

City of Northampton, MA
 City Council Select Committee to Study Barriers to Serving on City Boards
 and Commissions

MEETING MINUTES for **February 14, 2023**

Submitted by: Laura Krutzler

1. Chair Javier Luengo-Garrido called the meeting to order at 7:32 p.m. He announced that the meeting was being audio/video recorded.

City Council Administrative Assistant Laura Krutzler called the roll:

Members present and absent:

Member	Present	Time if arriving late or leaving early
Javier Luengo-Garrido, Chair, Citizen	X	
Jamila Gore, Councilor At Large, Vice Chair	X	
Garrick Perry, Ward 4 City Councilor	X	
Cynthia Suopis, Citizen	X	
Gwen Nabad, Citizen	X	
Susan MacDonald-Bolanos, Citizen	Absent	
Staff	Present	Time if arriving late or leaving early
Laura Hill Krutzler, Administrative Assistant	X	

2. Public comment

No members of the public were present. Javier Luengo-Garrido repeated the standard reminder that the first 15 minutes of every meeting is reserved for public comment for the benefit of anyone watching the recording.

3. Minutes of Previous Meetings

A motion was proposed and seconded. A roll call vote was taken, and the motion passed unanimously.

Motion:	Motion by:	Second:	Vote:
To approve the minutes of January 24, 2023	Cynthia Suopis	Garrick Perry	4 Yes, 0 No 1 Absent Abstention (Nabad)

4. General Discussion Items

- o General Survey Update
 - ❖ Last week, he sent out two versions of the survey, one with a compilation of the results in spreadsheet form and the other as a pdf document, Javier said. This will be the core of their conversation today.
 - ❖ Of the 115 responses, Gwen Nabad noted that a surprisingly small number came from people currently serving. It looked to her like a lot of people who responded had applied and not heard anything. She feels like more people who actually served could be reached out to. She thinks a key to

success is persistence and helping and supporting people to be able to find the survey in their email inbox.

- ❖ Javier mentioned the possibility of sending out a reminder to those who have not responded, and Laura Krutzler said she could do this. Gwen Nabad mentioned the importance of being strategic in when emails are sent out.
- ❖ Members shared their reflections and observations on the survey results. Some of the more significant findings cited were as follows:
 - A majority of those surveyed identified themselves as women (79 vs. 50). It was unclear if this reflects a majority of women serving or simply that a majority of women took the time to complete the survey.
 - Parking was cited as an obstacle. It was very clear that the option of remote participation made meetings more accessible to people during COVID.
 - A majority of responses came from non-working people or people who were retired. Having been a single parent for a while, Gwen Nabad said there was no way she could even have thought about serving on a city committee then.
 - Lack of mentoring/onboarding and a feeling of being unqualified or having a lack of expertise in the area of the board/commission's work were two of the most frequently cited challenges or barriers to service.
 - Garrick Perry: Something that stood out to him is that when asked if they would consider applying again, most people's answer was a resounding 'yes.' Certain things shine through, a lot of them things they've already talked about; such as having onboarding and more information about the process. There was a lot of talk about lack of response during the application process and the need to increase general public awareness [of vacancies]. It seemed clear that some of the issues they've already identified are the ones they really need to focus in on with a laser.

In response to the question about how they found out about a vacancy, Javier Luengo-Garrido said he noticed over 50% of the responses indicated the person needed to know someone; i.e. - the applicant was approached by a city councilor or the Mayor or someone else. A key recommendation has to be that the city strengthen its communication styles so it doesn't depend on 'who you know;' i.e. - it's not dependent on being close to a city councilor, etc.

Gwen Nabad said she agreed. It creates an imbalance because people who have the privilege to be serving are communicating with each other while people who are really busy working may be the most affected by decisions being made but have the least amount of representation.

Cynthia Suopis said the other point she found interesting is that chairs reported not having much input in the appointment process. Shouldn't the chair have an important role; shouldn't the chair be asked? She wondered.

One committee chair she worked with said she had to cancel their last couple of meetings because they didn't have a quorum. "That's a little alarming."

Councilor Gore said she thinks it should be part of their recommendation to bring the chairs more into the process. She thinks that should be something relatively easy for City Services to do.

As far as increasing awareness of openings, Cynthia suggested it might be helpful to characterize city service differently in a way that's more interesting and/or appealing. The fact that the city has so many vacancies and that the representation is sort of leaning toward one demographic points to the need to vary the presentation. "All we can do is make the best recommendations that we can."

Councilor Gore said the things in the survey that stood out to her is what they've been talking about with Megan Paik, the lack of onboarding and the feelings of ineffectiveness and not making an impact.

Councilor Perry said he thinks those are good points and that they go hand in hand. Having realistic goals and expectations and knowing what board members can and can't do goes a long way toward feeling effective and being satisfied with the process.

People need to understand the nature of the charge, Javier agreed. As an example, as a member of the Elected Official Compensation Advisory Board, his charge is to recommend fair compensation for elected officials, not necessarily to worry about the effect on the city budget. A lot of people feel like a committee is going to make a recommendation and the city is going to do it. Some people may put in a year of work and their recommendation is pretty much thrown to the curb. With the Northampton Policing Review Commission (NPRC), the recommendations were a little hijacked and misrepresented. He thinks having clear rules defining what's going to happen makes perfect sense. They have to manage expectations because false expectations can be frustrating.

He wants to advocate for a situation where it doesn't depend on who you know or don't know to access information.

Javier presented the following demographics of survey respondents:

- ❖ 53.98% are women. (There is a trend in direct service for service workers to be more women, Javier noted.)
- ❖ 34.51% are male
- ❖ Other respondents include one (1) transgender woman; five (5) non-binary, two (2) who prefer to self-describe and five (5) who prefer not to say
- ❖ 85.59% are white with over 9% saying they preferred not to say
- ❖ 60-something percent (%) are over the age of 45 with the largest group reporting themselves as 65+
- ❖ Ward 5 had the greatest number of respondents.
- ❖ The overwhelming majority of the people are married (He associated this statistic with the fact that, in the main body of the survey, the number of people citing childcare as an issue was low.)
- ❖ Reported employment status: 43.24% full-time, 'other' 36.04% (the vast majority of the people who chose 'other' are retired.)
- ❖ Household income: 30.91% - a third of people surveyed – reported earning between \$100,000 and \$200,000; 31.82% reported income of \$50,000 to \$100,000 (Gwen, Cynthia and Javier commented that this is disappointing but not surprising.)
- ❖ 72.73% report zero dependents. Overwhelmingly, board members do not have dependents, Cynthia observed. This tells her that white, retired, higher income folks are the ones serving.
- ❖ The primary language is 100% English

The demographic that struck him is the small number of people serving in the 18 to 24-year old age group, Councilor Perry said. This points to a glaring need for youth outreach.

It is important to understand that there is a correlation between the demographics of respondents and the nature of the responses, Javier noted. He thinks they should invite people to take a look at the demographics first and then to go into the meat of the survey because it is really telling. Demographic information is key to contextualizing what they are seeing.

On the NPRC, he served on a subcommittee with Carol Owen who taught him the term 'false equivalency' or the fallacy of making the assumption that because something didn't happen to you it probably didn't happen to

others. He gave the example of someone assuming that because they have generally been well treated by the police that police generally treat everybody well.

If false equivalency plays a role in how people conduct themselves and what they bring to the table to city commissions and advisory boards, they are lacking heavily in diverse voices. There is so much that needs to change, not only with processes being more transparent but with diversifying who gets appointed or at least who is the gatekeeper of who is going to serve or not. They are not questioning the quality of the work done by past committees but the level of accessibility and diversity, he stressed.

Gwen confessed thinking to herself, 'could it possibly be so unbalanced?'

Councilor Perry said he finds it telling but not surprising. With that being said, he is looking forward to more data. The answers he is looking for are why some of these populations are not even showing up on the radar. His understanding is it probably due to what has already been identified, a lack of outreach. His hope is that they can figure out ways to get into places where people who aren't normally reached can be reached. He mentioned setting up at a local establishment like a tavern, etc.

- Assignment Updates
- Discussion about Outreach/Survey Distribution
- Set Dates for Listening Sessions

In the remaining 20 minutes, members discussed some of the challenges to achieving greater diversification such as the high mistrust of government and 'the burden of representation' of some minority community members who are continually asked to serve as representatives of an underrepresented community. Cynthia also mentioned frustration that some recommendations and resolutions are not promptly acted upon by the city. She gave the example of **R-20.107 A Resolution in Support of Actions to Combat the Public Health Crisis of Systemic Racism** adopted by the Northampton City Council in August of 2020. The resolution resolved to create an Office of Equity and Human Rights but has yet to be implemented.

Javier talked a little about the structure of the final report in board brush strokes. The first section will be contextualizing the report with the demographics of the city. He still feels that the core of the context is either people selectively not knowing what is going on because of not being embedded in the existing social/political networks or not being able to make public service a priority because, in the hierarchy of priorities related to having to work and feed their families; it is not even #20.

He identified key discussion points as being the need for decentralization of communication and information so it is not associated with belonging to a particular group and increased transparency in the application/appointment process. He thinks the survey showed strongly that their collective understanding of the factors that limit participation by underrepresented communities are 'right on point.'

He said he thought there is also something to say about the perceived 'rubber stamping' of Mayoral appointments since the City Council's role in confirming appointments is a responsibility embedded in the charter and part of the checks and balances of government.

However, Councilor Perry pushed back against the perception that the City Services Committee acts as a rubber stamp. He has typically spent 45 minutes to an hour with the candidates he's vetted, he shared.

Members agreed to hold a listening session on Sunday, March 12, 2023 around midday. Javier said he was going to ask his friend to create a flyer for this and they would put it out. He is going to work with Gwen around

going to the Salvo House. Cynthia Suopis referred to the communication plan she had drafted, and Laura Krutzler said she would send that out.

Councilor Perry was asked to think about appearing on the Bill Newman show.

Javier said he will probably have about 80% of the report created by the date of the listening session. The collaborative work on the report should happen at a public meeting, he reminded.

Cynthia Suopis said she wanted to be sure that as a member of the committee she will be able to see the complete draft prior to its submission. Javier Luengo-Garrido confirmed this is the case.

5. New Business

6. Adjourned at 9:05 p.m.

- A motion was proposed and seconded and a roll call vote was taken. There was no discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

Motion	Motion by:	Second:	Vote:
Adjourn.	Councilor Perry	Gwen Nabad	Yes, 5 No, 0 Absent, 1