

History and Dynamics of Portland's Planning and Sustainability Commission

Findings and Recommendations

Research

30 interviews with nearly 40 stakeholders provided a diversity of perspectives.

- All current PSC Commissioners
- Past PSC Chairs
- Current and former BPS staff and leadership
- City Bureau Directors, staff, and City Attorneys
- Commissioner Rubio's Team

History and evolution of the PSC

- Climate was slotted into the scope of the PSC's work at a time when political interest in climate action was less prominent compared to land use.
- For the first decade the PSC's agendas were consumed with the Portland Plan, the Comprehensive Plan, the Central City Plan.
- BPS and other bureaus evolved other community-based forums to guide climate work.
- Recently, as the bandwidth of the commission has opened up, the Commission has expressed demand to work on climate and sustainability issues.

"Times are different than when we started the PSC. When I go way back to the merge of Planning and Sustainable Development Commission, no one cared when we merged those two commissions. We tried to work with every Bureau a lot about green jobs, water, air quality, and recycling. But no one on the Council cared enough about climate work to make real regulation. Merging the commissions gave climate a huge step up in importance because it was now part of the Planning Commission."

"For years the PSC was neck deep in the Portland Plan, the Comprehensive Plan, the Central City Plan. There was no time on the agenda for sustainability, so we headed off in our own direction, and never built relationships with commissioners. By the time they were ready for sustainability work, we had two climate action plans under our belt, and we had evolved our thinking about equity and who should provide guidance on this work, both the demographics and the expertise. The CAP is full of discrete things that went to the PSC for review, but the overall oversight of the plan all had its own advisory committees that guided that work."

Findings

Political interest in the Climate aspects of the PSC's work has shifted dramatically over the years, creating a mismatch in perception and expectations around what the City's oversight for Climate Action should look like.

- Historically climate activists have not seen the PSC as place to develop and advance climate policy.
- More and more PSC commissioners want to focus on climate and sustainability issues outside of land use even as mandated land use work remains high, creating tension around the belonging of climate centered scopes.

"How does the city get the best guidance it can on policy input on climate and racial justice? I am not assuming the PSC has the bandwidth to focus on all of that; it doesn't have to be us. A lot of people are passionate about climate and planning issues and are fired up about heat islands, mobility, so many issues that deserve public input that don't get to go to council. As the stewards of the Climate Action Plan, we haven't had much role. Now with the climate emergency, the PSC doesn't have as much education, but we feel ownership, and we have hit some walls. From the staff's perspective there is no precedent and not nearly enough time."

"Broadening overtime by Adams the scope of the Commission to include sustainability was not the best decision in retrospect. It becomes clunky and they lose their focus and familiarity with the issues. Planning Commission used to be much more familiar with regulation and code, they understood the impacts. That has been diluted overtime. We need to be getting back to having a functional Planning Commission whose job is looking at planning regulations. If they didn't have so much on their plate, they'd have a better time understanding code and land use regulation."

"The sustainability part of their work does not have a clear definition. Transportation is a noun but sustainability is an adjective, healthy is an adjective. They don't have responsibility for an individual agency, but it is an advisor to many -- but they don't have the department with the deliverables. They are given the responsibility, but they don't have control of what works. We need sustainability advocates, but they don't have the steps and functions we have to go through."

Findings

A majority of the Commission are newer members who joined remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Their onboarding has lacked essential mentoring, modeling, and time-intensive training — leaving commissioners confused about their optimal role and opportunity for influence.

- PSC members lack clarity on the PSC's role and their individual responsibilities
- PSC members and especially officers are not getting political and relevant strategic guidance from BPS leadership

"I wonder where am I allowed to exert influence? What can and can't I do as a commissioner? In the application it said we are stewards of the comprehensive plan, but in action we do less of those things. What do PSC commissioners do? It is a bigger conversation about what the governance structure should look like? What the role is and who decides that role should be a PSC-led conversation between 11 individuals."

"I signed up for something I didn't quite know what it was, and I think that is true for others too. By looking at the bylaws and charter I don't know if we are actually doing those things. We want PSC involvement, but we need to put guardrails around that."

"I found out about being on the PSC as a public avenue for testimony around sustainability issues. It gives me a dedicated way to stay active and keep learning. But it has been more focused on planning. I watched a few prior meetings and there were a lot of briefings about sustainability issues, and the nature of the bylaws gives the impression that we would focus on sustainability -- like heat islands and tree canopy. This creates accountability issues for the government. Should we change the name? Should we change the bylaws?"

Findings

City Bureau leaders express frustration about the PSC's:

- Breadth of scope (climate, housing, streets, watersheds, etc.)
- Overreach providing detailed direction on implementation without adequate expertise.
- Overstepping or contradicting guidance they have received in their own community engagement, or from other, more specialized commissions.

"I would like to see more assertiveness from BPS to explore with them the potential consequences. They need more considerations for going that route and not taking a hands-off approach when PSC members don't understand the problems they're creating and the consequences."

"Commissioners ask for inappropriate opportunities to weigh in on things that have already originated from community. They make amendments on things that don't need them and other bureaus are not always prepared for that we are infringing on their territory. PSC is not always aware of what the ecosystem is so we should map that out to see how the commissions of other bureaus and what are their jurisdictions so we can focus on our own corner of the ecosystem. The body is not as well respected as we think we are because we can make recommendations to City Council -- but territorialness can come up."

"I would like to make sure their work is defined, how they interact with us and the work we are trying to do. PSC needs to remain at a high level because we are the implementer. We need clarity about the interrelationship of Bureau work."

The Planning Bureau and its mission is overlapping with planning functions in other bureaus and the PSC gets used as a tool to force collaboration."

Because they are so connected to high level policy goals, and connecting the dots between policy adjustments and a coordinated vision, they can give useful advice to strengthen our resolve to do hard things, and push us to be more comprehensive about the goals as expressed in the comprehensive plan. When they can help us with consistency to the Comprehensive Plan, that is appropriate and fine. They need to focus on those higher level policy discussions."

Findings

- The PSC's identity as a citywide commission that does not serve under the mayor is not well understood or executed, causing additional angst.
 - By law, multiple bureaus bring code changes (Title 33) to the PSC.
 - If PSC is truly a city-wide commission, all bureaus would like more proactive city-wide communication on their agenda and decisions.
 - However, they also request that BPS provide stronger management of the Commission, reflective of how other City commissions are run.

"This conflation that we are a BPS Commission creates tension between other bureaus and interpersonal conflict that can exacerbate some tensions in policy put forward by the PSC. With "Portland Nice" the passive aggressive ego wins. PSC exacerbates it through our work. We don't know those landmines that we set up."

"In a Commission form of government our city is already pretty siloed. Land use doesn't stop at the border of BPS's work. We do this integration by design, we are going to be more messy than commissions like historic landmarks and forestry. But we should be OK with being messy but be clear about what we are going to mess with."

"I question why the Commission serves the entire city. Because it functions that way it is challenging for other bureaus. We want Planning and Sustainability staff to be the liaisons, but they really aren't. They are just staffing. The Bureau and the Commission are not in alignment and there is a lot of identity crisis. If this is an advisory committee to the City, we only learn about the commission's agenda if there is a synergy. If it remains a citywide advisory committee, we need to find a way to communicate as such. So you can experience it as such and not only when you're pulled in."

"My recommendation is that PSC should not be a citywide Commission because they're not doing a good job bringing in the rest of us. It needs a serious culture change to be on board with that."

"Bureaus see PSC as a BPS committee, not a city-wide committee, but the planning staff don't perceive them to be as much as they may see themselves as that. A lot of their work product is directed to that Bureau and that commissioner in charge of BPS."

"We are associated with BPS really strongly which makes sense from the planning side, but sustainability belongs to every Bureau like PBOT for example.

I don't really know what other bureaus are doing and that silo-ing and lack of alignment is a systems level issue We are not clear what is off limits and where our input is not helpful. Who should decide that?

People feel different ways about our scope our input is not well received by the implementing bureaus. Was this a breach of protocols because we did not have a frame of reference?"

"The PSC members see things happening in other city bureaus that don't align with the comp plan. Who is going to raise their hand on this? Sometimes the PSC raises our hand and in our form of government it creates tension between our director and the other director. We see ourselves as stewards, when we point something out it makes things difficult for staff. If we don't say something because of our form of government it doesn't work out that well. With other bureaus we have a reputation that's not always good. At housing we got a bad reputation around inclusionary zoning. Commissioners have to build relationships to cut through the assumptions. Things will get better when we figure out the job description stuff."

Findings

- From land use and zoning code to climate action and urban sustainability issues, the scope of the Commission's work is widely viewed as too broad.
- The time-intensive process and in-depth analysis required to make critical land use decisions is threatened by the massive breadth of the Commission's scope.

"Land use decisions are inherently contentious. Land use is the mechanism for building multi-generational wealth and there is a limited quantity. We are on stolen land and contending with the racist history of planning. Our best role is to be able to have nuanced, honest conversations and make decisions for recommendations to council. PSC can be a container for those conversations that wouldn't survive any council environment."

"The PSC has so much authority to influence land use with a climate lens. If they can create their lane focused on land use and development, they can be so powerful. The oil trains, West Hayden island and fossil fuel infrastructure are clear examples of how they can be really effective and useful."

"Their scope is so broad, they lack expertise because they are so broad and high level to understand the real technical aspects. This is great for high level concepts and policies but the technical details of the code and to make appropriate amendments. ...When it was just the Planning Commission, we had more regular interaction with implementation, so they had a foundation of understanding. We are not getting the best recommendations because they are not understanding the consequences of those decisions. There was more capacity to do trainings and a work session. That capacity isn't there now and the code is incredibly complicated."

"There is incredible power and so much work to be done in the nexus of land use, climate action, and racial equity. But we need to be clear that while all land use decisions have racial justice and climate action implications, not all climate action and racial justice work has land use implications. The PSC will be most effective and essential if they focus on centering our critical land use needs."

"PSC has the worst job in all of government and it's done by volunteers. They have the most complicated questions that a municipality runs into, it is an almost impossible situation. Probably this Commission has the highest workload and the most significant commitment as volunteers-- and they don't have the background. Even as a master's in urban and regional planning alum, they don't have the foundation they need to participate in a confident way. The new members are understandably quiet with the onslaught of very complicated projects. There have been heartening changes like the diversifying of racial identity and professional experience in the makeup of the Commission. But it is so technical, no wonder they used to all be planners, developers, and architects because the learning curve for these issues is so steep. Even our environmental planners don't completely understand these challenges. And City Council has much less expertise, God help them if they try to do it. If they pull a thread, they unknit the whole sweater."

"They are making really important major policy decisions with direct land use implications with a lot of ramifications, and in Portland that is hard. People with very different backgrounds can have a sophisticated conversation, but that happens best when you have clear lanes and a clear sphere of influence, and you get that right. PSC must have people with sophisticated professional backgrounds who can engage on par with staff about land use so they can push them. Developing really good policy is hard and you're going to piss people off if the underlying economics don't work. The PSC could be a very helpful place to have hard conversations if they reflect market forces, economic conditions, and technical realities."

"We don't prepare them for the complexity of questions that are before them. We are the West Coast distributors of great plans, but we are in credibly challenged by execution. If you want them to make these decisions, you need to help them understand the implications."

Findings

Opinions vary widely on the community engagement function of the commission.

- PSC recommendations sometimes layer over input from community engagement previously performed by City bureaus.
- The legal requirements of the land use function and legislative process create sub-optimal circumstances for community engagement.

"PSC does not feel approachable. The hearings are long and exhausting, and it is not always transparent how much time people have to testify. How could we do creative things to meet the community where they're at and not just a body for people who are already really wonky. Like a quarterly listening session to say what's on your mind and access points that are not testimony period like open houses to meet the commissioners and create access for people who don't already have access, so we don't exacerbate existing power disparities. Can we make it food oriented and make childcare available and make all our hearings more accessible by finding ways to be out in the community."

"You cannot try to do both technical expertise and advisement, and community engagement. Community engagement needs to happen along the way and decision makers need to vet to see if your community engagement was legitimate. But if you're trying to do both, then it falls on staff to be technical experts all the time. If PSC is sometimes advising Andrea and sometimes, they're a decision maker -- it's weird for them to also be a community engagement vehicle. It needs to be very clear who is making the decisions."

Findings

- Priorities for PSC focus vary widely amongst individual commissioners.
- The culture and practices of the commission need investment to be more welcoming and inclusive for BIPOC commissioners.
- Commissioners desire a much more robust onboarding experience with extremely clear context and guidelines for how to provide the most constructive influence.

"I would like broad overviews of these issues and have more input on the initial aspects of what could go further. A good example we got staff briefings on the West Portland Town Center from multiple bureaus. Our ultimate goal would be spending more time on one project instead of so many projects. I don't want to give quick input on five different projects at the very end."

"I would like a handbook for behavior. When I was new, I made mistakes and I didn't know how to move an amendment. If something comes up in a workshop, how do you handle it? As a new person it is confusing to figure out the rules. Are there rules for talking to commissioners outside of meetings can people talk through strategy outside? What kind of transparency is required? We should build a guidebook of what does it mean to be a commissioner, so we don't make mistakes with media. We can all sign what we agreed to do in our work and our practices including evaluation rubrics of community engagement so we can use a common analysis."

"We should develop a buddy system not just for commissioners but with staff to develop informal relationships and rapport. Give me someone who could answer my questions and a thought partner to work through challenges and build that better sense of connection."

Recommendations

1. Adjust the scope of the PSC to focus on the nexus of land use that advances equity and climate action.
 - Cut through bureaucratic inertia by asserting strong elected leadership with a clear land use policy agenda.
2. Reestablish PSC's credibility and trust.
 - Forge a symbiotic relationship with City Council members and the PSC through political leadership, relationship building, and regular communication.

"I want clarity around our mission and vision and the opportunity to support City Council. You should interview members of City Council and ask if they are receiving what they need from the Commission. Now we have more council members who come from community-based organizations who may have a different vision and we need to have that conversation."

"Council lately is having these blowups. We didn't have that because we were vetting things, maybe too much? Your work is to get it about 85 to 90% when you send it to Council. By the time it got to council they had already weighed in, this minimized people yelling at them because the sausage had already been made."

"The mayor and Commissioner Rubio should share their vision and marching orders to go do something. We need the passion, the commissioner or someone at Council must be solving a problem. During the good years there was strong leadership under all four of the mayors who wanted to get things done, whatever the mission was, they had an idea, a vision."

"We built that relationship out of trust with the elected officials and the director, and we knew what was political to our commissioners. They were calling me on the weekend because they knew we had power. That's been lost but that can be built back."

"The new leadership was not at all of our meetings which was noticeable on the politics side because you have to understand the implications and the politics of it. A leader needs to be more in tune with our work. During Charlie's time other electeds would have us come in and meet with them and staff were there but they elected was there too."

Recommendations

3. The PSC, as defined by state law, is a city-wide commission but clarity is needed as to whether the PSC also acts as an advisory body to BPS on items like developing budgets and work plans

- With clarity, make structural changes to improve the Commission's relationships with Council, BPS, and other bureaus.
- Create clear parameters for how the Commission provides direction to other bureaus, and its relationship with BPS.

Recommendations

4. Explore, assess, and communicate climate action engagement currently underway and throughout the City.
 - BPS climate staff must proactively communicate where climate engagement is happening and how the public is guiding policy.
 - Clarify opportunities for the City and community members to coordinate and advance climate priorities - understanding that climate action is underway throughout many City bureaus.
 - Reiterate the PSC's North Star is to focus on opportunities within land use to advance climate action and racial justice.

"BPS has all these semi formal spaces that we interact with community leaders for climate and sustainability work -- whether its PCEF, build shift, the third space climate justice initiative, the waste equity advisory groups, Pricing options for mobility task force, etc. We have these spaces to tackle sustainability and climate issues so we're frequently engaged with community already. What it's not satisfying is the perceived lack of control over the whole vision. It's as if there is lack of trust in city leadership so we're hearing people pining for a space to do that."

"Desiree Williams-Rajee worked to create a third space and to make community and the County equal partners to guide the climate work. The PSC is not the place for that. I am interested in creating the most authentic approach to co-creating accountability around climate action with the community and the county. I think that is the future, not to use community as an advisor but as a model to share power as equal partners."

"As you look at how you might structure community input or a Commission on climate action, decide what you are trying to get done in the next five years and set this up to help you do that. It seems Ted doesn't really care because there is no space left on his plate."

"Climate is as much of a lens and an approach -- because it is so cross cutting. What about having a steering committee that works with the whole city to do an update to the Climate Action Plan for the city? Is it an ongoing body or do we empanel a group that comes up with the plan? For example, OEHR does not have a sitting body. We need to make the most of the investments -- like with PCEF, perhaps there is a co-sponsor for an advising body to set priorities but not duplicate."

Recommendations

5. Reconcile the functional role of the commission as primarily a policy-making body as it responds to and evaluates each project's community engagement responsibilities

- PSC can play a role consistently evaluating the community engagement of each project.

6. Invest in the evolving Commission culture and practices to be more welcoming and inclusive for BIPOC commissioners.

- Create a PSC+ BPS committee to assess and recommend changes.

Recommendations

7. Designate ample time for more robust onboarding experience.

- Request briefings from all relevant bureaus.
- Ask former commissioners and planners to provide greater context and guidelines on providing constructive influence.

8. Develop a holistic approach to ensure long lasting results.

- The challenges and opportunities that need addressing to ensure success are systemic and intertwined.