

Portland Planning and Sustainability Commission

April 26, 2022

5:00 p.m.

Meeting Minutes

PSC Commissioners Present: Jeff Bachrach (left 6:01 p.m.), Johnell Bell, Jessica Gittemeier, Katie Larsell, Oriana Magnera (arrived 5:20 p.m.), Valeria McWilliams, Steph Routh, Gabe Sheoships, Eli Spevak, Erica Thompson; 1 open position

PSC Commissioners Absent:

City Staff Presenting: Commissioner Rubio, Jillian Schoen, Rico Lujan Valerio, Donnie Oliveira, Sandra Wood, Eric Engstrom, Patricia Diefenderfer, Julie Ocken

Guest Presenters: Julia Thompson (consultant)

Documents and Presentations for today's meeting

Chair Routh called the meeting to order at 5:02 p.m.

Welcome & Introductions

Commissioners and staff introduced themselves.

Commissioner Rubio's Welcome

Thank you for your work on this Commission – it's not easy work, but it's always appreciated. Commissioner Rubio connected with many in the community and on the PSC to understand the role and dimension of the PSC over time. A clear theme I heard was a need for clarity due to the changes over time. We wanted to make sure we're clarifying the roles, work scope of the PSC, and the vision for the Commission going forward.

Given the amount of planning work that needs to be done, we know we have opportunities to do all the work. Julia Thompson did this assessment and will share the findings today.

We have had some recent transitions, movement into different positions, so the timing is good right now. At the core, we want to strengthen our planning work and the role of the PSC to provide good input about planning work along with our climate work being informative, though a community-centered table for climate is another need.

Recommendations and ideas, options and potential obstacles – this is the goal of today's conversation.

Thank you to Julia and everyone who has helped to prep for today's conversation.

Findings and Recommendations

Julia Thompson

Presentation

We hear so many voices and input in the 30 interviews with nearly 40 stakeholders providing a diversity of perspectives. I hope we can take all these conversations and think about it as a renewal of the PSC. The passion and privilege of being on the PSC is something I heard from members.

We have new voices here and at City Council, so we want to be forward-looking with the inputs we've heard as the history of the PSC. [a history of the PSC is shared on slide 3.]

In the beginning of the PSC, there were a series of major plans that kept the PSC very busy! Portland Plan, Comprehensive Plan, Central City 2035 Plan. The climate teams mostly were doing community engagement in other forms, building relationships with climate activists here as the public table for climate conversations.

Now the nature of the work has changed. New commissioners have joined with a passion for climate and natural environment – looking for opportunities for this work to be on the PSC's agendas and work plan.

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.

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.

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.

The PSC's identity as a Citywide commission that does not serve under the mayor is not well understood or executed, causing additional angst.

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.

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

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.

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

Commissioners' Input & Discussion

Commissioner Bell: Do we know the role of the Charter Commission's work and what those updates may be for the PSC, other commissions, etc? As you're thinking about the future of the PSC, this is really important. It would be a missed opportunity if we're on one track and/versus that track of thinking and change.

Commissioner Spevak: I learned about the founding story of this Commission, which is different from what I've heard from past commissioners – this is helpful. The relationship with City Hall has been difficult the past few years. There were times when we had much more communication with City Commissioners. Former commissioners have advocated for projects to start, which is something I've questioned. A focus on planning makes lots of sense. The relationship with other bureaus will narrow our scope if it's specific to planning. The oversight bodies and how other community engagement is happening at other bureaus is especially important to me.

- Julia: Kat Schultz shared the approach they used in a previous version of the PSC, with prior administrations.

Commissioner Bachrach: It was enlightening to see all this – but nothing really surprised me. I've been hearing these things in conversations over time. This is both reassuring and a question noting the common problems. I appreciate this effort to solve a problem to work through this together. It feels like there is a next step in the process, so I'm curious about the next steps. We'll flounder if we keep circling around and over the problems.

Commissioner Larsell: There was lots about how we can do climate work, but there didn't seem there were recommendations about who will be looking at climate action. Nothing was listed about who is doing this work and where, as well as community engagement. We need clarity about who is going to deal with it all. This has real impact on people here. PSC had some big, meaty projects before, so perhaps they were overworked, but their work was clear. With less meaty or less important work, then we have a dissatisfied commission.

Commissioner Magnera: There isn't much that is surprising, but I appreciate seeing it all in context. The community plan work really resonates with me. Is the PSC a body that can hold the big plans accountable to the community work? How can the PSC help to create accountability to make sure that work is trickling up into broader Citywide work? The timing of this conversation is important, but with the question of the form of government we're looking at and potential changes is there, and we don't want to have this conversation restarted if and when the form of government changes. What is the broader conversation about community engagement beyond this narrow scope we have currently?

Commissioner Thompson: There was a lot that surprised me in the report. I echo some comments and questions from others. An overarching question is based in the idea that we are all here to do good work. What does success look like? Land use, equity, climate, bringing things to Council that are 85% complete... how will we know when we're moving in a better direction? Then thinking about how we do our best work – there are higher level conversation to be had about the charter and scope. But also the finer grain day-to-day aspects of the PSC are really important about how people feel valued and heard. The broad versus specific is curious – we are asked to see the big picture, but we have to be conscious of code and specifics at that level. This is a tall order. What does the Commission make-up need to be to achieve all this?

Commissioner McWilliams: The one thing that surprised me most was how the topic of sustainability was a reason I joined the PSC. Our work is a bit too broad, and we don't have as much of a decision-making authority over climate work as I thought we would. Success for me for this meeting is about talking about key priorities we want to tackle – onboarding and working together (culture) is something we can work on together. There is a concern if sustainability is its own commission, there is still so much we need to work on since our work is intertwined regardless.

Commissioner Gittemeier: I appreciate seeing the need for clarity is a key idea in the report. We should look at what the City structure needs so we're not duplicating efforts. What work would be most beneficial within our scope. Is the PSC the right size, the right body, to be overseeing all these pieces. Looking at the context in the broader City role would be helpful.

Commissioner Sheoships: A commission focused on racial equity is important. Onboarding is really important. I disagree with siloing the work between sustainability, climate, planning, houselessness – they all play into each other. I respect what we've done in the past, but with our new voices, I want to be sure we're defining success looking forward. What defines effectiveness? Where can we best find our voice with more defined goals?

Chair Routh: Thank you to everyone for your input. One thing that I heard was how to not cause trouble. The low-hanging fruit has been plucked. We are in the consequences of multijurisdictional disinvestment over the years. So instead, perhaps it is "how do we not surprise people?" As we are learning to adapt and build new pathways, we know nothing will be easy.

Commissioner McWilliams: The report looks at how we perceive the PSC. When I ask friends and family about what they think of what the PSC is, there are different perceptions of what it is. When I explain it, it is more about land use as opposed to climate and sustainability. We should also think about the public perception.

Commissioner Bell: What are some of our peers doing relative to planning commissions like in Portland? We have to figure out how to integrate equity into our work. We're leaving a huge segment of our community behind if we aren't creating a more accessible and inclusive process. This is one of the most consequential City commissions that can affect long-term change in the city.

Commissioner Spevak: The change of government form is one thing. We will still have a planning commission. How are we staying accountable to climate justice? We have to be able to upset the status quo. The power PSC has had in the past is that we've gone further than staff proposals (e.g. RIP and S2HC). There has to be a body like this for sustainability to ensure we're getting closer to our goals.

Donnie: All these perspectives resonate. We are having this conversation about next steps... but the reality is that we pick up tomorrow as the PSC we are. We will work to make these City Hall connections. The tough part is the unknowns. But the irrefutable standing of a Planning Commission is required by the state. The power that people on the Commission and our City leadership is how we can work to other goals and solve for other, larger-scope things.

Commissioner Rubio: Thank you for everyone's comments and questions today. I have had similar questions as well. We need a plan, and I'd love to create a workgroup to specifically tackle this. I'll ask Steph and Donnie to work with my team to start forming a group to begin thinking about this work and next steps.

My sense is that lots of what I've heard and been learning about are reflected here. I also recognize we need to do things differently. We can't do the "old boys network" anymore. But how do we take the essence of what is productive (trust and relationships with Council members)? There is a disconnect now. Council should know this is a consequential body that has reviewed all the pieces before moving forward and sharing a recommendation with Council. I want to do something transformative that moves the ball forward for Portland and that is worthwhile for our time.

Clarifying the role of the PSC **could** include memorializing it by Ordinance. But first we want to look at all the aspects – the workplan, capacity, what's reasonable, what the other body that could hold sustainability potentially. We can't solve these pieces altogether yet, but it's a starting point.

Commissioner Bell: Deep community engagement is critical.

Donnie: The workplan for the Climate Emergency Declaration is coming early this summer. We will share this with the PSC, which includes the PCEF work as well.

Commissioner Rubio: Climate is front-and-center in our work. More and more, people are wanting access to what the City is doing on climate, and there isn't a place for the public to provide input about climate right now. How do we institutionalize it so with a change in City leadership it doesn't get lost. I heard how the PSC in its work get informed by the climate efforts and want to see that come together better. We know communication is sorely lacking in this aspect – so how can we strengthen this now. With the Charter change, I think it only can get better.

Commissioner Larsell: It's a two-way street with the other bureaus about what they are proposing and what we are thinking. But strengthening relationships with other bureaus as well is important.

Next Steps

Jillian: Does staff come back to the PSC (the next meeting or interim) with the recommendations organized in a sequence we can then work to build out?

- This could be at an upcoming officer meeting.

Commissioner Routh: The workgroup will be a not-insignificant amount of work. In the next week, I'd ask PSC members to consider being involved in this process to bring before the full Commission.

- Sandra: This could be more than one workgroup based on the buckets and order we tackle the recommendations.

Discussion about returning to in-person / hybrid meetings.