

Summary of 12/20 Round Table Discussion

Overview:

As a result of the round table discussion at the December 20 committee meeting, several common themes regarding the strengths and challenges in Cambridge and those of a strong mayor system emerged.

- **Transparency** - into the city manager's office / administration, how can community members engage directly with the administration in a productive and accessible way?
- **City Council** - what should the role of city council be, how can there be more transparency in how policy priorities are set and the council's role in administration oversight?
- **Role of policy and politics** - benefits of a clear political agenda and an elected official's direct accountability to voters. How can identifying the right role of politics benefit Cambridge - whether through changing the form of government or modifying elements of the council/manager structure?
- **Public participation** - what makes a responsive government? Increase access to information and ability to engage with all branches of the government.
- **Preserve efficiency and effectiveness of the city** - What are the elements of the current government that ensure city programs, infrastructure, public spaces, and the fiscal health of the city are successful and how do we preserve them?

Cambridge Structure:

The common challenges that members brought up included the difficulty for residents to stay engaged and informed of a large number of city councilors with similar policy platforms. Committee members emphasized the importance of a system making clear how the elected bodies (City Council) affect the priorities of the executive and should balance power between city council and the manager. Benefits of the current system mentioned were the efficiency of city operations, implementation of programs and the city's strong fiscal position. Members mentioned the strengths of an appointed administrator that allows qualifications to be determined by the elected city council in an open process.

Strengths

- Efficiency of operations: such as implementation of programs, access to covid testing, clean streets, parks, low tax rate
- Tenure in executive role, continuity with city staff and programs
- Selection of administrator from elected body of City Council can qualify qualifications, references, public hearings of candidates

Challenges

- Difficult to understand policy positions or differences in policy stances of large number of candidates running for city council
- Lack of political big picture or goal setting side of government
- Challenging to understand how policy and administration priorities are set
- Opaque office of city manager (how might residents be able to influence / communicate with the city manager office)
- Lots of power / control for an unelected leader
- City Councilors sometimes defer to the manager's office for concerns residents have regarding issues or city programs, but the city council is the elected body.

- Slower to make change
- Power also lies in unelected board and commissions which sometimes lacks representation

Strong Mayor:

Concerns mentioned about a strong mayor form of government included potential for corruption, focus on politics and potentially short term goals as an elected leader is often looking forward to the next election. Benefits of the strong mayor system focused on direct accountability to voters and a more clear political agenda for the community to access and respond to.

Strengths

- Campaign of candidates / elected leader who have specific priorities and policy agendas
- Accountable to activists of a community
- Accountable to voters - encourages them to move faster and take more risk
- Clear path for voters to access and impact city executive

Challenges

- Focus more on politics
- Potential for corruption
- Money talking, can leave more communities out of the conversation

Other comments / specific suggestions

- How can the charter balance City Council and Manager responsibilities and the relationship?
- What are the ways to empower the representative body of the City Council?
- City council should be allowed to direct / oversight of manager (but not approval of department heads)
- Value of charter saying very little about manager - leave up to city council / new policy direction
- Clear Review Process: City council has x priority, manager executes with a review of x priority at a set time.
- City council approval over board appointments
- Term limits (city council and manager)
- Lengthen city council term
- City Council goal setting structure
- Defining what the role of city councilors should be
- What are ways to make the manager's office more accessible and public facing?