

Friday, February 28, 2025

Re: "Redesigning Advisory Committees of Council (ACOCs)" (2025-50)

Dear Members of City Council,

I am writing to share my thoughts and concerns regarding the recommendations outlined in the report titled "Redesigning Advisory Committees of Council (ACOCs)" (2025-50), specifically as they relate to the restructuring of various advisory committees and the shift toward alternative forms of community engagement. While I recognize the intention to improve the effectiveness of advisory committees and align them with the City's strategic goals, several important considerations should be addressed before these recommendations are approved.

Concerns Regarding Reduced Democratic Engagement

The proposed dissolution of numerous Advisory Committees of Council (ACOCs) and the transition to larger, more consolidated committees may inadvertently reduce the democratic accessibility of the advisory process. Eliminating smaller, specialized committees may diminish the opportunity for more diverse, focused input from community members on specific issues. Additionally, merging several committees could limit the ability of individuals with expertise in particular areas to provide the in-depth advice and feedback needed for nuanced policy decisions.

While the intention may be to streamline and focus efforts, there is a risk that broader, more generalized committees could dilute the specificity of input on essential issues like heritage, transportation, accessibility, and environmental concerns. A wide, multi-faceted committee may struggle to devote the attention required to each distinct area of expertise, leading to a less thorough examination of complex issues.

Increased Workload on Committee Members

The restructuring recommendations propose merging multiple committees into larger ones with more expansive mandates. While the intention is to increase efficiency, this shift will likely place a heavier workload on the committee members, who may now be required to consider a broader range of topics. These expanded responsibilities may reduce the capacity of individual members to engage meaningfully with each issue, resulting in diminished quality of advice and decision-making.

Committee members often volunteer their time and energy to participate in these advisory roles. Expecting them to engage with a broader scope of issues without a corresponding increase in resources or support may lead to burnout and a decline in the quality of their contributions. Considering this, it would be prudent to assess the impact of these changes on the workload of committee members and consider allocating additional resources or compensatory measures to support them.

Risk of Narrower Community Representation

While the report mentions the intention to attract a more diverse pool of candidates for advisory roles, broadening committee mandates could also limit the diversity of perspectives each committee can accommodate. Specialized committees, such as the

Accessibility or Heritage Advisory Committees, attract individuals with a deep passion and expertise in specific areas. The merging of committees could potentially dilute these specialized viewpoints and the richness they bring to decision-making.

Moreover, while the report addresses diversity, equity, and inclusion in recruitment, it does not fully explore how the proposed changes might affect the voices of marginalized groups. The shift away from specialized committees may reduce the ability of specific communities to have a direct, focused voice in shaping policy on matters that directly impact them.

Potential for Strain on Administrative Resources and Engagement Quality

While the restructuring may indeed streamline some processes, there is a possibility that it could create new demands on City staff. The consolidation of committees could require more coordination to ensure diverse and meaningful input from all affected groups, potentially leading to a higher volume of meetings or new administrative tasks. It will be essential to carefully assess the capacity of City staff to manage these changes and ensure that these shifts do not lead to unanticipated strains on resources.

Furthermore, the shift toward alternative forms of community engagement, while potentially more efficient in some ways, could lead to a reduced opportunity for in-depth, face-to-face discussions that smaller, specialized committees offer. The effectiveness of these new methods in capturing the full spectrum of community perspectives will be crucial to ensure that policy recommendations reflect the needs and priorities of all residents. It's important that the City continues to maintain robust avenues for community engagement that allow for detailed, thoughtful feedback, especially on complex or sensitive issues.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the recommendations to redesign the Advisory Committees of Council hold potential benefits, including streamlining processes and improving strategic alignment, it is crucial that we carefully consider the impact on democratic engagement, the workload for committee members, community representation, and the overall efficiency of the advisory process.

I strongly encourage the City Council to engage in further dialogue with community stakeholders, current advisory committee members, and experts in civic engagement to ensure that the changes proposed will genuinely enhance the City's decision-making process rather than inadvertently limiting public participation and the quality of advice provided to City Council.

Thank you for your attention to these necessary considerations. I look forward to seeing how the city will balance the need for efficiency with preserving meaningful democratic engagement.

Sincerely,

Steven Petric
Guelph