



ENGAGING EVERYONE

A Final Transition Team Report
for Mayor Lauren McLean

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INTRODUCTION

Boise is a vibrant, growing community known for its commitment to open spaces, its new industries and a growing cultural scene. It is one of the best places in the West to live, work and raise a family. As a community, we have made deliberate choices about the kind of city we want to be, and as we grow, we will need to continue to develop shared priorities and find community-based solutions to the increasingly complex challenges we face.

To do that we must recognize the hundreds of thousands of unique voices who live, work and play in Boise and build a culture of community engagement rooted in the belief that each one of these voices brings value to our community and has a perspective that is critical to have at the table.

We must recognize that finding ways to engage in city governance can be daunting. Too often the onus of community engagement is left to our residents. While it may feel as though there are plenty of avenues for participation - from public hearings, to online resident surveys to office hours with the mayor - opportunities to weigh in on critical public decisions demand the time and resources to drive downtown and find parking, the confidence to navigate an “official” building and sometimes confusing processes, and the privilege of assuming your perspective will be valued by decision makers.

We believe the City of Boise has the opportunity to be as fiercely proactive in its commitment to community engagement as it is in its commitment to protecting our foothills and river. As we continue to grow rapidly and face increasingly complex issues that define who we are and how we live, it is important to ensure we are engaging voices from diverse communities so we can anticipate how these issues - and proposed solutions to them - will impact all community members. It is incumbent upon the city to be more proactive about seeking out unique perspectives and diverse voices, particularly those of systemically underrepresented communities, to anticipate any barriers there may be to engagement and work to proactively provide solutions.

The recommendations from this committee recognize the work already being done to provide information to our people, to tell the story of Boise and to engage community members through traditional governance models. And, as a committee, we recognize the heart and compassion city employees bring to the work they do. We suggest that many of the pieces are already in place and that a recommitment to equitable and meaningful community engagement and a realignment of resources focused on internal communications can create a culture of engagement for everyone.

A NEW MISSION

The Office of Community Engagement (CE) was created to “foster deeper connections and engagement with the citizens of Boise and city employees” and is tasked with a broad array of services focused substantially on providing information to Boise residents (Curb It) and telling the city’s story (Boise Kind, Boise’s Energy Future). CE also plays a coordinating role between departments to ensure both internal and external communications are consistent and informative.

We recognize that there is a constant balancing act in apportioning CE resources internally and externally. The work of the city is diverse; it is a large organization tasked with heady responsibilities to the people who live, work and play in our community. CE plays an important role in coordinating communications between departments and informing city staff about upcoming initiatives. Currently, the ratio of CE resources that are internally focused versus externally focused is 80-20 and the external activities are more focused on selling city initiatives than engaging residents. We believe that ratio should be flipped, and that CE should be refocused on bringing the community together to tackle the challenges we face.

To reflect the city’s commitment to creating a community for everyone and a culture that proactively seeks out diverse voices we offer an updated mission statement for the Office of Community Engagement as a way of “resetting” its focus:

“As a city comprised of diverse communities, the Office of Community Engagement recognizes that it must strive to be a reflection of the people who live, work and play here and engages and empowers them in innovative ways to create and sustain a Boise for everyone.”

Throughout our conversations we kept coming back to four words to describe the values the city should embrace in creating avenues to actively engage more Boise residents in our collective governance: empower, engage, inform and include. Now more than ever we need the diverse voices of those who live, work and play in Boise at the table informing decisions about who we are, how we address the challenges that face us and how we become a community that engages everyone.

BUILD TRUST

EMPOWER

Before we can begin talking about an expanded portfolio for the Office of Community Engagement, one that takes a fiercely proactive approach to engaging diverse voices and supports a city where everyone belongs by valuing, respecting and listening to all community members, we have to acknowledge that not all members of our community have equal access to City Hall and that certain members of our community enjoy outsized opportunities to influence policy and participate in community conversations.

Access is very often limited by barriers large and small, real and perceived (though we believe strongly that what is perceived as real is real in its consequences, making even perceived barriers to engagement effectively real). Attending public hearings or council meetings requires the time and resources to come downtown, pay for parking, provide for childcare and myriad other logistical hurdles. Participating in outreach opportunities may mean having to ask whether the facility is not just accessible by ADA standards, but comfortable for a person with a physical disability. It might mean having to advocate for yourself to request language translation or ASL. It generally means that you have to go out of your way to engage with the city, rather than the city going out of its way to engage with her people.

Most of all, it requires the high level of comfort navigating complicated governmental processes, structures and language that having privilege brings with it. Those that walk with that privilege are also, typically, those who set the rules of engagement - not in a way that is overtly or deliberately meant to exclude others - resulting in systemically institutionalizing barriers to engagement.

The Office of Community Engagement has the opportunity to work with the mayor to take a leadership role in actively engaging and building relationships with community members - especially those who haven't always been the first to be included or have experienced barriers to inclusion. That has to start, though, with building trust.

For many members of our community, interactions with governmental entities or representatives have not been positive. In many cases, such interactions have traditionally been fraught and sometimes even violent. While it's easy to reiterate the joke "I'm from the government and I'm here to help you," in reality it has often been quite the opposite for impacted communities. Before we can reasonably ask traditionally underrepresented and excluded communities to come to the table, we need to dig into the work of rebuilding trust and relationships.

We believe rebuilding trust starts with showing up and meeting our people where they live, work and play. It means identifying existing leaders in key communities and empowering them as liaisons to the Mayor's Office. It means increasing the mayor's presence in those communities at existing, organic events that are meaningful to the community rather than at staged events and photo ops. And it means ensuring that adaptive resources are proactively provided so that people feel heard, seen and valued.

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS - EMPOWER

FIRST 100 DAYS

- Identify leaders in key communities that can serve as liaisons between the mayor and their communities.
- Increase the mayor's presence in traditionally under-represented communities.
- Include language (and translation) on the website committing to a new culture of community engagement that welcomes everyone.

FIRST YEAR/TERM

- Evaluate existing liaison programs and explore expanding the program beyond police representation and into additional neighborhoods and parallel communities.
- Commit to a city/mayoral presence at organic events in traditionally under-represented communities.
- Map communications channels beyond those that hit traditional constituencies and build a communications plan that meets parallel communities where they live, work and play.
- Organize listening sessions with the mayor and traditionally underrepresented communities, providing translators and adaptive technologies when appropriate.

INCREASE ACCESSIBILITY, ENCOURAGE QUESTIONS, BUILD IN FEEDBACK LOOPS

ENGAGE AND INFORM

Beyond building trust, there are many things we believe the city can and should do to address the barriers that may exist for some members of our community and to tangibly demonstrate a commitment to proactive community engagement. Some recommendations address logistical challenges our residents may face, including the cost of transportation and parking or access to meeting materials. Others seek to provide guidance and information about how the process works, what the building looks like and what to expect when coming to City Hall in an effort to make the experience more comfortable for those who have invisible barriers to engagement.

Perhaps more substantively, we feel strongly that the city needs to address the perception that communication with the public has become a one-way street, rather than a conversation between the people who live, work and play here, and the decision makers at City Hall. Any city has two main missions: to provide services to its residents and to deliberate on and set policies that reflect the values of the community and determine what it means to live, work and play there. In both cases, it is critical to involve residents in the dialogue and to actively seek out the perspectives of diverse constituencies throughout the community. Despite anyone's very best efforts, it is nearly impossible to see the world, much less anticipate unintended consequences, through another set of eyes. Where we all stand is very much determined by where we sit.

In the service of both missions, the City of Boise does seek resident input, yet there is a prevailing feeling that City Hall isn't listening that we believe goes beyond just being unhappy with a given decision. That disconnect is fixable but requires a strong commitment to instilling a culture of having a conversation with residents, rather than providing information to residents.

We agree with the Clean City Committee that Boise needs a "Blueprint for Community Engagement," which formalizes a commitment to a two-way conversation and builds out guidance for the "how, when and who" for different city functions. We believe it's a key step in becoming a leader in proactive community engagement for city governments.

Further, we recommend embedding the mayor's constituent services in the Office of Community Engagement and exploring mechanisms to evaluate trends and themes that emerge from often disparate meetings or surveys across departments.

FIRST 100 DAYS

- Identify ways to take the work of the city (meetings, public hearings) out of City Hall and into the community.
- Inventory existing city amenities (libraries, fire stations, etc.) that can be utilized for public meeting spaces.
- Explore how to provide parking for key meetings held at City Hall.
- Review current strategies to provide the public access to meeting materials and identify gaps in accessibility.
- Evaluate existing city communications for excessive jargon or legalese and create a culture of using easily accessible language in external communications.
- Build feedback loops into city surveys and other resident input techniques, reporting back what the city has heard from residents and stakeholders.
- Embed Mayor McLean’s constituent services into the Office of Community Engagement.

FIRST YEAR

- Add interpretive and adaptive services to all key meetings and translation for all city documents and videos.
- Create videos, infographics or even an app (with translation) walking people through how to navigate City Hall, how to testify and other ways to engage with the city.
- Identify and implement ways to allow Boiseans to participate in public discussions from home; add ways to interact with - not just observe- public proceedings.
- Explore ways to provide childcare for key meetings and community events.

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS – ENGAGE AND INFORM

- Identify and implement strategies to facilitate public access to meeting materials - this might mean printed packets for the public, translated documents online, a public computer for community members to access materials or other innovative strategies.
- Explore opportunities to get the mayor out into the community - at youth events to talk with parents, into senior centers, at existing neighborhood or community meetings or even impromptu rides on the bus.
- Work with key stakeholders and the community to develop a “Blueprint for Community Engagement.”

FIRST TERM

- Identify and implement creative ways to engage the community around issues of importance to the city, like using virtual reality or a participatory budget game to expand opportunities to develop shared priorities and anticipate impacts on different parts of the city.
- Add a “can I help” customer service pop-up to the city website.
- Add an “info desk” - real or virtual - at every engagement point.
- Develop ways to create conversations between residents across the Treasure Valley to get regional neighbors talking to each other.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

INCLUDE

Building trust, increasing access and recommitting to having a two-way conversation with the community relies heavily on a personal connection between the people who live, work and play here and the elected officials and staff at City Hall. As a frustrated resident, it's easy to fall back on critiques of bureaucracies - "I don't even know who makes decisions or how they get made," "I can't figure out who to call or how to get through," "Does anyone in that building even care?" - which is often unfair. As a frustrated elected official or staff member, it's easy to fall back on critiques around resident input - "We gave them so many opportunities to weigh in, it's not our fault if no one showed up," "Just because the decision didn't go in their favor didn't mean we aren't listening," "We're working so hard and with limited budgets!" - which is just as often unfair.

Elected officials and city staff are passionate about the work they do on behalf of the community and eager to provide good service and involve residents in shared decision making. Residents are thoughtful, diverse, complicated and passionate about their families, jobs and quality of life. In the end, we all have a lot more in common than we don't, and walls are best broken down (and preconceived notions thwarted) by personal relationships.

Our recommendations here focus on opening the curtains on both City Hall and the people who live, work and play in our community. Putting a human face on our elected officials and city staff personalizes the city for community members, making the process more accessible and reminding residents that there are human beings working hard on their behalf. Putting a human face on Boise residents reminds us all how incredible and diverse our community is and reminds us of the diverse needs and experiences that exist in our city and encourages us to keep actively looking at the issues we face from a diversity of perspectives.

The city already has several programs in place that seek to provide personal linkages between what happens at City Hall and the broader community. We were particularly impressed with the Livability Ambassadors and believe that program could be built out beyond educating community members on particular programs to encourage them to take an active role in putting a face on the work of City Hall.

FIRST 100 DAYS

- Continue the mayor's "porch talks" around questions that are of concern to the community.
- Encourage regular social media posts that residents know come directly from the mayor - it may be as simple as including -LM at the end of posts that come directly from her.
- Include a welcome message from the mayor on the "new residents" section of the website to start breaking down the cleavages between long-time residents and newcomers.
- Re-evaluate key staff presence on the city's website so the community can see the human beings behind the work that's being done.

FIRST YEAR/TERM

- Implement "takeovers" of city social media channels by the mayor, councilmembers and staff.
- Revive "Humans of Boise" style stories on social media.
- Increase Facebook Live events with staff and departments.
- Broaden the role of Livability Ambassadors.



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