

CITY COUNCIL AGENDA ITEM
CITY OF SHORELINE, WASHINGTON

AGENDA TITLE: Nalbandian Learning Opportunity
DEPARTMENT: City Manager's Office
PRESENTED BY: Steven C. Burkett, City Manager

PROBLEM/ISSUE STATEMENT:

To better serve the community, the City of Shoreline continues to look for ways to improve and enhance the effectiveness of the City organization and the Council/staff team. The City Manager and staff were impressed with the concepts presented by Dr. Nalbandian at a city manager workshop. We believe these ideas can help staff more effectively support the City Council's decision making process. Suggestions and comments from Council about the information will help direct how it is used to meet the Council's needs.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

There is no direct financial impact to this item.

RECOMMENDATION

No action is required. This item is for discussion purposes only.

Approved By:

City Manager  City Attorney 

INTRODUCTION

Staff is responsible for providing the City Council accurate, useful and complete information. The City Council balances this technical information with community values to make decisions about issues that often have no right or wrong answer. Staff can help in the decision making process by recognizing the City Council's role and supporting that role by providing the best possible framework and information.

City Manager Steve Burkett attended a workshop last fall that focused on this dynamic between staff and Council. The City Manager would like to discuss with the City Council how staff could best use the information from that workshop to improve the effectiveness of the City organization and support the City Council's decision making process.

BACKGROUND

In October 2001, City Manager Steve Burkett shared with the Council materials from a workshop he attended called *High Performance Governing Body*. The workshop was presented by John Nalbandian, Ph.D., Chair of the Department of Public Administration at the University of Kansas and former Mayor of Lawrence, Kansas. Nalbandian uses his unique dual perspective to provide insight on how councils and staff can work together more effectively.

Nalbandian's basic premise is that councils operate in a complex environment with many potentially conflicting *political values*. In contrast, staff often sees issues from the much narrower perspective of appropriate technical solutions. The key is for staff to understand the city council's role and incorporate that complexity into staff reports and other efforts to support the council decision making process.

Nalbandian identifies five *political values* that influence public policy development. *Responsiveness* is the primary political value and it is reflected in demands for the other four political values: *representation, efficiency, individual rights* and *social equity*.

Representation: The belief that government answers to the will of the people through elected representatives. The wishes of citizens should be represented in governing bodies. If public policy will have impact on a group, that group should have the opportunity to be heard.

Efficiency: Citizens expect government to be run prudently. This is achieved through cost-consciousness and rational, analytical decision making and through an emphasis on expertise and professionalism, planning and merit.

Individual Rights: Citizens are granted legal rights that protect them from arbitrary decisions by those who govern – both elected and appointed officials. These rights may be expressed in ordinances, statutes and laws, and the constitution. Property rights and civil rights fall into the broader value of individual rights.

Social Equity: Frequently, citizens are treated as members of groups rather than individuals. As group members they compare their treatment with that given to members of other groups and expect treatment to be equal.

One of the things that make a council's role difficult is the necessity of balancing these values because there is often no right or wrong answer.

One of the steps Nalbandian suggests to deal with this balancing act is for the city to focus on Community Building. This means focusing on broad objectives that unify the community across divergent value positions. This broader focus allows room for negotiation and compromise on political values which is necessary when making tough decisions.

By respecting political values and the council's efforts to consider them, staff can help by developing related information and accurately reporting it. The city manager's role is to seek alignment between staff and council perspectives, and act as both a translator and guide to make sure each has the information that is needed.

DISCUSSION

The City Manager will be using this information to work with staff to make staff reports and other materials that support the City Council more effective tools for decision making. A discussion about the information will help the City tailor its use to meet the needs of your Council. Following are a few topics for discussion:

- Should the City Council identify and define Shoreline's political values? Should they be prioritized?
- What is the most appropriate way for staff to address political values in staff reports? Is there a structure that would be useful?
- How can staff provide information that helps Council in the "compromise and negotiation" portion of balancing conflicting values during the decision making process?
- Would this be a useful topic for a Council and staff retreat?

RECOMMENDATION

No action is required. This item is for discussion purposes only.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A – Memo from the Nalbandian workshop.



Memorandum

DATE: October 22, 2001
TO: Shoreline City Council
FROM: Steven C. Burkett, City Manager *scb*
RE: ICMA Conference Learning Opportunity
CC: City of Shoreline Leadership Team

I recently attended the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) annual conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. It is my practice that when I attend an event like this I look for opportunities to bring back critical learning to assist in organizational development. I want to share some of the key learning points I picked up during one of ICMA workshops and how I plan to utilize these key learning points to improve the effectiveness of the City organization.

High Performance Governing Body, John Nalbandian, Ph.D.

Mr. Nalbandian has a unique perspective on city governance. He chairs the Department of Public Administration at the University of Kansas, teaching prospective city managers, but he also served on the Council and as Mayor of Lawrence, Kansas for many years. He utilizes this dual role perspective to provide insight on how councils and staff can work together to create a high performance governing body.

His basic premise is that councils operate in a complex environment with many potentially conflicting *political values*. Staff, in contrast, often sees the world from a much narrower, less complex perspective, e.g. what is the most appropriate technical solution. Success, he contends, depends on both the ability of the council to establish norms that allow it to be effective in this environment and staff's ability to recognize and incorporate (not ignore) these complexities into their efforts to support the council decision making process.

Political Values (See Attachment)

Mr. Nalbandian identifies five *political values* that influence public policy development. The primary *political value* is responsiveness. This value springs from demands related to the four other *political values*: i.e. representation, efficiency, individual rights, and social equity. He stresses that the job of balancing these values is uniquely the councils' and that there are no **right** or **wrong** answers. He commented that this is why we vote. While staff can't weigh these values and recommend a "right" answer, because there is no standard measuring stick, staff

should recognize the validity of *political values* and assist the council by providing information related to these values and by exploring options through them.

Poor Council Working Conditions

Mr. Nalbandian stressed to a room full of city/county managers the difficult role council members face. He points out that council efforts are characterized by the following:

- Vague Task Definition
 - There is no job description for a council member. Every council member and potentially every single constituent would likely generate distinct descriptions of councils' duties.
- No Hierarchy
 - The council has a chair (the mayor), but is otherwise composed of equal participants.
- No Specialization
 - Council members must participate in the making of all decisions and normally can't afford to focus on developing expertise in a sub-area of policy development.
- Little Feedback
 - Sources of feedback are scarce, usually predominantly negative, and ascertaining the "representativeness" of that feedback is difficult.
- Open Meetings
 - The dialogue of councils relating to the balancing of *political values* in making important policy issues occurs, with all its fits, starts, and miscues in front of the public on TV.

Successfully managing this environment, he argues, requires actions to reduce uncertainty including:

- Understanding the policy-making role of council
- Goal setting (focusing on "Community Building")
- Establishing problem solving techniques
- Developing norms of behavior
- Team building
- Developing a partnership with staff

Assisting the council in pursuing these actions is a key staff responsibility. Staff should support a "policy-making" perspective by providing policy development information, that is information that goes beyond the narrow technical issues relevant to specific subject case to identify the broader policy issues likely impacted by a council decision. Staff should assist council in creating opportunities for goal setting. Establishing and maintaining an effective and positive working relationship with the council should be a key objective of staff activities.

Summary of High Performing Council (See Attached Table)

Mr. Nalbandian identified three characteristics of a high performing council and the obstacles to consistent demonstration of those characteristics. I wanted to highlight a couple of the recommended "Steps to Take" listed in the attached table.

"Community Building" is the term Mr. Nalbandian used to describe efforts to focus on broad objectives that unify the community across divergent value positions. This broader focus allows room for negotiations and compromise on *political values*. This concept also informs the preferred context or perspective that staff should focus on in communicating with a council. It is too easy for staff to focus on near term concrete objectives and lose sight of how those objectives fit, or conflict with, the more complex community wide perspective populated with *political values*. It is simple to focus on getting a project completed. But this ignores the fact that how that project is completed may be just as, or more important in determining whether that project will serve, or frustrate the goal of "Community Building."

As also indicated in the table, Mr. Nalbandian spent some time focusing on the importance of council and staff recognizing the differences in their perspectives and on the importance of the City Manager acting as both a translator and guide to the organization on seeking alignment between them.

Valuing City Government

Mr. Nalbandian is of the opinion that in order to develop an appreciation for city government it is necessary to demonstrate that the city can accomplish desirable objectives collectively that could not be achieved by any individual acting alone. Trying to accomplish this highlights a central tension between serving the values of representation, individual rights, and social equity, while also seeking to serve the value of efficiency and to get things done. If a city efficiently accomplishes many objectives, but there is no community consensus on the desirability of those objectives, then it will be difficult for that city to get its community to value its efforts. On the other hand, if a city spends so much time and effort seeking community consensus on desirable objectives that very little actually gets accomplished at a high price in time in resources, then again the value of city government will be questioned.

Mr. Nalbandian encouraged everyone to recognize the hard work involved in balancing these values and how easy it is for councils and staff to fall into the trap of focusing on one side. Successful completion of this work requires an effective partnership between councils and staff. Staff should respect political values and council efforts to consider them by seeking to develop related information and accurately reporting it to council. Councils should recognize that there is a trade-off and balancing of political values that they must make, and that it is unrealistic to expect a city to achieve a high level of both community involvement and efficiency.

Examples

Richmond Beach Bluff Trail – This is an issue that to the outside observer would likely appear very simple. There was a problem (impact of a public use on adjoining property owners) that had a feasible engineering solution (relocation of the trail) that would allow the use to continue, and could be accomplished with available funding from another agency. Political values of *social equity* and *representation* became very important early in the process. Significant resources were expended seeking community consensus on a desired outcome, but that consensus was not forthcoming. Staff and Council worked hard to develop an understanding of and balance the

political values involved. Council had the difficult task of finally deciding whether *representation* and *social equity* had been given sufficient weight and if or when it was time for *efficiency* and *individual rights* to push the project forward.

Staff worked with the interested parties to clearly identify concerns in order to support Council decision making. Project options designed to balance the political values identified were also developed. The level of effort from staff and Council given the scope and expense of the project may have been disproportionate, but the resolution achieved a successful balance of involved interests resolving the problem.

Skate Park – This project also seemed simple and was initially approached by staff in a narrow way. Staff developed a set of siting criteria based upon opinions drawn from a group of potential users and engineering constraints. This criteria and staffs' resulting analysis did not respect the breadth of political values involved and did not develop or provide sufficient information related to key political values to the Council. As a result, the process experienced a number of false starts and dead ends as ignored political values asserted themselves late in the process and the political value of *efficiency* suffered. Only when an analysis of the alternatives that included information necessary to support Council's balancing of all political values was presented did Council feel comfortable making a decision.

In the future, the existence and importance of political values should be recognized at the beginning and Council's efforts to include them in the decision making process supported.

Medical/Dental Bldg. Zoning – This example illustrates how a problem that appears very simple from a technical perspective can require hard work to balance political values. During discussion regarding all the proposed zoning changes, staff did identify this decision as being the subject of particular political interest. One of the difficulties in resolving this issue was the absence of a "right" answer. Staff presented options that were consistent with the technical objective that initiated the discussion, i.e. resolving inconsistencies between Comprehensive Plan land use designations and zoning designations. The technical difference between the two options presented was very small, but the difference in the balance of political values perceived by interests involved was large. Presented in Mr. Nalbandian's terms, this was a struggle between the values of *individual rights* and *representation*.

Staff struggled with making a recommendation in relation to this issue. Mr. Nalbandian argues that this struggle was appropriate, as there was no "right" answer. The balancing of political values is the province of the Council. Staff attempted to support the Council's deliberations by articulating the positions of the interested parties, but the vocabulary and agreement on method to resolve these kinds of issues were missing. Staff, perhaps erroneously, stayed focused on the technical objective. Some Councilmembers looked for a strong staff recommendation consistent with past practice. After an uncomfortable dialogue, Council chose to sacrifice the technical objective in order to balance the political values.

Through this memorandum and follow-on dialogue, staff hopes to work with Council to introduce a vocabulary and begin the development of a comfortable environment in which to carry out Council's hard work of balancing political values.

Next Steps

Also attached is short "Key Learning Points" summary that I will be using to work with the Leadership Team in our continuing effort to make the information that we provide to Council more useful in your decision making process. I may also propose that we do further work, perhaps during a future retreat, do develop those systems suggested by Mr. Nalbandian to reduce uncertainty and to more effectively assist the Council in carrying out its hard work.

Please let me know if you have any comments or would like to discuss this with me in more detail.

John Nalbandian
Department of Public Administration
University of Kansas

POLITICAL VALUES

Frequently, when we think of values, qualities like honesty, reliability, love and sincerity come to mind. These are values--deep-seated beliefs that lead to judgements about right and wrong--but they have to do with individuals and how we lead our lives individually.

Political values influence public policy development as opposed to the lives of the individuals who make policy. The primary political value in our culture is *responsiveness* of governmental officials to public wants and needs. The value of responsiveness is reflected in demands for *representation, efficiency, individual rights, and social equity*.

Representation. This is the deep-seated belief that government answers to the will of the people through elected representatives. The wishes of citizens should be represented in governing bodies. If a public policy is going to have an impact on a group of citizens, that group should have the opportunity to be heard.

Efficiency. Citizens expect government to be run prudently. This is achieved through cost-consciousness and rational, analytical decision making and through an emphasis on expertise and professionalism, planning and merit.

Individual Rights. Citizens are granted legal rights that protect them from arbitrary decisions by those who govern--both elected and appointed officials. These rights may be expressed in ordinances, statutes and laws, and the constitution. Property rights and civil rights fall into the broader value of individual rights.

Social Equity. Frequently, citizens are treated as members of groups rather than individuals. Sometimes we classify people as veterans, disabled, African American, female and senior citizen rather than as Jose, Mary, Rita, and Jacob. As group members they expect treatment equal to members of other groups. And, they compare their treatment with that given to members of other groups. For example, people living in one neighborhood expect to receive a level of government service similar to that received in other neighborhoods; older neighborhoods might expect more service.



Key Learning Points

HIGH PERFORMANCE GOVERNING BODY

John Nalbandian, Ph.D.

September 2001

Points:

- Role of Governing Body (council and staff) is Community Building
- Council's job is complex and difficult
- *Political Values* are a valid and important part of decision making process
- No **right** or **wrong** answer in the balancing of values "that is why we vote"
- Cannot ignore any value over a long period of time
- Resolving value conflicts requires room for compromise and negotiation
- Council and staff perceive issues from a very different perspective
- Translation and alignment is important

Actions:

- Respect *political values* by seeking opportunities to develop and provide Council with related information early in decision making process
- Work to develop staff's sensitivity and appreciation of the complexity of the decision making process
- Create opportunities for Council dialogue and direction early in the decision making process in order to allow room for negotiation and compromise and to ensure all interests have been considered
- Develop specific objectives for information communicated to Council as part of decision making process in order to measure effectiveness
- Work with Council to develop an agreed process to support Council efforts to solve problems with conflicting *political values*

Examples:

- Public Comment – Preparing responses to the Council and the specific citizen is insufficient to demonstrate a respect for *political values*. Providing a complete and respectful response during the Council meeting, on TV, serves political values such as "responsiveness" and supports "Community Building."
- Projects – While completion of a project may be a critical piece of implementing a broader vision of the community, how that process moves forward may be just as, or more important to a project's success at "Community Building." *Political values* can not be ignored. Information related to these values should be developed and provided to Council as part decision making process.

Summary of High Performing Council

Characteristic	Obstacles	Steps to Take
Willingness to deal with difficult problems	Value conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify values and understand council's role as community building • Build council's capacity
Ability or capacity to deal with difficult problems	Unproductive working conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depersonalize issues • Establish vision and set goals • Build team expectations and teamwork • Schedule regularly retreats to assess effectiveness • Develop effective relationship with staff
Effective relationship with staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council that does not work as a team • Diverse perspectives of council and staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team building • Become aware of differences between council and staff perspectives • Develop and encourage translator role