

League of Women Voters Roseville Area

2020-2021 Equitable Representation Study on Appointed City Boards and Commissions

INTRODUCTION

Just prior to the League of Women Voters (LWV) Roseville Area chapter annual meeting in June 2020, the City of Minneapolis became yet another City where inequality reached a boiling point. The death of an African American, George Floyd, while he was being arrested, became an agonizing plea for racial justice here and now. This occurred during a devastating pandemic that was already exposing inequities in housing, health care, education, and in public life. LWV Roseville Area members advocated undertaking a study to look at equitable representation in our own backyard—in the five cities represented in our chapter. It was a small step, but nevertheless, something that we could do to bring awareness to the current state of diversity and equity on City appointed Boards and Commissions.

Serving on a commission can be a step toward becoming more involved in politics, and thus is an important gateway to more equal representation in local, state, and national governance. With demand for City services such as low-cost housing and green space continuing to grow, residents and cities alike welcome sound management and a range of voices contributing to public discussion of city needs and priorities.

The study team chose to define diversity broadly, to include race/ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, disabilities, and sexual orientation. The spirit of this report is to focus on what is working well, emphasizing equity strengths that can be shared across the cities. This aligns with positions of LWV and City leaders to foster opportunity for efficient, effective City boards and commissions including resident participation.

STUDY GOAL

The purpose of this study was to identify the current status and highlight respondents' recommendations for best practices in equitable representation for Boards and Commissions appointed by the City Councils of Falcon Heights, Lauderdale, Little Canada, Maplewood, and Roseville.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The study team collected the following information which informs the current situation with appointed Boards and Commissions in the five cities:

- Email requests to City clerks or managers for current and former commission member e-mail contact information, details such as purpose of the various commissions, term lengths, commissioner qualifications, and recruitment and onboarding. Information from City websites was also used.
- Online anonymous survey to 116 current commissioners in Falcon Heights, Little Canada, Maplewood and Roseville (Lauderdale currently has no commissions) with a response rate

ranging from 19-73 percent (median=61 percent). Note that since Roseville has the most commissions, they had the most survey responses. Results have not been summarized by City to ensure confidentiality.

- Phone calls with survey respondents who requested a follow-up conversation.

Suggestions were then drawn from the information collected. We acknowledge that the survey was subjective in nature, representing respondents' views and raises topics for the Cities' consideration. Subjective data relies on participant awareness; that is, we don't know what we don't know. Personal bias is inevitable and enters into responses. On-going data collection and reflection help create more personal awareness and recognition of one's own biases and perspectives.

City demographic snapshot

The Cities are generally similar, except for population and differences such as Roseville having a little less racial diversity, Maplewood having more people under age 18, and Lauderdale having the highest percentage of people below poverty levels.

| | Falcon Heights | Lauderdale | Little Canada | Maplewood | Roseville |
|-------------------------|----------------|------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|
| Age | | | | | |
| Median/middle | 32.9 | 33.2 | 43.8 | 38.1 | 40 |
| percent under 18 | 18% | 13% | 18% | 22% | 19% |
| percent 18-64 | 66 | 70 | 65 | 62 | 60 |
| percent 65+ | 15 | 17 | 17 | 16 | 21 |
| Gender | | | | | |
| Male | 47% | 48% | 49% | 49% | 47% |
| Female | 53% | 52% | 51% | 51% | 53% |
| Ethnicity | | | | | |
| White | 71% | 70.72% | 66% | 64% | 76% |
| Black | 8 | 11 | 10 | 9 | 8 |
| Native | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0.3 | 0.5 |
| Asian | 15 | 12 | 15 | 15 | 8 |
| Pacific Islander | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Hispanic | 2 | 3 | 5 | 9 | 4 |
| other | 1 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| two + | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 |
| Income | | | | | |
| median | \$72,660 | \$50,909 | \$51,500 | \$66,758 | \$68,300 |
| Below poverty | 12% | 16% | 8.7% | 9.8% | 9.7% |
| 100-149 percent poverty | 5.3 | 5.9 | 10 | 8.7 | 5.7 |
| 150-184 percent poverty | 6 | 7.2 | 7.7 | 5.5 | 4.4 |
| Population | 5,446 | 2,442 | 10,580 | 41,738 | 36,644 |

Population data adapted from 2010 US Census and 2019 American Community Survey

City commissions snapshot

As the chart of the commissions shows, the types of commissions vary in each city. Lauderdale currently has no commissions, as previously mentioned.

| | Falcon Heights | Little Canada | Maplewood | Roseville |
|---|----------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|
| Commission | | | | |
| Planning | X | X | X | X |
| Parks & Recreation | X | X | X | X |
| Environment (& Natural Resources) | X | | X | |
| Public Works/Environment & Transportation | | | | X |
| Community Engagement | X | | | |
| Human Rights, Inclusion & Engagement | | | | X |
| Community Design Review Board | | | X | |
| Heritage Preservation | | | X | |
| Housing/Economic Development | | | X | |
| Ethics | | | | X |
| Finance | | | | X |
| Police/Civil Service | | | | X |
| Variance (overlaps with Planning) | | | | X |

Similarities in commissions

Few commissions reported having required qualifications other than being a resident. There are some exceptions, such as the Finance Commission requiring that three members have professional financial experience. The average number of commissioners per commission is 6.5 and the range is from 3 to 11. All commissioners are appointed by City Councils and/or Mayors. The only commissions that the Cities have in common are Planning and Parks & Recreation. There is also similarity between Maplewood’s Environment & Natural Resources and Roseville’s Public Works/Environment & Transportation, and Roseville’s Human Rights, Inclusion & Engagement and Falcon Height’s Community Engagement. Meetings are held in the evening in all cities, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, were held online via Zoom.

How long have you served on your specific board or commission?

| | Responses | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| I am currently serving my first term. | 21 | 36 |
| I am serving my second term. | 22 | 37 |
| I am serving now and have also served in the past. | 11 | 19 |
| Other | 5 | 8 |

| | | |
|-------|----|-----|
| Total | 59 | 100 |
|-------|----|-----|

Most respondents were serving on their first or second terms. Some were serving now and had served in the past.

Differences in commissions

Of note to this study is that in 2017 the City of Roseville combined its Human Rights and Community Engagement Commissions to create a Human Rights, Inclusion and Engagement Commission. The purpose is to evaluate the City’s outreach and inclusion efforts and advise on strategies to improve them. Roseville also has two voting youth (high school) commissioners on two commissions and Falcon Heights has a youth commission which encourages teens to serve on several of their commissions. Maplewood previously had a Human Rights Commission and may possibly create a similar new Commission. Except for Maplewood, the cities each have term limits for commissioners. These differences are noted as they impact obtaining more diversity in commissioners.

STUDY FINDINGS

Pride in accomplishments

We asked commissioners what they were most proud of in their work:

- Most common answer of 42 responses was full participation by members, equal opportunity to speak, without intimidation from other board members and getting input from the public to make positive changes. “Good collaboration, city seeks and takes input/feedback.”
- Second most common answer was working from a master plan for their commission
- Other common responses, some specific to type of commission included: improving park facilities; develop a primer for orientation of new commission members and ongoing resource for all commission members about important topics and aspects of work on the commission; engagement toolkit; hiring of diversity and inclusion consultant by the City as a result of our recommendation; solar power and water rates; work on utility rates and organic composting

What works well with your Commission?

The following comments were the most frequently mentioned of 42 responses:

- Having a comprehensive plan was mentioned by the most people with comments such as, “We developed a master plan and we reference it when making recommendations” being typical (comments about the comprehensive plan are likely from Planning Commission members, who have a role to play in the cities’ development of the statutorily-mandated Comprehensive Plan)

- Having positive relationships was mentioned next most frequently with comments such as, “Being open to all opinions and showing a willingness to listen” and “Respect for each other’s opinions.”
- The next most common response was the importance of having an engaged staff or a City Council member who worked with the commission, such as, “We are helping to promote more active engagement in building a vibrant City atmosphere.” Similar comments include “city staff is well informed on issues,” and “competent staff liaison.”
- Actively seeking feedback was mentioned by a number of respondents, “Input from the community,” and “improved outreach and inclusion for underrepresented communities.”
- Several people also cited making positive change/adaptations toward progressive environmental policies as an important accomplishment.
- Several people mentioned how COVID-19 has affected their commission. Most have adjusted to online meetings with somewhat mixed results, though more made positive rather than negative comments about online meetings. “We are starting to think “outside of the box” due to the pandemic restrictions.” “The online dynamic is working well.”

What could improve your Commission?

- The most common response of 39 who answered this question was needing more feedback from the public such as, “More local interest and involvement, including with students. Have more commission recommendations approved or supported by City Council. Consider ways to reach out to various stakeholders in community, (for example) solicit input on goals or identify areas of concern or interest.”
- The next most common response involved clarification of their role, including clear guidance and more defined role for commissioners, wanting a more clearly defined mission, regular progress updates, better access to central data, better onboarding or training for new commissioners, better cohesiveness between City Council and the commission and better communication.
- Several people mentioned problems presented by COVID-19 and they felt they were being more reactive than previously. “Even before COVID, the number of meetings per year was too few.” “Looking forward to in-person meetings. Hard to do all our work through Zoom.”

Existing orientation and training

- Only half of respondents reported receiving an orientation. Of those, 92 percent said it was useful:
 - nearly all want training in policies and procedures and the City’s strategic plan
 - next highest request was history of past practices
 - less than half said training in building consensus and communication skills was necessary, though we respectfully indicate that this may increase in importance as diversity of experiences increases
- On the need for orientation, we asked commissioners to rate the importance of an orientation on a scale from 1 to 100. Respondents’ ratings averaged 70 out of 100 on the importance, with 66 percent scoring it over 50. “(Need) improved onboarding for new commissioners, clear guidance from City Council.” “(Need) roles and responsibilities of a

commission, especially as it relates to city government/budget process, to city staff, to other commissions, to City Council.” “Need new commissioner training....”.

- Maplewood and Roseville have a handbook which is provided/reviewed with new commissioners

Barriers to participating

- Small numbers of respondents said hearing or vision issues (2), day or time of meeting conflict (3), childcare needs (3) or technology issues (2). “Conflict with work engagement.”
- One each cited barriers such as mobility/access, personal work/travel schedule, meetings get rescheduled and conflict with calendar, no in person meetings because of COVID-19. “Frequent out-of-area travel.”

This information may not reflect *potential* commissioner barriers, as there is no method for obtaining it from persons who, by definition, have not applied or been appointed.

Diversity of respondents

We do not have demographics for all members of the commissions. However, to the extent that we obtained a representative sample, the responses suggest limited diversity among those serving on these commissions.

- Respondents were largely male (62 percent)
- Income levels were high, with 42.6 percent reporting incomes of higher than \$120,000. Only 17 percent reported incomes of under \$80,000, with 3.8 percent below \$20,000. Eight people did not respond to the income question.
- 83 percent of respondents were White, Asian/Pacific Islander constituted 8 percent of respondents. One respondent reported that they were Black and 1 indicated multi-racial.

Why commissioners serve and recruitment sources

When asked the reasons they chose to serve, 82 percent wanted to serve their City and make a difference, 36 percent “had needed expertise”, 25 percent “make needed change” (25 percent), “fix a problem” (12 percent), and “other” (4 percent).

How did you find out about this commission?

| | Responses | Percent |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| City newsletter | 24 | 40 |
| City website | 14 | 24 |
| Current commissioner, City official | 9 | 15 |
| Other (inquired with City, etc.) | 8 | 14 |
| Social media | 4 | 7 |
| Total | 59 | 100 |

Heard about openings on commission:

- 70 percent learned of opening from City newsletter, website, or social media
- 15 percent were solicited by someone already involved in government and a similar number inquired with the City or received an email from an organization. “The membership of commissions is appointed from the pool of those who are interested in working on city issues and then apply for membership on a commission. This is where an effort must be made to encourage more interest in working on a commission. There could be a way to reach folks who do not use any of these resources by advertising directly to certain groups.”

Comprehensive Plans

How does your board or commission’s work fit into your City’s comprehensive plan?

| | Responses | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| We provide advice and opinions. | 48 | 43 |
| We respond to specific requests for information and advice. | 32 | 29 |
| We provide essential information that is important for some decision making. | 27 | 24 |
| Other | 4 | 4 |
| Total | *111 | 100 |
| <i>Note: * Respondents could check more than one category.</i> | | |

- We asked commissioners to rate their familiarity with their City’s comprehensive plan on a scale from 1 to 100. Although a few indicated lack of knowledge, the mean score was 67 and 66 percent scored between 50 and 94, indicating that most were at least somewhat familiar with the plan.
- When asked how their work fit into their City’s comprehensive plan, responses included providing advice, responding to specific information requests, and providing valuable information to inform work with the comprehensive plan. “Alignment with the comprehensive plan.”

Impacts on effectiveness of commissioners

- While the majority think everyone has an equal voice, several people disagreed
- When the response was, “Sometimes Equal Voice”, comments as to when that happen included:
 - “Format can break down with 1 or 2 members dialoguing unless other member is very forceful that they have something to add. Meeting importance and formality breaks down at times during the meeting. This has negative impact on board function to community and devalues the work being done.”
 - “All are heard but some don’t attend so they can’t be heard”
 - “It takes some time for new commissioners to feel that they have an equal voice”
- There was a strong endorsement for their recommendations being adopted by City Councils. Sixty-six percent scored their response above 50 percent (on scale of 100).

“Commission views and suggestions are well received by City Council.” Another view differed: “The City Council could listen more to our advice...”.

Missing voices

When we asked whose voices needed more representation, 70 percent responded that some groups were missing a voice. (We assume that those who did not answer felt no voices were missing.) Among those who did respond, the most endorsed “missing voices” category was different races and ethnicities. When asked to rate from 1 to 100 how they were doing on obtaining input from people of different races and incomes, the mean was about 50. “Input from all community stakeholders, not just from residents that are directly affected by certain situations or issues.”

Identify stakeholders whose voices you think are missing when your specific board or commission does its work.

| | Responses | Percent |
|---|-----------|---------|
| No voices missing | 19 | 30 |
| Persons from different races/ethnicities | 9 | 15 |
| Homeless | 7 | 11 |
| Low income | 7 | 11 |
| Renters | 5 | 8 |
| Homeowners | 4 | 7 |
| Other | 4 | 7 |
| Persons with different abilities | 3 | 5 |
| Senior citizens | 1 | 2 |
| Persons with different sexual orientation | 1 | 2 |
| Youth | 1 | 2 |
| Total | 61 | 100 |

Commissioner comments about equity

What could be done to make this board or commission and its work/recommendations more inclusive of needs of diverse stakeholders in the city?

| | Responses | Percent |
|---|-----------|---------|
| Recruit and appoint more members from diverse backgrounds | 26 | 43 |
| Routinely survey a representative sample of the community | 11 | 18 |
| Personally consult with more diverse constituents | 8 | 13 |
| Other | 5 | 8 |
| Nothing, we are quite inclusive | 4 | 6 |
| No response | 7 | 11 |
| Total | 61 | 100 |

- “Commissioners are selected by City Council, which itself does not represent the diversity of the community.”
- “How we can be more intentional in incorporating equity principles and practices in our work; whether as a commission and even as a City, what internal work do we need to do ourselves to assess where we are at, be on the same page about equity definitions, goals and vision, while also creating systemic changes that are more equitable for the community.”
- “The membership of commissions is appointed from the pool of those who are interested in working on City issues and then apply for membership on a commission. This is where an effort must be made to encourage more interest in working on a commission. Some Cities advertise widely for commission openings on a variety of City platforms (City newsletter, City website, Nextdoor, Facebook, etc.). There could be a way to reach folks who do not use any of these resources by advertising directly to certain groups.”
- “We need more ethnic diversity representation. It is difficult to get other cultures involved.”
- “Too many people are appointed to a board or commission for the sake of diversity, even though they have no expertise that is relevant to the board or commission.” This is a dissenting perspective and not supported by survey responses.
- Conduct a survey of representative diverse communities for their input

SUGGESTIONS FROM CURRENT COMMISSIONERS

We heard that numerous aspects of commissions are working well and commissioners believe they are serving an important role. As with any group, there is room for continuous improvement. The following areas and resources are suggested for City Council discussion and possible action.

- Appoint a City staff liaison member to all commissions.
- Improve equitable representation by broadening recruitment to target and reach more diverse groups. Ideally, reach out to relevant groups in advance of openings to build relationships and inform community members about the commissions.
- Develop an orientation / handbook and ensure training is conducted for all commissioners to provide a contextual understanding of the commission and City governance.
- As soon as safely possible, consider a balance of online meetings using Zoom or similar tool and in-person meetings. While Zoom is convenient and can remove transportation and possibly childcare barriers, it may be less personal, making it more difficult to speak up and harder to get to know others.

OTHER BEST PRACTICE RESOURCES

- League of Minnesota Cities – Collaboration of commissioners with other City commissioners in similar situations often offers the best path to effectiveness and

efficiency. While this group has no resources specific to boards and commissions, their Manager of Policy Analysis suggests, “There are many cities in MN, especially in the metro area, that are working to advance race equity in their communities. They are making changes to their HR practices as well as their commissions. I would suggest that you reach out to cities you have connections with.”

- Institute for Local Government – See their publication, *Beyond the Usuals Ideas to Encourage Broader Public Engagement in Community Decision Making*
- GROUNDWORK USA – See their publication, *Best Practices for Meaningful Community Engagement*
- University of Minnesota Extension Services – Leadership and Civic Engagement Extension. This program provides teams to help cities become more welcoming communities.

EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION STUDY COMMITTEE

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