

The City Council and Department Heads typically meet as the Committee of the Whole once or twice a year. It is a chance to get beyond our individual departments and committees and to discuss projects and issues with broad impact.

The last two years the Committee of the Whole discussions taken a form of strategic planning: to identify our mission and to align our management towards it.

In July 2011, index cards were distributed with each participant asked to provide a brief answer to the question, "What is the purpose of The City of Evansville as an organization?" Common themes among the answers included: top-notch, quality service and quality of life to the citizens (residents and businesses) in a positive, courteous, and cost-effective manner. Additional comments noted the need to go beyond adequate service and seek ways to improve and the need to see the entire organization beyond individual departments or committees.

We also noted the 2005 Smart Growth Plan had included a list of community values such as small town atmosphere, well-maintained historic architecture, resident and volunteer involvement in the community, sense of safety and closeness, low crime rate, local events that build community, generous businesses who give money and time to community projects, friendly residents, school district, and a great place to raise a family. These values are the core to our community identity.

After a three hour discussion, we closed the meeting with the question "How are we doing from our stakeholders points of view?" This was a companion to the opening question about the purpose of the City. Because the perceived quality of our performance is so situational, it is vital to make every transaction count. We need to strive to constantly achieve through training, professionalism, cooperation, and other means. Consistent effort for being thoughtful and fair is essential.

Variations on these themes have continued to be the emphasis of five Committee of the Whole meetings over the last two years.

Top-Notch Service

We provide services for our residents and businesses. By "top-notch service" we mean providing basic services at a high level. This includes best management practices and professionalism, often with third-party recognition.

There are many examples of best management practices. The Public Works Department participates in the Federal Emergency Management Association's Community Rating System which results in a fifteen percent discount in flood insurance premiums citywide. Earlier this year, our Electric Utility earned Reliable Public Power Program (RP3) designation by the American Public Power Association. Less than ten percent of the public electric utilities in the country earn this distinction for providing customers with the highest degree of reliable and safe electric service. The Police Department has been working toward formal accreditation by the Wisconsin Law Enforcement Accreditation Group; their assessment is scheduled for this November.

We also encourage certification and continuing education of staff. With a three-year program, our City Clerk earned certification as a municipal clerk. The Wastewater Operator has earned certification for our upgraded treatment plant. We have a qualified team of journey-level electric line workers. Staff are also active with trade associations for police, ambulance, utilities, building inspection, and labor relations. Such continued investment in training helps ensure high quality services for our residents and businesses.

Third party recognition may include the best management practices and certifications just mentioned. It also includes awards and recognition we've received the last few years for our Smart Growth Plan, Main Street reconstruction, various energy conservation efforts, Tree City and Bird City designations, and the new wastewater treatment facility. And it includes active representation in the League of Wisconsin Municipalities (LWM) Legislative Advisory Committee, on the board of the LWM Engineers and Public Works Section, and with the LWM Lobby Corps.

Drive For Excellence

Closely related to top-notch service is a "drive for excellence." It takes a long-view with an emphasis on improving operations and service. We need to be both effective and efficient. We need to be effective – from the citizen's point of view – in providing quality service. We need to be efficient in the process – whether it means eliminating unnecessary paperwork, time and delay, and/or costs.

This means a commitment to improvement: a vision for top-notch service, practical training, a focus on results, and nurturing an organizational culture which looks past the status quo.

An example of improved service is the City's becoming an owner-member in WPPI Energy several years ago. Another example is the Public Works Department adding wing blades to two of the plow trucks and applying a salt brine prior to snowstorms in order to reduce the time it takes to clear the streets. The Finance Department now accepts on-line and by-phone payment of utility bills for better customer ease and convenience, and having utility bills printed and mailed by a third-party vendor has freed up significant staff time.

Previously, the City offices had a split "finance department" with some responsibilities vesting with the Clerk/Treasurer and other responsibilities vesting with the Finance Director. It lent itself to duplication of effort. And it resulted in an artificial division between the office employees – depending on which supervisor they reported to, they were either Water & Light or City.

In 2007, we eliminated the split department, aligning all the fiscal duties in one Finance Department. It also resulted in better office and accounting efficiencies and improved customer service. Although the jobs in the Finance Department had been re-organized, we still maintained separate accounting systems. With an upgrade of the accounting software in 2011-2012, we then consolidated the accounting databases: streamlining

office procedures and further eliminating duplicative efforts. In late 2012, we combined the Administrator and Finance Director positions to eliminate having two managerial positions in the same office and to streamline some overlapped duties and staff supervision. By this example, continuous improvement is not a one-time action.

This drive for excellence and professionalism has also been a key discussion when hiring the Water & Light Superintendent, City Engineer, Community Development Director, and all recent staff positions. And I expect it will continue to be the focus when hiring positions in the future.

Teamwork

With several new members on the City Council and staff, our April and May 2012 Committee of the Whole meetings discussed teamwork. Some of this included fundamentals such as meeting etiquette, open meetings law, and conflicts of interest. The discussion also included broader thematic conversations about constructive debate and stewardship.

One of the responsibilities of leadership is the ability to resolve diverse interests. Each individual brings a different set of background experiences and perspective. With more rounded debates, we tend to find that the group's decision is better than could have been made by any one member. Participants need to be comfortable in sharing their ideas, and people must keep an open mind (not coming to a meeting with your mind already made up) and listen. The focus should be on the issues, not on the dynamics of the group.

The obvious example of stewardship is our fiscal responsibilities with taxpayer money; it is not the money of the City Council or an individual department. We need to use it efficiently and do the best with what is available. Other stewardship responsibilities were recognized in the investments in infrastructure, buildings, staff, and equipment which need to be maintained. The long-term neglect and complete rehabilitation of Lake Leota is a very tangible example of the need to maintain the City's assets. Another example of stewardship is that we work for all of the public, not for special interests. Other examples include responsibilities for the environment, historic identity of Evansville, and future generations.

Attention to Results

Over a series of Committee of the Whole meetings in April, May, and September 2012 and May 2013, we conducted exercises recognizing the past, present, and future.

To "appreciate what is," we brainstormed a list of accomplishments from the recent past as well as several long-term multigenerational values and projects. It was simply a list, not a prioritization, but the list was long and encompassed parks, infrastructure, energy efficiency, public/private collaborations, buildings, utilities, tourism, public safety, historic preservation, and economic development.

Later we noted achievements in every department in just the prior eight months. It was an immediate time frame, but much continues to be accomplished.

Then we turned to the “foreseeable future” to recognize that change is going to happen, to re-emphasize our focus on top-notch service, to discuss population growth and resident expectations, and to note tight budgets are here to stay. These themes lead more specific discussions about intergovernmental cooperation, technology, succession planning, personnel policies and recognition, and lean operations.

Next Steps

Our next Committee of the Whole meeting will be September 28. We have not yet drafted the agenda, and obviously the discussion can be wide-reaching, so the specifics of the upcoming meeting are unknown.

One item which will be discussed is our Smart Growth Comprehensive Plan. The deadline for completing the 10-year update to the plan is June 2015. Work on the update has already begun and will continue in earnest through 2014. Although a couple on the City Council had been involved as citizens during the original Smart Growth Plan, none were on the City Council itself. So an overview of the elements of the plan, public involvement in the process, and expectations for the update are in order.

An additional theme of discussion will be the evolution of the services we provide. Our drive for excellence is not a one-time thing; it needs to be recurring. How we identify and prepare ourselves for changes in technology, regulations, or other trends will determine the effectiveness of our operations in the future. Obviously, maintaining relations with trade associations, continuing to invest in staff training, and emphasizing an adaptive and improvement-oriented culture will be paramount.

Other items which may be on the agenda are unique opportunities with long-range impact. Examples may include purchase of the former Coach House property which would be a first step towards a future connecting street between East Main Street and Creekside Place Community Center, purchase of land on the far side of Lake Leota to preserve it from development and to maintain scenic views from the park, or technology and computer upgrades.

Whatever the specifics of next week’s meeting agenda, the discussion will surely be strategic in maintaining a high performing organization for the benefit of our Evansville community.