

# San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission

455 Golden Gate Avenue, Suite 10600, San Francisco, California 94102 tel 415 352 3600 fax 415 352 3606

November 30, 2018

**TO:** All Commissioners and Alternates

**FROM:** Lawrence J. Goldzband, Executive Director (415/352-3653; [larry.goldzband@bcdc.ca.gov](mailto:larry.goldzband@bcdc.ca.gov))  
Peggy Atwell, Director, Administrative & Technology Services (415/352-3638; [peggy.atwell@bcdc.ca.gov](mailto:peggy.atwell@bcdc.ca.gov))

**SUBJECT: Draft Minutes of November 15, 2018 Commission Workshop**

1. **Call to Order.** The workshop was called to order by Chair Wasserman at the Bay Area Metro Center, 375 Beale Street, Yerba Buena Room, First Floor, San Francisco, California at 3:30 p.m.

2. **Roll Call.** Present were: Chair Wasserman, Vice Chair Halsted, Commissioners Ahn, Eckerle, McElhinney, McGrath, Pine, Scharff, Sears, Showalter and Vasquez.

3. **Workshop on Staff Reports.** Chief of Bay Resources and Permits Ethan Lavine introduced Professor of Urban Planning, Bonnie Johnson, PhD, AICP, University of Kansas. He covered some logistics and legal matters for those in attendance.

Mr. Lavine informed attendees that this workshop would consist of exchanging ideas and brainstorming about ways to improve and revamp staff reports.

Dr. Johnson addressed the attendees. She shared with the group her background and experience in a number of fields. The inadequacies she noted on staff reports she has reviewed over the years motivated her to dedicate her time to improvement of these documents.

After reading a definition of “Staff Report” from the American Planning Association she shared with the group the five big ideas that the planning office of the future calls for. They are as follows:

- a. Think big
- b. Exercise leadership
- c. Change culture
- d. Implement big ideas
- e. Advance equity

She mentioned that staff reports are the main, communication tool between an agency’s staff and the decision-making bodies. They are supposed to have significant impacts upon a community and affect decisions about a community’s growth and development. If they are not having this effect then perhaps things need to be done differently.

**BCDC COMMISSION WORKSHOP MINUTES  
November 15, 2018**



When Dr. Johnson asked participants to describe a staff report in one word their descriptors fell into two categories and the following is a partial listing of those adjectives.

<b>USEFUL</b>	<b>NOT SO USEFUL</b>
Informative	Boring
Just the facts	Too long
Tradeoffs	Unfocussed

Dr. Johnson mentioned that staff reports are central to what an agency does but that very little research has been done to improve them.

Dr. Johnson shared a list of purposes of staff reports with the group. She asked if a staff report should make a persuasive argument. It was discussed that a staff report consists of two things: Just the Facts and Recommendations.

Although applicants on a project will put forth the facts that they feel will compel an agency to approve their project the Recommendations part of a staff report will determine whether the decision-makers are persuaded or not to approve the project.

The idea of tailoring a staff report to the intended audience was discussed. The notion that a staff report may have multiple variations depending on its intended use and targeted audience was discussed at length.

The group was made aware of a study of staff reports from 94 cities and 41 states and were apprised of the fact that most of them included a lot of very technical language with very little communication to the intended audience.

Dr. Johnson went through approximately 27 examples of different literary techniques and examples of methods of communication found in a number of staffs reports throughout the country. She discussed the merits and shortcomings of a number of these.

She followed this discussion with a list of things that stand in the way of greatness as far as staff reports are concerned. The list is as follows:

- (1) Short turnaround times
- (2) Incomplete applications
- (3) Multiple projects
- (4) Attention spans
- (5) Consistency (being evenhanded)
- (6) Might be a court case someday
- (7) It's always been this way

A number of methods were shared with the group that might help in changing the look and impact of a staff report for the better.

Dr. Johnson asked; what do you like about staff reports?

A partial listing of responses follows:

- (8) Consideration of the audience with appropriate information
- (9) Proper titling of the report
- (10) The use of tables
- (11) The use of maps
- (12) Highlighting of the recommendations
- (13) Well structured

Dr. Johnson asked the group to voice any worries or concerns they might have about staff reports. A partial list follows:

- (14) Reasons for recommendation not clear
- (15) Difficulty in finding recommendation (formatting)
- (16) Insufficient differentiation between planning and permitting reports
- (17) Difficulty in preparing summary as opposed to recommendations to abide by regulations
- (18) Difficulty of considering ongoing negotiations while producing a summary and a recommendation
- (19) Lack of flexibility in legal timelines associated with the production of a staff report
- (20) Lack of collaboration between stakeholders
- (21) Insufficient noting of negotiations around central issues
- (22) Noting more consistently best practices
- (23) Not thinking big often enough
- (24) Not emphasizing contentious issues enough and ways of dealing with them
- (25) Simplification of the process and the reports to effectuate a more streamlined timeline
- (26) Lack of pros and cons in a table form
- (27) Insufficient linking of the staff reports to the scope, breadth and size of a project
- (28) Low engagement of the audience because of a lack of appropriate presentation

Executive Director Goldzband asked the Commissioners to submit the best staff reports from their respective jurisdictions and PDF them to Ethan Lavine. He asked them to include why the report worked for them.

Chair Wasserman noted that there are basic models and standards that people need to adhere to.

Commissioner McElhinney suggested that BCDC staff do some peer review with MTC.

Executive Director Goldzband mentioned that different generations want different types of reports. He asked how this generational difference could be dealt with.

Dr. Johnson commented that her students are often under the impression that using big vocabulary and flowery sentences make for a good report. She noted that they are relieved when she tells them that it is okay to make it simple and understandable.

Commissioner Vasquez opined that the public has to get something out of the staff report and feel sufficiently informed by it to make valid public comment and decisions.

Chief of Enforcement Adrienne Klein stated that there is an inherent tension between the job that staff needs to do and how it should be effectively communicated. Staff will need some time to digest the ideas put forth and their effect on the writing of staff reports.

Dr. Johnson closed by stating that if this were easy it would have already been done and we would have wonderful staff reports. The very fact that they are the way they are shows how difficult it is.

**4. Adjournment.** Chair Wasserman adjourned the workshop at 4:38 p.m.