

Ashland City Council
Listening Session Proposed Structure

Prepared by Councilor Graham

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Listening sessions are part of the community engagement process the Council has decided to employ as it works to address the chronic, year over year shortfall in the General Fund. The listening sessions are planned to be held between mid-November and the first week of December. Staff is currently working to find two dates that work for the Mayor, Councilors, and key staff.

We have two goals for the evening. The first is to provide information to ground the public in terms of the Council's General Fund discussions so that their input can be the most effective. At the same time, we want to provide an open venue for Ashland citizens to come and talk with us and their neighbors in a safe, informal structure that allows some back and forth discussion, unlike the formal public testimony process during regular meetings.

The following is a proposed agenda and Zoom structure for those sessions that is built off of the structure we used in early 2019 for an in-person listening session before Council moved into the budgeting process. It has been adapted to address the online aspect and current discussion.

Proposed Agenda

6:30 – 6:40: Opening remarks by Mayor Akins welcoming the public, outlining the process the Council is moving through to address the General Fund shortfall, creating the context for the listening session, and letting attendees know the structure of the evening. She will also share that there is an online survey asking these same questions through the Engage Ashland survey program on the City's website for those who were not able to attend this Zoom session.

6:40 – 7:00: Staff presentation regarding the situation with the General Fund, the order of magnitude of the decisions that need to happen in this process, and the elements of the City's operations that are funded through the General Fund. This will also be the time to share information about current staffing structures and capacities vs. recommended structures and capacities, and the differential costs of those structures.

7:00 – 7:30: Community members will be randomly assigned to breakout rooms, each of which will have an elected official and a staff member. The staff member is there to take notes and the elected official is there to listen and ask questions of the community members in their breakout group. The assumption is that there will be 6-7 community members with each

elected official, which allows us to hear from 42-49 community members in the breakout sessions.

Each community member will have four minutes to talk. We will ask them to start first with their name and share briefly something they love about living in Ashland. Then they will say whatever it is they want the Council to hear in terms of what is important to them in this General Fund process. They can take the entire four minutes or they can end a bit early so that they can have a bit of back and forth with the councilor. The staff person will help them keep time with some sort of chime that is not intrusive. We ask each person to listen respectfully to their neighbor in these sessions so that everyone has a chance to be properly heard.

Two alternative endings depending on the number of people who sign up and/or attend:

1. If we are able to accommodate all participants in the first breakout session, the Zoom operator will bring all participants back to the main Zoom meeting room and the program will end after Mayor Akins offers closing remarks thanking participants, acknowledging the difficult decisions in front our community, and sharing next steps in terms of what the Council will do with the thoughts they have shared and the upcoming community-wide survey. Event will end by 7:45.
2. If there are more attendees than can be handled with one breakout session, we will have our staff members from fire, police, parks, planning, and administration stay with the those who are not in breakout discussions from 7:00 – 7:30 to answer questions while the first breakout groups are in process. Once those are complete, the Zoom operator will move the remaining people from the general Zoom meeting room into breakout groups to repeat the process that was just done with the first group (from 7:35 – 8:00 pm), while the first breakout groups return to the main Zoom meeting room to have their questions answered by staff. When the second breakout group is done, the Zoom operator will bring the second set of breakout group participants back to the main Zoom meeting room so that Mayor Akins can offer closing remarks to the full group. Event will end by 8:15.

We will ask residents to register ahead of time for the session so that we know how many people to expect, which will assist in our planning. We will also do our best to accommodate everyone who attends whether or not they knew to register ahead of time.

Staff who are assisting in the breakout groups will be asked to type up their notes and send the electronic versions over to Gary, who will share them with the Council along with answers received through the Engage Ashland survey platform.

If there are more than 100 people who sign up (or show up) to the first listening session, we will add a second listening session to the schedule at a time that will already be set aside in our calendars for this eventuality – likely 10-14 days after the first one.

Next Steps

Next steps are to set the first listening session date, lock the second one into our calendars as a fall back, and get the registration form out via social media. We will also need to contact local news outlets so that they can share this information with the public. Finally, it is imperative that we either ensure that administrative support staff have the experience to manage the Zoom logistics, or hire for outside assistance managing the Zoom transitions.