

Briefing on the City of Harvard's Proposed Departmental Reorganization

City Council Committee of the Whole meeting - November 17, 2025

1.0 Executive Summary

This document provides an analysis of the proposed departmental restructuring within the City of Harvard, as discussed in the November 2025 City Council Committee of the Whole Meeting. The core of the proposal involves splitting the former Community and Economic Development Director role into two new, more specialized positions: a **Community Engagement Director** and a **Planning and Development Director**. This reorganization is driven by a significant increase in development activity, challenges in recreational program participation, and a strategic effort to align departmental functions with the city's Strategic Vision. The proposal has generated considerable discussion among council members regarding process, transparency, and operational specifics, leading to a decision to further vet the changes in a dedicated Administration Committee meeting.

2.0 Proposed Departmental Restructuring

The City Administrator has proposed a significant reorganization of the Parks, Community Development, and Economic Development departments. This plan emerged from a six-month, hands-on analysis of departmental needs and aims to better address the city's recent growth and strategic goals.

2.1 Creation of the Community Engagement Director Position

This new role is designed to consolidate community outreach, oversight of recreational programming, and marketing/promotional aspects of economic development.

Key Responsibilities & Rationale:

- **Recreation Program Management:**
 - The Parks and Recreation department's efforts to expand non-sports programming (arts, culture) have been met with very low or no attendance, resulting in cancellations.

- An analysis revealed that many of these programs were being duplicated by the Harvard Diggins Library and the Senior Center, which have higher participation.
- **New Strategy:** Partner with the library to co-promote and fund non-athletic programs, with the library hosting and managing them. The Community Engagement Director would facilitate this partnership.
- The position will retain management of the city's successful basketball program and pool operations (staffing side).
- **Economic Development & Business Relations:**
 - This role will absorb the marketing, business outreach, and promotional duties previously under the Economic Development Director.
 - Responsibilities include building relationships with existing businesses, attracting new development, researching market trends, and managing the BluDot business inventory software, which has been underutilized since its purchase a year ago.
- **Board & Stakeholder Liaison:**
 - The Director will serve as the city's representative on the Senior Center Board, the NISRA Board, and the Harvard Parks Foundation.

The City Administrator noted that a candidate currently employed by the city, Jo Atkinson, has demonstrated the capabilities for this role, citing 15 years of experience in stakeholder coordination, partnership building, launching new programs, and managing a \$2.2 million budget.

2.2 Creation of the Planning and Development Director Position

This redefined role is intended to create a specialized focus on the technical aspects of city development in response to a dramatic increase in building activity.

Key Responsibilities & Rationale:

- **Zoning, Planning, and Inspections:**
 - The previous director's role was more geared toward economic development outreach, with the city outsourcing many building inspection and plan review services.
 - The city has experienced an increase in building permits for both new homes and businesses.

- **New Strategy:** Hire a director with more experience in inspection services, urban planning, and zoning to handle the increased workload and bring more services in-house.
- The goal is to reduce the reliance on outsourcing, which currently costs approximately \$30,000 annually. While some complex plan reviews (e.g., stormwater) will still be outsourced, day-to-day inspections and smaller residential plan reviews could be handled internally.
- **Departmental Leadership:**
 - This individual will lead the Community Development Department, overseeing building services, licensing, and code enforcement.

2.3 Other Operational Changes

- **Parks Maintenance:** To provide the Community Engagement Director with the bandwidth to handle economic development duties, all park maintenance responsibilities will be shifted to the Utility Department. This is seen as a logical move, as the Utility Department has more mechanics and relevant experience.
- **Organizational Structure:** The City Administrator explained the challenge: "We have three positions and you have enough budget to fill two." The reorganization fills the roles of Parks, Community Development, and Economic Development with two director-level positions.

3.0 Alignment with the Strategic Vision

A central justification for the restructuring is its direct alignment with unfulfilled goals in the city's Strategic Vision, which expires in 2026. The new positions are designed to provide the manpower and expertise needed to advance key initiatives.

Strategic Vision Goal	Key Strategy to be Addressed	Proposed Responsible Position(s)
Efficient, Effective Government	Explore partnerships with neighboring communities to share resources.	Community Engagement Director
	Improve communication with residents.	Community Engagement Director
	Launch a resident survey to inform the City's work & decision-making.	Community Engagement Director

Thriving Economy	Establish best-practice business retention & development program.	Planning/Dev Director, Comm Eng Dir & City Administrator
	Partner to build a business incubation program/space.	Planning/Dev Director, Comm Eng Dir & City Administrator
Housing & Neighborhoods	Explore incentives to encourage improvements to historical homes & neighborhoods.	Planning & Development Director
	Complete a housing stock and residential land inventory.	Planning & Development Director
Vibrant Downtown	Use data to inform small business recruitment/retention (via BluDot software).	Community Engagement Director
Arts & Culture	Develop policies, establish a commission, create spaces for art. (Noted as having "little to no progress at all").	Community Engagement Director
Parks & Recreation	Review and revise parks master plan.	Community Engagement Director
	Collaborate with the library on programming.	Community Engagement Director

The City Administrator stated, "I do feel that if we have the opportunity to form these positions into what I see them to be that we can make a lot of progress with this."

4.0 Financial Implications

The proposed restructuring is presented as a budget-neutral or cost-saving measure.

- The total financial solution is "less than we budgeted for this fiscal year."
- **Community Engagement Director Salary:** Split 75% (71,250) from the General Fund and 25% (23,750) from the Parks fund. This reduces the salary allocation from the Parks department from its current \$70,000.
- **Planning and Development Director Salary:** Set at a range up to \$115,000, paid 100% from the General Fund.

- **Potential Savings:** By bringing some plan review and inspection services in-house, the city aims to reduce its current annual outsourcing budget of approximately \$30,000.

5.0 City Council Discussion and Concerns

The proposal prompted extensive debate among council members, highlighting several key areas of concern.

5.1 Process and Transparency

Some council members expressed discomfort with the process, particularly regarding the proposed appointment for the Community Engagement Director role.

- **Lack of Formal Job Description:** A council member noted the initial packet lacked a complete job description, containing only a list of duties, stating, "it makes me uncomfortable."
- **Internal Promotion vs. Public Search:** Promoting an internal candidate without a more exhaustive search raised concerns. One alderwoman commented, "I have some concerns about promoting somebody into a position for \$95,000 a year, and we don't have a complete job description, and we haven't done any outreach for it."
- **Information Dissemination:** Members not on the Parks or Community Development committees felt they lacked sufficient information before the proposal reached the full council. An alderwoman stated, "What was presented in the packet in connection with the appointment was not transparent."
- **Codified Procedures:** The discussion revealed there is no formally codified procedure for internal promotions or appointments, unlike the process for external hiring. This led to a call for a standardized process "so that appointing would be the same procedure."

5.2 Organizational Chart and Reporting Structure

The initial organizational chart presented to committees caused confusion, specifically regarding the reporting line for the Parks Maintenance Leadman (Trevor Dolgach).

- **Initial Plan:** The chart showed this position reporting directly to the City Administrator.
- **Rationale:** The administrator explained this was to avoid having the employee report to different directors during different seasons (Public Works in winter, Parks in summer) and to prevent "friction that had happened in the past." It also kept the employee in the union.

- **Council Feedback:** A council member suggested the position should report to a single department head, specifically the Public Works director (Rob), as maintenance is their core function. This was accepted as "an easy fix."

5.3 Impact on City Code

A significant concern was raised that eliminating the "Park Superintendent" title and other changes would conflict with existing city ordinances.

- An alderwoman pointed out that ordinances reference the Park Superintendent and the relationship between the Park Superintendent and the Parks Board. She argued, "This isn't just you know shuffling the deck a little bit, I mean there's stuff in our code that needs to be changed."
- This concern was a primary reason for the argument that the Administration Committee should vet the proposal to ensure all legal and procedural "i's are dotted and the t's are crossed."

6.0 Debate on Committee Meeting Structure

A separate agenda item involved the Mayor's proposal to change the council's meeting structure.

- **Proposal:** Eliminate the rotating individual committee meetings and move to a single **Committee of the Whole** meeting each month. Standing committees would be maintained for ad-hoc special projects. The role of chairperson for the Committee of the Whole would rotate among council members quarterly.
- **Rationale:** To streamline processes, improve communication by ensuring all council members receive information simultaneously, enhance efficiency, and reduce staff workload. The mayor cited the Huntley community as a model for this structure.
- **Council Objections:**
 - **Insufficient Trial Period:** Council members argued the current every-other-month committee structure, itself a recent change, hasn't been given enough time to prove its effectiveness. "I'm hesitant to change it again until we find out if maybe we've learned something from this."
 - **Public Engagement:** Concerns were raised that the public would be discouraged from attending if they had to sit through a long, multi-topic meeting to comment on a single item.

- **Role of Citizen Appointees:** The change would effectively sideline citizen members of boards, such as the Parks and Recreation Board, as they would no longer participate in the Committee of the Whole.
- **Value of Smaller Committees:** Some members felt smaller committee settings allow for more open and honest discussion.

The consensus was to maintain the current committee structure for the time being.

7.0 Agreed Upon Next Steps

After extensive discussion, the council and city administration agreed on a path forward for the departmental reorganization proposal:

1. **Referral to the Administration Committee:** The entire proposal will be sent to the Administration Committee for a detailed review.
2. **Special Meeting Scheduled:** A special Administration Committee meeting was tentatively scheduled for **Wednesday, December 3rd, at 6:30 PM.**
3. **Required Documentation:** For that meeting, the City Administrator will prepare:
 - A complete, formal job description for the Community Engagement Director position.
 - A revised organizational chart reflecting the agreed-upon reporting structure for the maintenance lead.
 - A review of all city ordinances affected by the proposed title and duty changes, with recommended amendments.

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