

Port of Olympia - Transparency / Meeting Comparative Analysis

Prepared by the Port of Olympia Citizen Advisory Committee
September 15, 2015

Introduction

This report responds to the Port of Olympia Commissioners' request that the Citizen Advisory Committee investigate and report back on the issue of transparency. The Commission set forth several broad questions to be addressed in this analysis:

- What is an acceptable definition of transparency in government, and in particular the Port of Olympia?
- What is it that the citizens of this community at large want to see improved as it relates to Port transparency?
- What is the overall feeling of the citizens in this community on the Port as it relates to Transparency?

In addition to these broad questions, the Commission also has asked for specific feedback from the Citizen Advisory Committee to evaluate, compare, and make recommendations if necessary regarding meetings and supporting materials provided at those meetings. To complete the comparative analysis, we interviewed and/or reviewed the public websites of the following Ports and local governments:

- Port of Bellingham
- Port of Skagit County
- Port of Vancouver
- City of Olympia
- LOTT Clean Water Alliance
- Thurston Regional Planning Council

The detailed Commission request is included as Attachment A.

Overview of Transparency

While the term “government transparency” seems to be well used these days, there does not appear to be a common definition. The individuals we interviewed at each of the comparative entities talked at length about their organization’s commitment to transparency, however none had adopted a written policy that defined the term. Broadly, we found that those interviewed (and that other websites we visited) typically referred to concepts of **openness** (citizens have access to processes, decision-making, information, documents, meetings, etc.) and **accountability** (clear reporting on meaningful performance measures.) In some cases these two components are separated.

Although the term transparency is broad and can encompass many things, in the context of this report we interpret it to reflect the principle of active encouragement and fostering of citizen participation and valuing openness in its decision-making processes; conducting business in an accessible, clear and visible manner; and ensuring activities are open to examination by citizens.

The Commission asked us, as part of this study, to provide information about citizen attitudes toward transparency. Specifically they asked:

- What is it that the citizens of this community at large want to see improved as it relates to Port transparency?
- What is the overall feeling of the citizens in this community on the Port as it relates to Transparency?

We do not have access to empirical data about citizen attitudes and do not feel we can answer these questions with any confidence, without conducting extensive sampling of the population. Our committee does not have the expertise nor the resources to conduct random sample surveys, focus groups or other unbiased data collection effort that this would require. We do, however, agree with the Commission that these are important

questions and believe that the Commission should make every effort to conduct such a data collection effort to help guide their future efforts.

The Port of Olympia Efforts to Improve Transparency

The Port of Olympia, like many government agencies over the past decade, have made strides to improve public transparency. A few of these efforts include:

- Commission meetings were rescheduled from the daytime (when most citizens were working) to the evening so that more citizens could attend.
- Commission meetings were moved to a location that provides greater public accessibility (no security check-in).
- The Commission makes an effort to hold meetings outside of the Olympia area to allow citizens in more rural parts of the district to attend and participate in public meetings.
- Commission rules have been modified to provide greater opportunities for public input - for example, agendas are published in advance, in most cases the public has at least two opportunities to provide public comment, meetings (including work sessions) are open to the public.
- The Public is continually invited by the Commissioners to call or meet with staff or the Commissioners if they have questions or comments.
- Commission meetings are now televised and videos of the meetings are posted to the port's website for on-demand viewing.
- The public website has been greatly expanded and improved over time, making it more user friendly.
- The staff has devoted time and resources to improving the budget documents, and the public is welcome to come in to ask questions about the budget.

These are valuable steps forward for the public, and in many cases represent leading industry practices. To better understand where there are opportunities for further improvement, the Commission asked that we also

provide a comparative analysis, contrasting the practices of the Port against the practices of other similarly situated Washington State ports and against the practices of other local governments in Thurston County.

Comparative Analysis

The Commission asked us to compare the Port of Olympia's approach with other similarly situated Washington ports (we chose to focus on Vancouver, Bellingham, and Skagit) and local governments in Thurston County (City of Olympia, Thurston County and LOTT).

Ballotpedia.org's 10-point transparency checklist provides a useful framework for evaluating a government's transparency efforts. This brings together the most common criteria for evaluating transparency. We used this checklist as a way to provide one comparative view:

Ballotopedia.org provides a 10-point transparency checklist that distills the most common factors of transparency, and provides the rationale for why these items should be on every government website. We are using this checklist, with some modifications, to provide a framework for comparing the Port of Olympia's practices with those of other Washington Ports and local governments.

Most Common Transparency Parameters	Port of Olympia	Port of Bellingham	Port of Skagit County	Port of Vancouver ✓ Provided Not provided
<p>Budgets: Budgets show the big picture of what goals and priorities the government established for the year. The entity's website should include the budget at a minimum, and graphs help citizens evaluate and understand trends. Checkbook registers and credit card receipts can also be posted.</p>	<p>2015 Operating Budget and Capital Investment Plan is posted (30 pp) along with a 33 pp narrative that provides for example, business outlook, grants, tax levies, capital investment plan, and financial and strategic plan.</p>	<p>2015 Budget is posted (133 pp). Narrative overview (18pp) with pie charts, tax info, and recent year reviews. These are followed by details and spreadsheets.</p>	<p>2015 Current operating budget is clearly and simply stated on the website (9pp) with pie charts and 3pp of spreadsheets. 2013-4 Annual Report is posted (12pp).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Budget Priorities ✓ Website Budget Check Registers CC Receipts
<p>Open Meetings: Meetings are one of the few ways the public can engage in true dialogue with elected officials. Alternatives to meeting attendance should be provided by posting meetings, agendas, locations and minutes on their website. Better yet, meetings should be televised and videos posted to the web.</p>	<p>Commission meetings are in the evening and have been moved to a location more easily accessible by the public. Commission meetings are aired on public television and videos are posted to the website for public viewing. Agendas, minutes, and other relevant documents are made publicly available in advance of the meetings. Citizens are provided at least two opportunities to provide public comment on most items before the Commission takes a public vote.</p>	<p>Commission Meetings are taped and posted on You Tube and on the website. Meetings back 2 years are posted. Meetings are held during "working hours", except for special meetings.</p>	<p>Meetings are open, but are not filmed. Meeting notes (for both regular and special meetings) are posted on the website back to 2008. Pre-meeting info. packets are available and public comment is solicited in local press, and FaceBook pages.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Open Meetings ✓ Posted Meeting Information ✓ Web Postings ✓ Meetings televised
<p>Elected Officials: Officials are</p>	<p>Commission members names</p>	<p>Names and contact info. are</p>	<p>Names and contact info. on</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Contact Information posted

<p>elected to represent their constituents. In order to do so effectively they should be engaged in regular dialogue and be as accessible as possible by providing a variety of ways to be contacted.</p>	<p>and contact information are available on the website. Commissioners attend an array of area meetings.</p>	<p>posted on the website.</p>	<p>website. Commissioners attend each Chamber of Commerce in area. Open "Coffee with a Commissioner" meetings with public once a quarter.</p>	<p>on Website ✓ Multiple contact paths</p>
<p>Administrative officials: Administrative staff are knowledgeable resources that provide constituent services. It is imperative they be available to constituents by providing contact information to the heads of each department in addition to general contact information.</p>	<p>Staff names, titles, emails and phone numbers are posted on the website. During this research we found the staff to be very open and responsive to questions.</p>	<p>Website Contacts page has phone names and phone numbers for 20+ managers. Sub menus have contacts for staff. During this research, we found the staff to be very open, and responsive to questions.</p>	<p>Org. chart, names, and contact info. all available on website. During this research we found the staff to be very open and responsive to questions.</p>	<p>✓ Contact Information posted on Website</p>
<p>Audits: While budgets give the big picture to constituents, an audit reveals how well the government performs on their goals and enables constituents to hold them accountable. Citizens should have access to regular audit information including report results, audit schedules and performance audits.</p>	<p>Audited financial statements and State Auditor Accountability reports dating back to 2005 are posted to the website.</p>	<p>Audited financial reports for 2014 (71pp), and back to 2009 are posted. Reports include statistics, employee, demographics, and operational reporting.</p>	<p>Audited financial reporting is not available on the website, but would be available from staff..</p>	<p>✓ Audit findings are contained in Annual Report, which is posted on the website</p>
<p>Contracts: Contracts should be available for review so constituents can evaluate the contract and evaluate if the government chose the best solution for its constituents.</p>	<p>As per RCW 53.08.440, the port maintains a contract database that provides a list of all contracts awarded, by year since 2010 including all public works and personal services.</p>	<p>Current (and past) bids and contracts are very well detailed and posted on the website. These include construction, personal and professional, and consultant contracts, with timing, amounts, change orders, and funding.</p>	<p>'Limited & Small Public Works' contracts (>\$300K) are listed on the website for the previous year.</p>	<p>Contracts available on restricted basis if subject to Public Disclosure</p>
<p>Public Records: Governmental entities are obligated by state law to respond to public requests</p>	<p>The port adheres to all public records laws. The records coordinator's name and</p>	<p>A new Public Records position was recently created. That person spends about 1/2 time</p>	<p>One click from the home page leads to a Public records request form with the name</p>	<p>✓ Complies with Public Records Laws of Washington ✓ Instructions posted on</p>

for information. Providing the name and contact information for the person who is in charge of fulfilling open records requests on the agency's website eases the way for constituents to file their requests.	contact information is provided on the website. In addition, the port maintains and distributes an inquiry log which documents all citizen inquiries and their dispensation.	responding to public records requests. Name and contact info is available on the website.	and contact info. for the public affairs officer.	website
Taxes: Disclosing to citizens tax burdens (along with all other sources of revenues) accurately, and providing clear, easily understandable descriptions of how those tax dollars are spent is an important aspect of providing transparency.	The Port's website includes a page devoted to the distribution of port tax dollars. Distribution of port taxes is addressed in annual budget documents as well.	Tax (income and expense) reporting is included within the details of the financial reports. Interested citizens have to dig through to find specific data.	Simplified tax info. is called out in the budget overview.	✓ Tax rates & other explanation posted on website

Most Common Transparency Parameters	City of Olympia	LOTT	Thurston County
			✓ Provided Not provided
Budgets: Budgets show the big picture of what goals and priorities the government established for the year. The entity's website should include the budget at a minimum, and graphs help citizens evaluate and understand trends. Checkbook registers and credit card receipts can also be posted.	The City provides an extensive budget document (298 pp) on their website, as well as a handful of specialized or summary budget documents.	Current Operating and CAPEX budgets are posted online (63pp) with easily understood summaries, tables, and projections; and comparisons to similar public entities. .	✓ Budget posted on website ✓ Strategic plan posted on website
Open Meetings: Meetings are one of the few ways the public can engage in true dialogue with elected officials. Alternatives to meeting attendance should be provided by posting meetings,	Council meetings are held in the evening and are both aired on public television and videos are available on the City's website. Public testimony is limited to 30 minutes.	Meeting schedules are posted on the website for months in advance, agendas posted prior to meetings. To present, meetings are audio taped, but are to be televised by fall 2015.	✓ Open Meetings ✓ Posted Meeting Information ✓ Web Postings ✓ Meetings televised

Most Common Transparency Parameters	City of Olympia	LOTT	Thurston County ✓ Provided Not provided
agendas, locations and minutes on their website. Better yet, meetings should be televised and videos posted to the web.	Agendas are posted to the City's on-line system the Thursday prior.	Expected cost to upgrade video are \$200K. Meeting reports and minutes are posted online for last 2 years.	
Elected Officials: Officials are elected to represent their constituents. In order to do so effectively they should be engaged in regular dialogue and be as accessible as possible by providing a variety of ways to be contacted.	Elected officials are identified, with bios and email. A general council contact phone number is provided. Each Council member participates on (or chairs) an array of committees.	Four elected board members are identified with bios and contact info. The new street front building invites public comment and participation in meetings.	✓ Contact Information posted on Website
Administrative officials: Administrative staff are knowledgeable resources that provide constituent services. It is imperative they be available to constituents by providing contact information to the heads of each department in addition to general contact information.	An organizational chart is provided that lists the names of key Directors. On a separate page, City Departments are listed, along with Directors' names and department phone numbers.	Contact information is readily available online, Management goals and objectives are detailed in 5 year 'Performance plans' (84pp) posted online. Staff is "plugged in" to multiple blogs, many community calendars, and a variety of websites. During this research we found the staff to be very open and responsive to questions.	✓ Contact Information posted on Website
Audits: While budgets give the big picture to constituents, an audit reveals how well the government performs on their goals and enables constituents to hold them accountable. Citizens should have access to regular audit information including report results, audit schedules and performance audits.	The City's Financial Website includes several years of Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports, which include Audit Reports.	Audited financial statements and reports are posted for the last 2 years. Within the website "library", there are many more operational and financial data reports posted.	Audit information not readily available posted on website
Contracts: Contracts should be	Contract award information is	Agreements with related public	Contracts available on

Most Common Transparency Parameters	City of Olympia	LOTT	Thurston County ✓ Provided Not provided
available for review so constituents can evaluate the contract and evaluate if the government chose the best solution for its constituents.	available at the time of award. No database tracking information appears to be available.	entities are posted online.	restricted basis if subject to Public Disclosure
Public Records: Governmental entities are obligated by state law to respond to public requests for information. Providing the name and contact information for the person who is in charge of fulfilling open records requests on the agency’s website eases the way for constituents to file their requests.	The City has a page on its website devoted to public records requests and includes all information necessary to submit a request. The page does not provide a specific name, but does say that the City Clerk is responsible for public records requests and provides an email and phone number for the City Clerk’s office.	A link for records request is posted on the website home page. Response is promised within 5 days. Full information including policies and contacts for staff is readily available on the website.	✓ Complies with Public Records Laws of Washington
Taxes: Disclosing to citizens tax burdens (along with all other sources of revenues) accurately, and providing clear, easily understandable descriptions of how those tax dollars are spent is an important aspect of providing transparency.	The budget information provided on the City’s website includes significant detail about taxes (sources, rates) and details about the City’s plans for how it plans to use those revenues.	The budget info posted online includes explanations, rationale and timing for current and expected costs, and for projected capital improvements. Specific tax information is deep in the details.	✓ Available & posted on website but on a subdomain

Findings

Several themes emerged from our comparative analysis.

1. The Port of Olympia does a good job of providing public access to meetings, meeting materials, and ability to provide public input. Compared to the other entities reviewed, the Port of Olympia provides as much or more public access in this area.
2. The Port of Olympia has done a good job of making the work of the Commission accessible to citizens. Commission meetings are televised and videos are provided on the website for future viewing; commission meetings are held in the evening in an effort to accommodate working citizens; commission meetings are occasionally held in other parts of the county to allow citizens in more rural areas access to the meetings. While the City of Olympia had a more sophisticated ability to televise its meetings, and to sync its agendas with the on-line videos of past meetings, this would likely be a costly upgrade for the Port. It is unclear whether the added benefit would outweigh the added cost.
3. Port staff have made efforts to demystify the Port's annual budget and make the revenue and expenditure information more accessible and digestible for the average citizen. These efforts have helped significantly. Other, much larger (typically general government) entities have provided added detail (e.g., "Open Checkbook"¹) and more sophisticated, easier to digest analysis and online tools to assist citizens in understanding the complexities of finances. These currently are being used by larger organizations, with larger administrative budgets and staffs to support the development and maintenance of those tools. It is unlikely that a wide-spread demand currently exists for this level of improved accessibility to budget and finance detail at the Port of Olympia. However, if a survey of citizens

¹ "Open Checkbook" has become a generic reference to software systems used by state and local governments that provide spending/expenditure data available to citizens online as a key resource for citizens. These systems typically provide basic data visualization (bar graphs) for quick top-level look at the data within, as well as detailed access to financial datasets (including budgets, revenue, contracts, payroll, and detailed expenditures in a checkbook-style presentation.)

indicates broad dissatisfaction in this area, there are tools available that the Port could investigate.

4. The Port generally appears to be responsive to citizen requests for information. Some entities make their contracts available to the public by posting them on their website. For example, the Port of Bellingham posts a list of all their public works contracts, including all change orders, to their website. This provides useful information to current and potential contractors and to the public who is interested in seeing how public dollars are being spent.

Recommendations

Our analysis suggests that the Port of Olympia is providing citizens with reasonable transparency, and in areas related to public access to Commission meetings and materials, the Port exceeds many of their peers. As with virtually all governmental entities, there is room for improvement. As the Commission considers what additional measures or procedures the Port should implement in the future, we recommend the following.

First, the Commission should consider hiring a firm to conduct unbiased citizen surveys to identify what needs citizens feel are not currently being met (if any), and prioritize future work based on the strength of those identified needs.

Second, based on our research, we recommend the Commission focus on two areas that appear to provide added transparency and openness.

1. Continue to improve the “consumability” of budget and tax information - find ways to test the information being developed with individuals outside of the Port to ensure that it is understandable; telling the complete story; and answering the questions that citizens most want answered. This will take staff time.
2. Publicize good performance measures and how they affect performance (for example, did the Port’s investment in water quality change anything?)

APPENDIX A

Request from Port Commissioners



PORT of OLYMPIA

**Citizens Advisory Committee
Port Commission Meeting Comparative Analysis**

Staff Lead:

Jessie Bensley, Executive & Commission Coordinator
528.8014 or jessieb@portolympia.com

Background:

It would be of value to the Port Commission to have the POCAC investigate and report back on the issue of Transparency. From time to time, citizens have commented on the need for greater transparency at the Port of Olympia. These statements lead to a perception that the Port is not as transparent as perhaps it should be. The desired intent is to evaluate, compare, and make recommendations if necessary to the Port Commission regarding meetings and supporting materials provided at those meetings. This task will be done in an effort to increase the effectiveness of the Port Commission meeting and compare and analyze the Port's meeting procedures to other local public entities and comparative Ports.

Scope of Work:

Questions to be answered are as follows:

- What is an acceptable definition of Transparency in government and in particular the Port of Olympia?
- What has the Port done to improve Transparency at the Port over the past few years?
- What additional measures or procedures can the Port do to improve Transparency at the Port?
- What is it that the Citizens of this community at large want to see improved as it relates to Port transparency?
- What is the overall feeling of the citizens in this community on the Port as it relates to Transparency? (This may require a public hearing(s) held by the POCAC as part of the informational gathering aspect of this task.)
- Is there a cost (financial and/or labor resources) of any suggested improvements to Transparency at the Port? Any estimates on those costs?

The desired outcome would be a report that compares and contrasts some of the following items with other public entities:

- Commission Meetings and work sessions
 - Frequency
 - Time of Day
 - Length of Meeting
 - Number and Type of agenda items per meeting
 - Method of decision-making and information sharing
 - Use of Advisory, Action items, Consent Calendar
 - Televised or webcast

- Size of meeting space and public accessibility
- Use of technology
- Meeting topic trends
- Use of resolutions (trends, topics, ceremonial, policy, etc)
- Public comment (how often during meetings, limitations, enforcement of time limits)
- Commission Meeting Materials
 - Cover Memos
 - Presentation Materials
 - Publishing date of materials and types of materials published
 - Access to Commission Meeting Materials (Posting on website, mass emailing, printing).
 - Commission Meeting Agendas (Structure and Content)

Please provide final analysis that consists of:

- Recommendations on changes to existing meetings and materials
 - Please include rationale for recommendation
 - Benefit to be achieved
 - Anticipated cost of implementation (both financial and staff time)
 - Reference other entity that implemented similar change
- Commendations for items that the Port of Olympia is leading in as compared to the other entities.
- Please include the Revised Code of Washington information which provides under what circumstances the Port is allowed to hold executive sessions which do not include the public (RCW 42.30.110).

Please compare and contrast with at least 3 of the following Ports:

- Port of Vancouver
- Port of Longview
- Port of Bremerton
- Port of Tacoma
- Port of Bellingham
- Port of Skagit
- Port of Port Townsend

Please compare with at least 2 of the following local entities:

- Thurston County
- City of Olympia
- City of Lacey
- City of Tumwater
- LOTT
- Thurston Regional Planning Council

Timeline: September 2015

