

Getting Systematic about Langley's Policy Work

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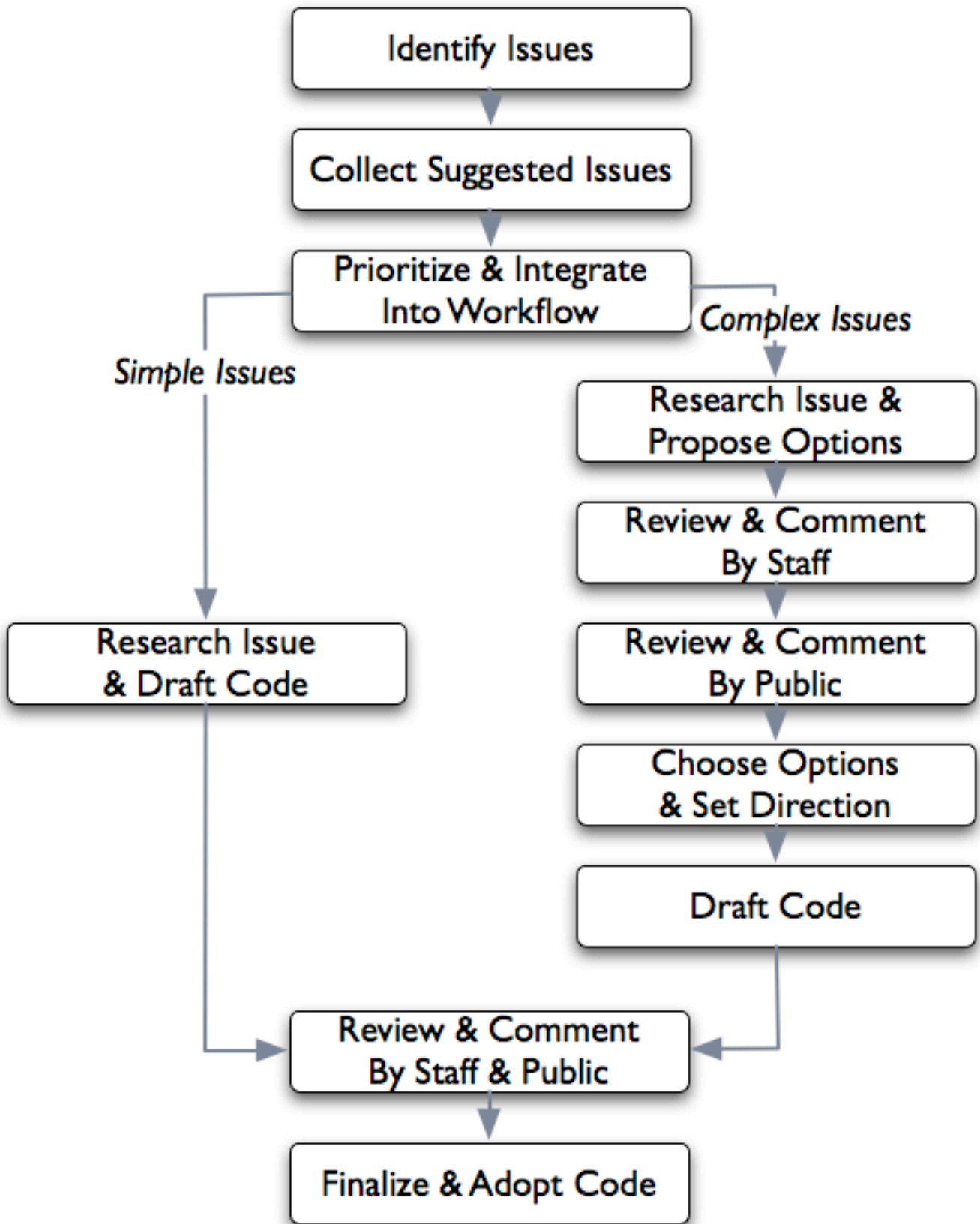
This paper is intended to provide a starting point for a council conversation about how we can develop a systematic approach to policy development, including the code work that flows from the changes in the comp plan.

Let me start with a few key ideas:

- Policy development is fundamentally the council's responsibility
- Effective integration of staff input into policy is essential to making good policy
- Effective integration of public input into policy is essential to making good policy
- The system needs to combine thoroughness and efficiency so that it can produce good policy as quickly as possible
- The system needs to be flexible enough to handle ups and downs in the amount of work

To see how this could work in practice, I've put together the following series of steps to explore one possible system that could express these key ideas. The next page provides an overview of these steps as a workflow diagram. After the diagram there is a description of each step, including who's involved and what happens during that step.

Policy Workflow



From Concept to Code -- description of the steps

1. Identify issues or topics that could be addressed through code changes

Who's involved - Elected officials, staff, and citizens

What happens - Any one of the above gets an idea for a potential change in city policy

2. Receive and collect suggested issues

Who's involved - The Policy Process Coordinator (a new role). I suggest that this role be filled by the mayor pro tem or some other person (preferably another council member) designated by the council.

What happens - The Policy Process Coordinator (PPC) serves as the collection point for all ideas that could be worked on as policy changes.

3. Prioritize changes and integrate them into the workflow

Who's involved - Elected officials and staff

What happens - Council decides, with input from administration and staff, 1) **whether** the idea will move forward at this time, 2) if it will move forward, **who** will take the next steps with it, and 3) **what priority** it will have in the workflow. If it is a simple issue that will go straight to drafting code language, the council will provide policy guidance on how the issue should be addressed in the code. If the person(s) assigned to take the next steps are not staff, a staff contact person should also be identified.

4. Research issue and propose options

(for simple issues, combines with **Draft language of Code** below)

Who's involved - Staff, elected officials, and citizen volunteers, individually or in committees/boards

What happens - The individual or committee to whom the issue is assigned by the council researches that issue and develops options for how the issue could be addressed. In simple cases these options will be in potential code language. In more complex cases the options will be in pre-code conceptual terms. When the researcher(s) are not staff, the staff contact person should be actively in the loop during this phase. This phase is complete when the researcher(s) and the PPC agree that it is complete. Disagreements about completeness will be resolved by council.

5. Review and comment by staff on proposed options at concept stage (for complex issues only)

Who's involved - Staff, including those who have not been directly involved in step 4.

What happens - Once initial options for addressing the issue have been developed, these options will be distributed to the relevant staff for review and comment. These comments go back to the researcher(s) for potential modification of the options.

6. Review and comment by the public on proposed options at concept stage (for complex issues only)

Who's involved - Citizens

What happens - The options for addressing the issue are made available for public comment. The researcher(s) may make further modifications to the options based on this public comment.

7. Choose preferred options and set direction for drafting (for complex issues only)

Who's involved - Council or an advisory board, depending on the issue

What happens - The researcher(s) present the proposed options to the council or board. The council or board reviews the proposed options, chooses among them, and assigns who will do the final drafting of the code language.

8. Draft language for code

Who's involved - Staff, elected officials, and citizen volunteers, individually or in committees. Depending on the issue, this may or may not be the same as the researcher(s) above. Will almost always involve staff.

What happens - Based on the guidance from the council, code language is drafted. Specifics encountered in this process may lead to various options for the code language. This phase is complete when the drafter(s) and the PPC agree that it is complete. Disagreements about completeness will be resolved by council.

9. Review and comment on proposed draft language

Who's involved - Staff and public

What happens - The proposed code language (including options if any) are made available to staff and public for comment. May involve a public hearing if required or desirable. The drafter(s) may make modifications based on these comments.

10. Finalize and adopt code

Who's involved - Council

What happens - The drafter(s) present the final proposed code language (including options if any) to the council. The council goes through the first and second reading on the proposed code language, making any modifications they deem appropriate. At the second reading the final language is adopted (or not).

Commentary

Let's now look at these steps from the perspective of the key ideas:

- *Policy development is fundamentally the council's responsibility:* This system has the council (and the PPC, representing the council) play a central role in managing policy development as well as eventually approving policy. In steps 3, 7, and 10, the council as a whole gets to set the general policy direction, choose among policy options, choose who will do the work, and finalize the code before approval.

I am envisioning that the council will have great flexibility in whom they assign to do the work (individual or group, staff or volunteer, standing or ad hoc), subject to the availability and willingness of that person or group. (The one place I am aware of where state law limits the council's choice is that comp plan amendments must be handled by the 'planning agency', but we already have experience with customizing our planning agency, e.g. with the Comp Plan Group, so this should not be a significant impediment to the city's flexibility.)

The council's management role continues by delegation through the PPC, in step 4 and step 8, working with the researcher(s) and/or drafter(s) to decide when enough work has been done that it is ready for comment. This will require the PPC to monitor the progress of all of the policy work to make sure it is moving along well.

- *Effective integration of staff input into policy is essential to making good policy:* Staff participation is woven throughout the process. In practice, the administration and the staff would likely have a great deal of influence on the council's decisions in step 3 about whether, who, and with what priority any issue would be worked on. Likewise, when staff time is available, staff will likely be the first choice for the researcher(s)/drafter(s) role. The process also requires staff review in steps 5 and 9. Step 5 in particular makes sure that for complex issues staff review occurs before public review.
- *Effective integration of public input into policy is essential to making good policy:* This system offers many opportunities for public participation. Citizens can initiate policy ideas in step 1. Steps 3, 7, and 10 are all at council or other public meetings. Citizen volunteers can be involved as researchers and drafters. And steps 6 and 9 require opportunities for public comment.
- *The system needs to combine thoroughness and efficiency so that it can produce good policy as quickly as possible:* Within its overall structure, this system offers a lot of flexibility so that the scale and complexity of the process can be well matched to the complexity of the topic. The council can designate a particular issue as simple and thereby combine steps 4 and 8 and skip steps 5, 6, and 7. Simple issues can also be assigned to one person as the researcher/drafter. On the other hand, complex issues can be assigned to whatever committee or board is appropriate and will get the extra attention provided in steps 4, 5, 6, and 7. In all cases, the ongoing monitoring provided by the PPC is designed to help keep the process moving.
- *The system needs to be flexible enough to handle ups and downs in the amount of work:* Finally, the ability of the council (in most cases) to assign the work to any willing, available, and capable party, ad hoc or otherwise, allows the system to expand and contract to match the policy development workload and adjust to the overall workload of the various parts of city government.