

Seattle City Council Confirmation Questions & Answers Ben Noble, City Budget Office

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1. *What is your general philosophy for how to most effectively work with the City Council? Has your thinking on this matter evolved since the time of your first appointment?*

Given my 13+ years of service on the Central Staff, I have a deep appreciation for Council's role in setting City policy. In my time at Central Staff and as the Director of the City Budget Office (CBO) I have dedicated myself to providing the information and analysis Council needs to fulfill this role. Although the Legislative and Executive branches serve different functions, I do not see them as being in opposition. The "checks and balances" of government are essential, but they can be executed in respectful and collaborative environment. In that context, I have found the best way to work with Council is to seek an open and cooperative relationship – with Councilmembers, their legislative assistants and the Central Staff. I believe I have done this over the past four years, and I am committed to do so going forward. In terms of the evolution of my thinking, I would only say that my experience has further cemented my overall philosophy and approach. I have come to appreciate that cooperation, and more specifically trust, between CBO and Council is essential for the Council to have the information it needs to successfully develop policy and for the Budget Office to effectively develop and implement the budget.

2. *How will you ensure that Council members and legislative staff receive timely information needed from your department for Council to make sound policy and budgetary decisions? How has this improved since the time of your first appointment?*

As I noted above, I see the provision of information to Council as being one of CBO's most critical roles. I have worked with Central Staff Director Kirstan Arestad to develop procedures and protocols that are designed to streamline the flow of information between the Executive and Council. We have encouraged staff to develop both formal and informal channels of communication – allowing them to exchange routine information without complication or fanfare, while at the same time providing the structure needed when potential policy differences between the Council and Executive require information flow to be more carefully documented. CBO has traditionally play a key role in reviewing the information provided by Executive departments to the Council. My goal in fulfilling that role is to ensure the accuracy of the information while also stressing the need for timely transmittal. When necessary, I have directly reached out to department directors to insist that they prioritize the information requests from Council and directed my own staff to expedite their review of requested materials. While room for improvement remains, I believe that CBO has been more effective over the past four years in delivering information than has been true over the previous administration. Looking forward, I know that Mayor Durkan shares an interest in providing the information Council needs to make sound policy and budgetary decisions.

- 3. One of the challenges that you inherited four years ago, is how improve the performance of some departments, which are known for delayed/tardy responses to Council questions—particularly during budget. Can you describe your efforts to improve this? Do you feel that they have been successful? What opportunities do you see for further progress on this issue?*

The “budget season” presents some very specific challenges with respect to information flow and responding to Council questions. The biggest challenge is, of course, the sheer volume of inquiries. Council is working with a wide range of complex policy issues during the budget process, and not surprisingly has many questions about these issues. As we entered my first season as Budget Director four years ago, one particular point I emphasized with CBO staff was the need to streamline the process for answering questions. Some of the frustration I experienced as Central Staff Director was fresh in mind, but more broadly what I saw was the need to correct a system that was inefficient in terms of how requested information was reviewed and evaluated. From a management perspective I “pushed down” the authority required to approve transmittal of requested information. Individual CBO analysts are now empowered to screen most information, and their managers are only requested to review more complex responses or ones that address particularly contentious issues. While in the past direct review by the CBO Director could be a bottleneck, I have purposefully removed myself from a direct role in reviewing information, except in very limited circumstances. At the same time, I raised concerns with the directors of several department which traditionally have struggled to provide information in a timely way. To be fair, these departments are often ones that are inundated with Council questions. But recognizing this, we discussed ways to anticipate certain questions and to compile information that was likely to be requested in advance of the budget submittal. These strategies have succeeded in improving information flow, but I recognize that we could still do better, and I am committed to working with Kirstan Arestad to identify further potential enhancements.

- 4. One of the indicated benefits of the reimplementation of the City’s Summit financial management system is improved accuracy and availability of information about departments’ spending. Currently, the Council receives three revenue forecast each year from the City Budget Office but receives a more limited picture of actual expenditures compared to the budget. What are your thoughts on incorporating an expenditure update component into future revenue forecasts?*

The City’s newly implemented accounting system provides an opportunity to develop standardized mechanisms for on-going expenditure reporting, and such reporting should and will be a part of CBO’s regular reporting to Council. With all departments now recording expenditure information in a standardized way, which was not previously the case, we can now implement comparable reporting structures for all departments. Work remains to develop these structures and the associated reporting protocols, but this will be a focus for CBO over the coming year. At present, we are still in the mode of stabilizing the new system, and we expect this stabilization work to continue for first half of this year. We will not wait to start the work on developing standardized reports, and in fact some of that effort is underway, but full

involvement of department staff will only occur after stabilization is complete. This all to say that the expenditure area is a work in progress, but an area of focus for CBO.

5. *The Council would like to increase the accountability and transparency of the City's use of dedicated levy funds, specifically the Parks District and Move Seattle levies. What improvements in reporting would you implement to help ensure that the Council and the public can better tell whether the promised improvements are being delivered?*

In recent years, the Executive has been working ever more intently on incorporating performance measures and visual dashboards into the outward facing reporting the City provides around the use of public resources, and in particular dedicated levy funds. We have websites up for both the Seattle Park District and the Move Seattle transportation levy. That said, neither represents a final product and improvements are needed. In addition, a comparable reporting summary would be helpful for the recently reauthorized Housing Levy and the upcoming education levies. From my view, the challenge we have is how to make these presentations simple, easy to interpret but also informative. This can pose a tradeoff between the simplicity of the presentation and the depth of information provided. One solution may be a "layered" approach, where a high-level dashboard is supplemented by more detailed information for those who are interested in "drilling down" to specific program areas and/or specific investments. Fortunately, CBO is developing the expertise needed to assist departments in developing these reporting structures, and will able provide City-wide leadership in this area. Over the past couple of years, CBO has added a team of analysts dedicated to performance management, and we have made strides in developing performance metrics to incorporate in the budget process. This year we have merged our performance group with the Innovation Team that had been part of the previous administration's Mayor's Office policy function. The joint expertise provided by these two groups has already been put to use in developing metrics around homelessness services, and they are currently working with the Fire Department on some additional data-driven performance measures. Their work is not only aimed at increased accountability to the public, but also enhanced use of data to drive policy and management decisions.

6. *In your position, how have you supported the implementation of the City's Race and Social Justice Initiative? Can you provide some specific examples?*

The City's Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) is both a personal and professional imperative for me. CBO has a change team that has coordinated with the Mayor's office on a number of training and policy efforts. At CBO, we have worked to better incorporate RSJI analysis into our consideration of specific budget proposals, whether they be proposed additions or reductions. While the standard "Budget Issue Paper" includes a section regarding RSJ impacts, we have had to work with departments to make sure that appropriate attention is given to this portion of this analysis. In addition, we have purposefully expanded the group involved in the review of the BIPs to include Mayor's Office policy staff to ensure that other ideas and points of view are included in those internal policy analyses. Staff training has been a key element of ensuring

that we have the tools necessary to support analysis. We have conducted trainings as part of CBO retreats and participated in team-wide trainings and discussions with Mayor's Office staff, including separate caucusing. We have also taken advantage of somewhat difficult situations to advance dialogue and learning. For example, a couple of years ago a temporary art exhibit in the Mayor's Office triggered a discussion about artistic expression and the risk and realities of stereotyping. The painted images, some of which depicted people of color using drugs, made some staff uncomfortable and were certainly thought provoking for all. Working with the Office of Arts and Culture and the Office for Civil Rights, we invited the artist to meet with staff, to discuss the inspiration for the paintings, share her personal story and engage in rich dialogue about her work and how it could be interpreted. Going forward, RSJI remains a priority for me, and further integration of RSJI analysis into the budget process is among the goals my management team has for this year.

- 7. Recent proposed budget documents have incorporated levels-of-performance indicators for City departments. How do you see these indicators evolving and being put to greater or more visible use in budget development?*

From my perspective, performance metrics are most effective when they serve as a management tool for departments, rather than just a "number" that is reported up to the Mayor's Office and Council, or even outwardly to the public. In working with departments on performance metrics we have found that all different types of city work groups benefit from quantifying the impact of their work and measuring their performance and/or effectiveness against identified benchmarks. While not easily visible outside the department, these metrics can actually have a significant impact on budget decisions. These decisions are not the high-level funding allocations recommended by the Mayor and determined by Council, but rather the day-to-day decisions about resource allocation that department managers make every day. Through a series of department-specific engagements, CBO's Innovation and Performance Team has worked with department management staff to develop such measures for individual work groups to help spread this idea of internal accountability. That said, performance measures can also inform the more discrete funding decisions made by both the Mayor and Council. To that end, we have expanded the standard BIP to include questions about how the impact of specific funding changes will be measured and how the effectiveness of new program will be measured. To ensure that this type of analysis has long-run impact, we collectively – the Executive and Legislative branches – need to demonstrate a commitment to this type of quantitative analysis and to making decisions based on the information provided. For example, this means following up year-after-year to ask what the data have shown about the effectiveness of past investments. To date, we have tried to develop such a culture of accountability by including performance measures in the budget book itself, but we are exploring other, potentially more effective ways, to present this information as part of both the annual budget process and more regular reporting to the Mayor and Council. For example, more regular reporting on spending could include information about performance relative to this spending.