

Analysis of UC Progress for 2020
by Elaine Roberts Musser

I appreciate Gerry suggesting a year end analysis of what worked and what didn't work in our commission.

1. What we do as commission is highly technical, and of critical importance to utility customers and the City Council, who depend on commissioners' expertise to deliver well thought out recommendations.
2. Too often matters not critical to the UC's mission have intruded into UC meetings, taking up valuable commission time. Then matters critical to the commission's mission get short shrift.
 - i. A good example of this was the LITS program, that was placed on a back burner a number of times, so that the City Council took the decision out of the commission's hands.
 - ii. Other instances include issues the City Council did not invite the commission's opinion on, yet commissioners spent hours discussing, such as:
 1. Whether the city should purchase DWR assets;
 2. The BrightNight contract;
 3. And the process by which the City Council makes its decisions.
 - iii. And then there are the overly long discussions of process ad nauseum. Several times I have come very close to "walking out of a meeting", either literally or figuratively speaking via Zoom, because yet another process discussion was taking far too long.
3. So in my opinion there needs to be a more critical evaluation of whether a suggested topic by a commissioner is really appropriate for the commission to delve into. I think we need to ask 3 questions.
 - i. First, have we been invited by the City Council to give an opinion on the issue? Perhaps this is not a battle we should take up. Not all battles are worth fighting.
 - ii. Second, if the commission decides to give an opinion, are commissioners remaining respectful to the City Council? It does no good to antagonize City Council members needlessly, because they are less likely to listen the next time when it is critical they do so.
 - iii. And third, is there sufficient time on the commission's calendar to take up the suggested topic without being to the detriment of more critical issues?

It should be remembered even if the commission chooses not to take up a suggested topic, there is nothing stopping commissioners from weighing in on an issue as private citizens.

4. I also think it is crucial to prioritize the agenda, putting the most important items first, to give sufficient time for thorough discussion. I am not in favor of extending meeting times to as much as 3.5 hrs. People are not operating at their best after 2 to 2 1/2 hrs. in the evening. In short there needs to be better time management. If I remember rightly, we are supposed to vote whether to extend a meeting beyond the scheduled 2hrs, and that has not been happening.
5. And lastly, too often a member who suggests a topic to research is not willing to tackle the task himself/herself, so the item is shelved to the parking lot portion of the long range calendar. Why is the commission wasting it's time to discuss potential topics to research, if the person who proposed the idea is not willing to do any of the work? This makes no sense to me.
6. On the positive side, I am very much in favor of the trend in looking at utilities as a whole, not just on the rate and revenue side, but evaluating other facets of running a utility which can effect what the customer has to pay.
7. I am also very proud of the fact that our commission has strongly supported the need for appropriate reserves to make all our utilities resilient and fiscally sustainable. This is what we were tasked to do.
8. And I do believe we are a collegial group that gets along well with each other, which always makes things more pleasant.

Ultimately, we are a fairly new commission relatively speaking, and from the beginning have always wrestled with exactly what our mission should be, and what specific topics to discuss. I would argue that our mission has become so general, that we are at times wandering off the reservation. I think we need to better concentrate in keeping on task first and foremost, and only if time permits do more exploring. And process issues should not take up inordinate amounts of time to discuss.