



Office of Ombudsman

Morgan Spicer

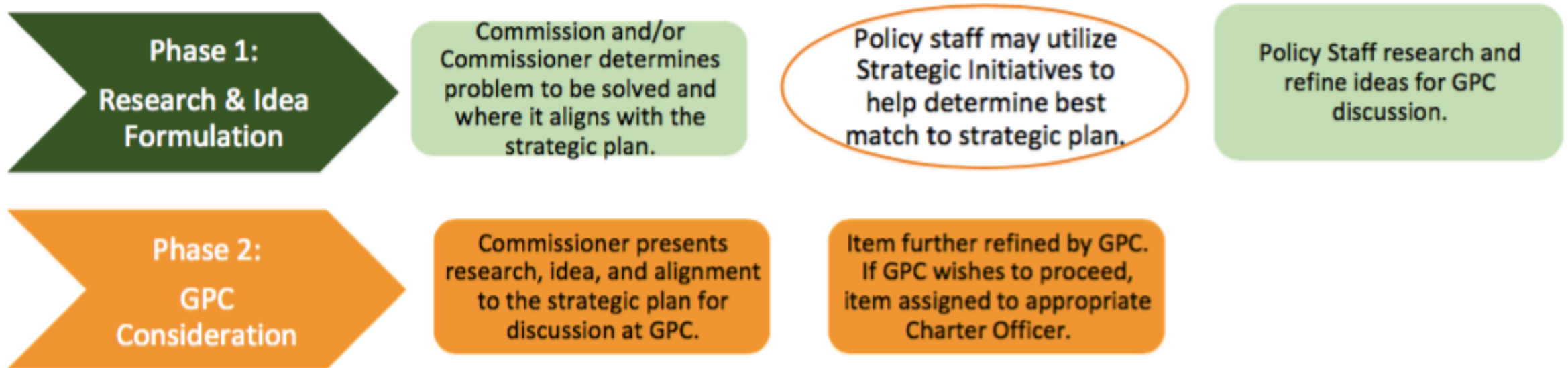
Interim Policy Oversight Administrator

Office of the City Clerk

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Policy Research Process



Overview of the Presentation

- What is an Ombudsman?
- Structure of an Ombudsman Office
- Types of Ombuds
- Municipalities with Ombuds Offices

What is an Ombudsman?

- An ombudsman (ombud, ombuds, or ombudsperson) office serves as an independent oversight agency for municipalities to provide neighbors with a confidential avenue to address complaints.
- The office can provide mediation, information, and potentially investigation services to resolve the complaints and concerns of neighbors.
- The office can also propose policy and procedural changes when systemic issues are identified.
- Some programs are designed to resolve problems specific to agencies or programs, while others offer a space for general concerns amongst neighbors or staff to be addressed.

Ombud Structures

Executive Ombudsman

- Accountable to an executive member of the municipality. The executive could have full control over appointment and the office would not be an independent legislative agency.
- Has potential to be housed under the City Manager, City Auditor, or Office of Equity and Inclusion, or other relevant Charter Officer.
- Advantages: Easier to create, makes conflict between the ombud and the city less likely, and ensures the ombud has more access to city resources and officials.
- Disadvantages: Office may be perceived as being biased towards the government, and the office may be more subject to political motives if not established in an independent and neutral way.

Ombud Structures

Legislative Ombudsman

- “Classic” ombudsman structure, as it is an independent legislative agency with general jurisdiction over all the executive administrative agencies. A legislative ombudsman would report directly to the Commission, rather than a charter officer.
- More typical in larger cities.
- Advantages: May be easier to instill public trust as an independent institution, and the codification of the office may make the structure and purpose more concrete.
- Disadvantages: Office is more difficult to create as it would likely require a charter amendment and may lead to more conflict between city officials and the office, who may see the office as a liability more than a benefit.

Types of Ombuds

- Common federally – the Internal Revenue Service, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Education, etc. all have an ombudsman to facilitate communication between the department and groups served.
- Several states have legislatively established ombuds to investigate complaints concerning government agencies. The State of Florida has a Long Term Care Ombudsman.
- Ombuds are most common among larger cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, and Seattle. Most local ombuds are organizational ombuds which serve to generally resolve complaints from residents about services and practices however some are more specialized, such as those serving local businesses or specific programs.

Organizational Ombud

- Serves as a designated neutral and provides conflict resolution and problem-solving services to members of the organization (internal) and/or for clients or customers of the organization (external).
- Responds to concerns and disputes brought forward by visitors to the office and may report trends, systemic problems, and organizational issues to high-level leaders and executive in a confidential manner.
- Does not play a role in formal processes, investigate problems brought to the office's attention, or represent any side in a dispute.

Case Studies

- Coral Gables, Florida
- Jacksonville, Florida
- Anchorage, Alaska
- Chapel Hill, North Carolina
- Seattle, Washington
- Austin, Texas

Examples of Municipal Ombuds

Coral Gables, FL

- Executive Ombudsman for Residents and Small Business Owners under the City Manager's Office. The office assists residents and small business owners with questions regarding permits, building codes, special requirements, and other administrative processes.

Jacksonville, FL

- Office of Ombudsman deals with city employee complaints, and falls under the Procurement Division of the City. Acts as an intermediary to promote contractual fairness, neutrality, and administrative accountability.

Anchorage, AK

- The Municipal Ombudsman's Office is responsible to the local legislature and is empowered to investigate the acts of Municipal agencies and the Anchorage School District. The office was created through ordinance in 1977, and the ombudsman is selected by the local legislature.

Examples of Municipal Ombuds

Chapel Hill, NC

- Ombuds Office falls under the City Manager's direction, and helps residents, visitors, and Town employees identify options, strategies, and resources to help people thrive. The office does not take sides in a dispute, conduct formal investigations, serve as a witness in a formal proceeding, make any decisions for you, or offer legal advice.
- The office helps neighbors role play through situations, provides training on certain issues, provides information and referrals, explores non-adversarial approaches to resolving conflict, and offers a confidential sounding board.

Seattle, WA

- Office of the Employee Ombud is a confidential and independent resource serving City of Seattle employees. The office ensures employees have a resource to informally address workplace concerns in an equitable manner. The Office Director is appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by the City Council.

Examples of Municipal Ombuds

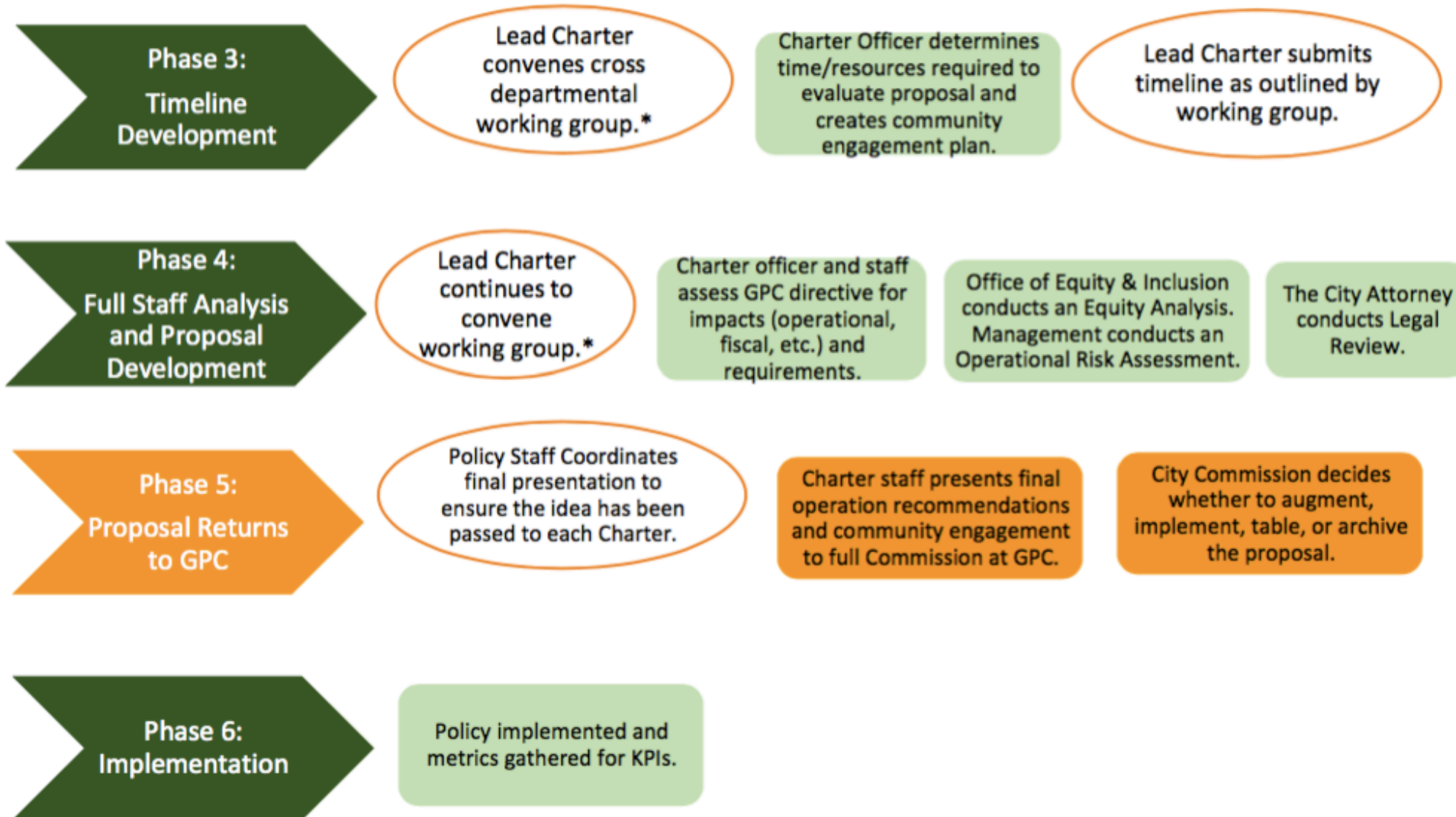
Austin, TX

- Austin's voluntary Alternative Dispute Resolution Process (ADR) is coordinated by the Austin Ombudsperson. The Ombudsperson is located in the city's Labor Relations Office, overseen by the City Manager.
- This process assists with the voluntary resolution of disciplinary probations, suspensions, demotions, discharges, and denials of promotion.
- The Ombudsperson engages in mediation, mediated communication, and facilitation and information sharing to resolve personnel actions.

Key Questions to Answer

- Identifying where the Ombuds Office should be placed within the city – i.e. under a Charter Officer, or whether a Charter Amendment should be pursued to make it an independent office.
- Identifying what purpose the Ombuds Office would serve and ensuring that the work of the Ombuds Office is not already covered through existing city services (i.e. Human Resources within the City Manager's Office, City Auditor, or Office of Equity and Inclusion).
- Ensuring neighbor and staff trust in the office as an independent actor.

Policy Research Process



Discussion?