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**Title:** Citizens Advisory Committee Assessment: Process Update

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**Purpose:** To define operational considerations of the Citizens' Advisory Committee (CAC) based on the CAC's core value proposition.

**Background:**

MCWD's systematic program alignment has led to significant growth and evolution throughout the organization. To ensure the contributions of the Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) evolve in parallel and continue to provide maximum value in MCWD's work, District Board, CAC, and staff are in the midst of a process to define the core value proposition of the committee, and align the committee's work and operations around this value.

This process, which has followed a similar approach to realigning MCWD's other program areas, is entering its final phase:

- Defining the problem or opportunity
- Gathering data and drawing insights
- Defining the core value proposition of the program relative to the organization
- **Defining operational considerations based on value proposition**

To complete this final phase, the April OPC discussion will step through the why, what, and how of the CAC realignment:

- Why: The value proposition of the CAC
- What: What that value proposition suggests about the CAC's scope of work
- How: Operational considerations for optimizing the CAC for this type of work

**Why: Value Proposition of the CAC**

At the March OPC meeting, building off of feedback from several discussions with the CAC, staff provided an update on how the discovery and insights phase brought into focus the core value proposition of a resident advisory board, and how that value is distinct and complementary to the work of staff, board, technical, or expert advisors. At its core the CAC's value over time is rooted in providing fresh and diverse perspectives that improve how the organization communicates, and thinks, about its key work. This value is embedded in the name of the committee itself:

Citizen: Technical or expert advisory panels provide value by leveraging their shared expertise to go deep on a particular technical topic. In contrast, it is the *lack* of a particular overlapping expertise among members of a resident advisory committee that provides a source of value. This span of backgrounds provides a broader field of vision than many topic-specific advisory groups, which simulates other external audiences the District often must communicate with, such as policymakers and community members. A citizen advisory board has three key points of distinction from expert advisors:

1. *Professional background diversity:* While many technical and expert advisory groups bring together people of similar professional background, the CAC is made up of people with highly varied professional

backgrounds. This means members can draw on broad areas of knowledge and notice novel connections between MCWD's work and similar situations in other professions.

2. *Geographic diversity:* While many resident advisory groups are formed around a particular geographic similarity, advice from the CAC is flavored by the fact that the CAC draws members from all corners of the watershed's varied geography.
3. *Taxpayer perspective:* Unlike technical or expert advisory groups, the CAC is made up exclusively of residents of MCWD, who can provide advice through the lens of an engaged tax-paying resident.

Advisory: An advisor is someone who uses their unique background and skills to help someone think about their work in a new way, providing non-binding advice on how to improve their ideas and plans. Advisors are distinct from:

1. Deciders, who make binding policy decisions, like the Board of Managers. Instead advisors provide perspective that allows decision making bodies to be more effective.
2. Doers, who execute the work of the organization, such as staff, contractors, or volunteers. Advisors inform the work, but do not carry it out.

Committee: A committee is a group of people appointed for a specific function, which operates differently than an individual advisor. Committees provide a venue for multiple points of view to learn from each other, strengthen each other's ideas, and become greater than the sum of their parts. Over time, members of a committee build relationships and mutual understanding that allow them to continually improve as an advisory body. Additionally, presenting work to a group of people, rather than an individual, challenges staff to consider multiple perspectives when thinking about and communicating their work. An effective standing committee is characterized by:

1. Recruitment and appointment of members who are suited to the role
2. A meeting schedule that ensures the committee is able to provide advice when it is of most value
3. A leadership structure that supports effective functioning of the committee

Within MCWD's culture of idea meritocracy, the CAC has a critical role to play in leveraging its varied perspectives to help examine, refine, and build upon the ideas that underpin MCWD's work. This represents the core value proposition of the CAC.

### **What: Defining the Role of the CAC**

With this understanding of the CAC's value proposition, MCWD must define what types of work build on the CAC's value, and what types of work do not.

*Work that builds on the committee's core value:*

Vetting and refining communications: The CAC is made up of interested and engaged advisors who do not share a particular overlapping expertise. In this way, they are similar to the policymaker and community member audiences MCWD must frequently reach. By requiring staff to communicate their key work to an audience that may not share their professional background, vocabulary, or depth of background on a topic, it challenges staff to be able to think about and communicate their work in new ways. As a result, staff members leading key initiatives sharpen their messaging, consider answers to new questions, and refine their own understanding of the work.

Advising on District key initiatives: Within MCWD's culture of idea meritocracy, key work evolves through constant stress testing from various groups: Board, staff, partners, and advisors. The CAC plays a critical role in this, leveraging its unique combination of professional, geographic, and taxpaying perspectives to help broaden the field of vision on these key initiatives.

Providing an inward flow of information: The CAC’s unique geographic distribution means each CAC member brings their own local knowledge and community network to the committee. As a result, CAC members can provide a lens of local context to key initiatives, and keep MCWD apprised of important developments and opportunities within its communities.

Work that falls outside the committee’s strengths:

Deep, sustained engagement on a single topic: Whereas technical advisors provide value in their ability to go *deep* on a particular subject, the CAC is uniquely suited to go *broad*: Reviewing, vetting, and providing counsel on a variety of key initiatives at a snapshot in time. While longer-term engagement on a particular initiative may be occasionally needed, this is not the committee’s primary value.

#### Serving as an ambassador

Advisors are different than ambassadors: Like other advisors, CAC members draw on their local knowledge and connections – such as concerns of people in their neighborhood, or work going on within their city — to inform their advisory work. This *inward* flow of information is an asset. This role is distinct from the role of an ambassador, who is tasked with an *outward* flow of information: carrying an organization’s message back into the community. While CAC members will naturally become informed about the District’s key work in the course of their advisory work and share that information within their network, this is not a core function of the committee.

Executing MCWD’s work: An advisor is distinct from a “doer” who carries out the work of the organization in a volunteer, staff, or contractor capacity. As such, activities such as clean-ups, staffing booths, or maintaining vegetation fall outside the core work of the committee – though opportunities for volunteer work may occasionally arise.

Creating clear boundaries around the CAC’s work ensures the CAC is focused on work which maximizes its value to the organization and provides clarity and focus for CAC members, Board and staff.

#### **How: Operational Considerations**

Based on this understanding of how the CAC’s value proposition drives its core work, MCWD must define how the operation of the committee best achieves this work.

Content focus: There are a number of types of MCWD initiatives the CAC could focus on. Historically, the committee reviewed and recommended grant applications. More recently, the committee was involved in a sustained effort to refine the District’s climate action framework. The CAC also reviews annual planning documents such as the budget, work plan, and capital improvement plan. MCWD must determine:

*What type of work is best suited for the CAC’s review, given its value proposition?*

Related question:

*Should the CAC’s agenda be tied to the Board workflow, so that key items pass through committee before going to the Board?*

Meeting rhythm: The committee’s advice is most valuable when it is tied to the appropriate milestone. Given the dynamic nature of MCWD’s key initiatives, these milestones may not line up with a pre-scheduled rhythm of meetings. At the same time, CAC members need to be able to plan around scheduled meetings and understand the level of time commitment required of serving on the committee. Thus, MCWD must determine:

*For the CAC’s schedule, what is the optimal frequency of meetings, and what is the appropriate balance between predictability and flexibility?*

Related question:

*How can the CAC’s operations be integrated with staff workflows to maximize value and minimize overhead?*

Contextual materials: Historically, MCWD has provided the same type of contextual materials for seeking CAC counsel as for seeking Board of Managers direction and decision making: Agenda packets, individual memos, and presentations. Developing packet material significantly increases the overhead associated with bringing items in front of the CAC. At the same time, contextual pre-read material allows members to consider their perspectives before the meeting, and possibly provide higher-value insight. Thus, MCWD must determine:

*What is the appropriate level of contextual information to provide ahead of CAC meetings, to get the desired level of broad reaction and vetting?*

Related question:

*What level of education, training, and flow of information is needed for the committee to achieve its core value?*

Committee leadership: Currently, the CAC Executive Committee meets 16 times per year, in addition to the CAC's 12 meetings, to plan and review the flow of agenda items and information between MCWD leadership, staff, and the committee. Focusing the committee's future work on providing fresh perspectives on MCWD's key initiative at key milestones of the work may reduce the need for long-range agenda planning. At the same time, a formal mechanism for MCWD leadership to remain in sync with the Executive Team ensures the CAC continues to evolve alongside the organization. Thus, MCWD must determine:

*What is the optimal role of the CAC Executive Committee in the flow of information between District leadership and the CAC?*

Related question:

*Can serving on the CAC and its Executive Team serve as a training ground for future Board members?*

Committee membership: Historically, CAC members were solicited by an open call for applicants and were selected via an informal review process which weighed applicant's backgrounds against each other and committee incumbents. This approach created a pool of applicants from which to select committee members and resulted in a diverse committee primarily by happenstance. At the same time, by narrowing the eligibility of applicants to only those who meet an established criteria could ensure applicants who are best suited to the CAC's role are selected, however this may require a different approach to soliciting applicants and could create challenges in finding qualified candidates who are interested in volunteering. Thus, MCWD must determine:

*Which attributes or qualifications should be considered when adding new members to the committee?*

Related question:

*To what degree should MCWD recruit members, versus responding to open calls for members?*

Terms and tenure: Over time, members of a committee build relationships and mutual understanding that allow them to continually improve as an advisory body. A committee comprised of members with some degree of tenure are better suited to work together as a group and in partnership with the watershed district. At the same time, regular opportunities for new members encourages the flow of diverse perspectives that underpin the CAC's core value. Thus, MCWD must determine:

*How long should members serve, and how often should MCWD solicit new members?*

Related question:

*What is the optimal committee size?*

#### **April 8<sup>th</sup> OPC:**

At the April 8, 2021 OPC meeting, staff will review the why, what, and how of the CAC realignment, and seek the OPC's input on the operational questions raised in this phase.

#### **Next Steps:**

On April 14, staff will bring a similar set of information and questions to the CAC.

On May 13, staff will present a report that synthesizes the results of these discussions, and seek approval for proposed updates to the CAC's strategic orientation and operations.

**Supporting documents (list attachments):** None