Summary of Major Themes from Community Input

Ad Hoc Committee on Police and Community Relations. Notes corresponding to Slide 12 from the PowerPoint presentation for the Report to City Council April 12, 2016.

The Process

The overall atmosphere of the forums was at first tentative, but ultimately positive and hopeful. The act of face-to-face engagement and listening was affirming. Each forum had its own character that went beyond the written comments and summaries. (We cannot do justice to the people present in this brief time. A work session after this debrief is needed in order to faithfully relay the input we received.)

The vast majority of respondents reported positive first hand experiences with OPD. There were a small number of adverse experiences, and a slightly larger number of negative second-hand accounts. Note – several people stated they believed that people with the most adverse experiences would not be willing or able to share those experiences with the ad hoc committee.

The model of having citizens who are not employed by the city engaged in outreach on these topics was important to build trust. It was significant that the individual members of the committee were diverse – five citizens including two African Americans, an Asian American, a Mexican immigrant naturalized citizen, two gay men, two women

This 6-month process was a continuing community conversation with many facets, and the council would benefit from hearing how open and honest the conversation was. While many issues were raised by the community, the committee was actively listening and did not often try to answer or address the concerns in the moment. We noted them and pass them along to the city and council. It is important that the city, in some way, respond to the questions and concerns raised through this process. While the engagement itself had intrinsic value, there has been a lasting suspicion that the whole exercise is a whitewash or a sop to real concerns that will remain after the committee is done. We would invite the opportunity to provide further input, after the Council has had the opportunity to absorb and reflect on this material, to meet again in a less formal structure and to try to convey the reality of this collaborative process.

What Did the Committee Hear? Themes/Main Messages

1) Effective policing requires respect, trust, listening, communication, building relationships. Modes of engagement with the public are very important. An overarching and consistent priority across the community was the desire for officers to consistently show visible respect and warmth in their interactions and to be open, to listen and pay attention to the individual they are dealing with and to that person’s
circumstances. Related to this is the repeated message that the “command and control” style may be necessary at times, but if it is not necessary, that style is very negatively received. Several people referred to officers who arrived to a non-emergent scene in a very amped-up fashion, and that was off-putting or even frightening and dangerous. People want police interactions to be interactive, helpful, and human. The great majority of people reported their personal experiences with OPD were in fact positive and respectful. We repeatedly heard that people would like the chance to know the officers as human beings – to have enough consistency in assignments that they can feel the officers know the neighborhood. There were many specific suggestions for social projects and contexts for officers to do so. It important for officers to strive for cultural competence, including sensitivity to language barriers and the fact that immigrants and many native born might not know the workings of the criminal justice system. Many people said they wanted more opportunities to interact with OPD in a model like the Ad Hoc forums, i.e., with some police presence, but facilitated by diverse citizens who are not affiliated with OPD and not employed by the city. This formal helps engender trust. Training for the department has already been funded and is under way for OPD in relationship-building and multi-cultural awareness. Transparency in what that training consists of is vital to building trust and confidence. Resources for such trust-building also resides within this community and it would be positive for OPD to engage with these local resources.

2) Understanding and perceptions of the internal workings of the police department is limited. Improving that knowledge and understanding would be helpful. Perception of OPD overlaps with and sometimes is formed by people’s perception of police in general.

It was plain that many members of the community are under- or misinformed about OPD’s recruitment, screening, hiring, training, and discipline practices. Whatever communication is being employed is less than effective. As a consequence, there are some wrong assumptions that strongly affect the perception of the local police, many of these originating from experiences from elsewhere or with personnel who are no longer with the city. Each individual encounter forms opinion about all of OPD, and people tell those stories, good or bad, over and over. The great majority of first-hand accounts of how they were treated by OPD were positive. The visuals are important, including the black squad cars, the absence of a “protect and serve” motto, and the grim façade in the foyer of the police department. Affirmative statements of a community service orientation are very significant to people. Specific calls were made for policy changes in use of force and de-escalation, accountability systems; training in hate crimes and incidents; neutral evaluations of complaints against OPD (some of which is already in place); and a citizen review board. If these ideas are already in place, they apparently need to be better publicized. If they are considered and rejected, it would be helpful to have a dialogue about that. When officers attended the forums and people had one on one conversations, the experience was positive. There were a few people at several forums who found the presence of police with guns frightening and even a barrier to
attending and participating. There was, however, no discussion about a firearm being part of the uniform of an on-duty officer.

3. **Cultural awareness/acknowledgement of implicit bias, institutional injustice.** Societal issues are manifested in situations where police respond. There is a community responsibility as well. Many community members -- some representing ongoing discussion groups in town -- suggested that we all, individually, have biases that play out in policing interactions; and they specifically requested officer training about implicit bias and services for officers that help them process the encounters they have with segments of the population where biases may form over time (meaning officer reaction in a future encounter may be impacted by previous negative encounters). There is a strong perception that process and laws favor police officers throughout the hiring, training, and incident review or corrective actions. Thurston County has a very white population and it is challenging to deal with race issues. Bias can be a two-way street -- some people are biased against law enforcement, and some people scapegoat law enforcement for bias in the population at large. Schools are important places for race and bullying to be addressed. Larger societal issues: race, poverty, homelessness, mental illness, addiction, are manifest in aspects of police/public interactions, but they are not only police problems, even if they’re manifested in police-involved flash points. Regardless of individual misperceptions or the presence of actual bias, the broader system is either not aware of or not responsive to the needs of minority groups and marginalized people, notably vulnerable youth. There is a need for cultural awareness and more adequate mental health responses. The lack of resources for these larger societal problems cannot solely be addressed at the police level, but emphasis on data-driven, trauma-informed training could assist OPD in approaching issues in a more community-collaborative fashion.