

City Council/School Board Subcommittee Minutes

February 3, 2025

6:00 p.m.

City Council Workroom, Alexandria City Hall

301 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314

Sub-Committee Attendees: Mayor Alyia Gaskins, Councilman John Chapman, Chair Michelle Rief, School Board Member Kelly Carmichael Booz, City Manager Jim Parajon, Superintendent Melanie Kay-Wyatt. **Council Members in Attendance:** Jacinta Greene and Abdel El-Noubi

Meeting Called to order at 6:00pm

Mayor Gaskins expressed her enthusiasm for joining the committee and serving in this role. She also thanked Dr. Rief for being a thought partner in this work.

She then asked to discuss opportunities for shared collaboration, noting that over the years, they had identified 12 areas. Initially, she expected the list to be much smaller, but three or four emerged as urgent priorities.

She posed the following key questions:

1. How will we work together on these priorities?
2. What specific problems are we trying to solve in each area?
3. What decisions are we aiming to reach?
4. What information do both of our bodies need to make these decisions?

She suggested developing a framework for decision-making, presenting it to colleagues, and continuing to move forward. While acknowledging that there won't always be agreement on every decision, she emphasized the importance of aligning a structured approach to decision-making.

She also recommended revisiting the priorities discussed at the retreat held the previous Saturday and work through each one, considering how much time should be dedicated to each.

On Saturday at a retreat the group reviewed shared priorities, with three key areas emerging:

- **Long-term planning and construction**
- **Youth programming**
- **Youth employment**

Additionally, she asked staff to highlight **transportation** as a priority to ensure it remains on the radar.

Chair Rief thanked Mayor Gaskins for reviewing Saturday's retreat and mentioned that ACPS has a study of its transportation program right now to see what efficiencies we may attain.

Mayor Gaskins Suggested that we can start with that one, or we can move it above youth programs and youth employment.

(at this point, a shared screen SharePoint graphic showed bullet points):

-What is the problem we're trying to solve?

-What is the decision we need to make?

-What data needs to be compiled to support discussion (sic) making? (e.g., cost implications, staff capacity?)

-What stakeholders should be involved and what level of community engagement is expected?

-When and how will the City/Schools Subcommittee discuss each topic?

Councilman Chapman said he would add to the discussion points what is the appropriate timeline, considering the City's budget process.

Mayor Gaskins then asked Dr. Kay-Wyatt and CM Parajon if they have any further questions.

CM Parajon said that an important question to him and Dr. Kay-Wyatt pertains to the data needs, as they could be extensive. **Dr. Kay-Wyatt** acknowledged that these are high-level topics and we need to know the scope of the work. She mentioned Councilman Chapman's view of aligning it with the budget - said that we can plan out a project, but it is really the implementation timeline that she wanted to make sure we address.

Vice Chair Booz appreciated the framework of these questions, adding that both leadership bodies need to acknowledge the timeline.

Mayor Gaskins said that she could not agree more, that one of things that came up at the retreat was how do we make sure we are all communicating and the same information. She proposed this as an exercise and acknowledged we are not going to get it all right - There may be things we are missing. We need to make sure, when we bring this data to our colleagues, we have already captured what is needed to make decisions and accounted for that in a work plan.

Dr. Kay-Wyatt added that we account for "what does success look like for all these projects?"

Mayor Gaskins asked for Strategic Initiatives Officer Dana Wedeles to share her screen and take notes to develop the work plans, starting with long-range planning.

Chair Rief said that from the school side – ensuring that we have the space we need to carry out our educational programming for all our students, and that we need to be responsive to growing enrollment.

Councilman Chapman said he believed Chair Rief is right; the additional piece from the City's side is being able to fund that within the constraints of our financial ability.

Mayor Gaskins added we also need to look at how do we plan in a way that is responsive to the growth of our city and where development happening, within the community. A second part is that we're not always aware of each other's needs and constraints.

School Board Member Booz raised the importance of being aware of others' needs and constraints, noting that while a 10-year CIP budget is set, emerging priorities—such as middle school capacity and

alternative schooling—require adjustments. She stressed the need for flexibility in addressing evolving challenges within long-term planning.

Mayor Gaskins said she valued being nimble and flexible, adding sometimes it feels like there isn't a joint plan of how that comes our CIP's come together in a joint integrated decision document – a layered searchable document. **Councilman Chapman** added we need to be able to fund and manage our entire budget, and looking at the vision and future needs is a part of that.

Chair Rief asked about criteria for prioritization - When there is limited funding how do we prioritize on the needs for what we have? What is the decision/expected outcome?

Vice Chair Booz added that a shared document would help, because we don't always have the insight when we look at our CIP and choices we have to make.

Councilman Chapman stated that in our various city presentations every year, our Budget staff provide a graph or some data that speaks to our City's bond authority. He would be weary of staff creating a new document.

Mayor Gaskins clarified that the document would show, as an example, that City Hall is on our CIP at this time and here are all the implications for that in terms of borrowing, our operational budget.

Mr. Routt, OMB Director, offered that we have a table of what the City and School Board is funding and we show City and schools projects together.

CM Parajon added that perhaps how we show it to decision makers is something that we could work through. Much of our capital is geographically based and there is some ability to create some visual process to see where we are investing, where we expect growth, where we have the highest level of disparity. We could match it up with school needs, and enrollment.

Mr. Routt suggested that the CIP contains a lot of little projects, and if helpful we can roll some of those up into bigger categories. Capital maintenance items could be a single line, similar to what the schools do, where they have their capacity projects and non-capacity projects.

Dr. Kay-Wyatt said we could look at and prioritization model, or an impact model, that could be used to help guide those decisions.

CM Parajon said that one caution is that we get further out in years it is more difficult to predict what we can and can't afford - a more graphic or visual form should be shorter term, because that is where we are going to be.

Councilman Chapman recalled that in the not so recent past for schools they did have a 3 or 4-year CIP. The challenge though was that it didn't set up conversations for growth. Perhaps there is a hybrid to talk about projects in the long-term and funding in the short-term.

Mayor Gaskins said that maybe this is something where we can give staff and our colleagues a chance to think through what this would look like – perhaps a model or different spreadsheet, maybe working with what we already have.

Councilman Chapman said that when we drill down into a section of the budget we do get into the kind of consequences of movement within the CIP, and perhaps this could be more of a conversation in our work sessions.

Vice Chair Booz said she thought it was important to have the conversations on big projects four years in advance.

Mayor Gaskins agreed, because if we had some way of doing that work together then the conversation becomes: How much money has gone into this already? How much could be saved in a different way?

Councilman Chapman wanted everyone to understand what happens when we need to make tradeoffs. How do we make those conversations? We are not looking at a future that is flush with additional dollars, How do we spend less in the future? The public deserves to know how we will have these conversations.

Mayor Gaskins said she wondered if it's not just how do we show the trade-offs, but what is the process for and how do we discuss the trade-offs, and how are we going to choose between them? The Mayor then turned to the last two questions posed related to stakeholders and timeline: What would be the expectation for community engagement around transportation and what is the process for making decisions?

Vice Chair Booz said that a good time to bring the community into the conversation is when we look at the 10-year CIP and make decisions about trade-offs She cites trade-off decisions around George Mason as a good example.

Mayor Gaskins said that if we come up with a tool to address this, our two budget advisory committees might be able to give it a scan.

CM Parajon remarked that this year's budget will be received in roughly 20 days and suggested that any changes in process may be better for next year given the timing.

Mayor Gaskins stated that no matter what budget they are presented with, there are going to be tough decisions coming forward and we should identify what we need for the tough decisions in the next few weeks and what could be developed for the long-term decisions over the course of a year.

Vice Chair Booz agreed that this is one of those conversations that we cannot solve in the middle of a budget cycle, so we should consider end of summer, early fall.

Councilman Chapman said that he is struggling with this, because we already have timelines; we have a budget adoption date, and a fall retreats. Are we looking at what we have now and what we should adjust?

Mayor Gaskins viewed this not necessarily as part of the budget process, as a new way of looking at tradeoffs or impact analysis.

Chair Rief said she thinks it needs to be tied into our existing schedule. If we can talk about these criteria for decision making over the spring, maybe we will be ready for the Fall.

Mayor Gaskins suggested May/June for meetings to go deeper into the criteria. Also, we will have just finished the budget so people will have reflections on what data and criteria would be helpful moving forward.

Chair Rief said she was trying to understand the role of staff versus elected officials; and to clarify how this works into existing workloads.

Councilman Chapman agreed. He understands the purpose of making a new tool but had concerns about staff capacity and timing of when we could implement a tool.

Mayor Gaskins asked what is possible now, given staff capacity and other priorities. It might not be a new tool, but rather, as an example, four impact measures for the CIP projects that are going to be discussed.

Dr. Kay-Wyatt said that she had already presented the ACPS budget, so looking back now would be difficult – perhaps there is a way of using our existing tools. She then asked if we go to look at one of the shared priorities for this budget season, or all three.

Mayor Gaskins said she didn't think we can do everything and need to prioritize where we will spend our time and suggested that for this budget cycle we take the existing tools we have and see which of those tools can help us answer the questions we are still wrestling with. When we come together after the budget in May or June we can look at how this information can help us move forward.

CM Parajon suggested that we discuss transportation to follow up on the direction he received from Council.

Mayor Gaskins said to start with the problem we are trying to solve.

Councilman Chapman said that the general problem is that we are seeking to use current assets that are in the City to be more efficient, with the transport of all students or a certain set of students.

Mayor Gaskins added that for every dollar we put into a school bus we are only able to serve students, for every dollar we put into a DASH bus we serve students and other people – how do we map where people are going to find the shared efficiencies.

Vice Chair Booz mentioned the bus driver shortage; emphasizing safety, and we are going to need to be competitive by having bus drivers that stay and want to work here.

Dr Kay-Wyatt said that the topic of transporting students deserves more time than what we have tonight – there are many components that cannot be fully addressed through the questions that we have posed for the other priorities.

Councilman Chapman suggested we focus specifically on what the Memo addressed, which is secondary transportation. There will be other conversations that come up through the process, but the focus is on what the scope of the memo includes.

Mayor Gaskins asked to clarify that we are just focus on secondary (high school) students.

Councilman Chapman said yes, we have to have the kind of self-discipline to focus on the kind of outcomes that are laid out; in this example it is the memo. Drawing this out into a conversation for multiple years does not work out.

Chair Rief stated the School Board did not have any input in the memo and asked if we are trying to implement this in the Fall?

Councilman Chapman said no, he was just trying to make a conversation about a decision point – that does not lock in the implementation.

Chair Rief said that she thinks primarily around a school calendar schedule, adding that she would like to see something like this on a school calendar. To make a transition like this, there would be a requirement on investment, based on the routes, the time, and the transit.

Mayor Gaskins agreed that we need the data to make the decision, for implementation, and conversations about which students already take DASH, who cannot or will not; we have a need for a lot of information to determine if this is the right decision. We are not deciding which school year to take this on – first we need the information to make a decision.

Dr. Kay-Wyatt said that we had already started a transportation study. When staff get together to discuss this, they need to take into account the studies we already have and a conversation about timeline. She emphasized it's important to know the timing of this, given the staffing shortages we already may have and the impact these decisions may have on staffing.

CM Parajon emphasized that the memo was to evaluate the potential for efficiency - he did not take Council's direction as a proposal to implement change. He added that it is great that studies have been done and there is also the need for a series of additional analysis, whether it's ACPS or the City.

Mayor Gaskins asked if we have study on routes, both for ACPS and DASH, and utilization.

CM Parajon responded that DASH has some of the data but it is specific for DASH. He was not aware of a combined approach.

Dr Kay-Wyatt was asked if there was a school-specific study, and asked for Dr. Alicia Hart, Chief Operating Officer, to touch on that.

Dr. Alicia Hart said that the study being referenced is by Trans-fold. It is multi-pronged and was prompted by the need to prep for CIP - decentralization/efficiencies and facility needs are part of the priority. They shared that study was underway at the fall retreat and hope to wrap up the results soon and will present the results to the Board and Council.

Mayor Gaskins asked if the study included specific information about the routes (use, ridership, etc.) and **Dr. Hart** said yes, and they have been working with DASH regarding routes and usage. **Mayor Gaskins** then asked for delivery of such data next month, including DASH, on utilization, routes, and cost.

City Manager Parajon asked that we make sure the data on cost is all-encompassing, including equipment, facilities, fleet maintenance.

Mayor Gaskins added EV charging infrastructure needs; she suggested a second discussion in March to consider safety costs that may have fiscal and experience impact. She called on **Josh Baker, DASH CEO**, and asked what else both elected bodies need to know.

Josh Baker said that we all need to be aware of what the needs are, but we have things robustly in place already. For data, we need to identify points of origin of travelers and mentioned he has been in coordination with Dr. Hart on this piece.

Mayor Gaskins asked for an April deadline.

Josh Baker responded said we can have some answers/general estimates by then, and the data will be based on the concepts though he is confident the data is good for conversations on a broader level.

Mayor Gaskins asked that in April we discuss rider information, points of origin, destination, and where are riders going, gaps, timing, and why. She added to prioritize where people are going, and why.

Chair Rief wanted to add that this reminds her of conversations on enrollment and class size issues as these are not fixed data points - points of origin are important but also looking into where there are gaps in usership.

Dr. Kay-Wyatt added that we include looking at those who use buses and those who walk and asked for clarity on how we are defining “movements.”

Mayor Gaskins then drew a scenario of how young people move throughout the day - who need buses for options to take them to different places at the end of the day.

Josh Baker said we have specific watershed standards and understanding travel options based off of standards would be helpful.

City Manager Parajon asked the committee if it would be helpful to look at how the service is run today, as a frame of reference?

Mayor Gaskins agreed and proposed that for February we look at the current state of both systems. In March we dive into movements of students. For April we consider cost and utilization. In May we look at safety considerations and also a path of presenting some options.

School Member Booz suggested that safety is moved up to April.

Chair Rief asked about stakeholder engagement.

Mayor Gaskins stated we will do stakeholder engagement, but suggested the engagement reacts to the data and information being collected. She said she would check with her colleagues on what their goal is to have by add/delete.

Dr Kay-Wyatt asked for clarity on the timeline as this sounds like it may have a Fall impact.

Councilman El-Noubi, *in attendance*, added that we have had this conversation during a Council meeting. We are flexible, and we don't necessarily need everything by Add/Delete but we do need some sort of preliminary timeline.

Mayor Gaskins said that we will want the data but are not making a decision on this by then.

Chair Rief responded that is helpful.

Councilman Chapman agreed, that we don't have to have it as part of the add/delete conversation, but we would like to have the data by that time.

Chair Rief said that she appreciated that, and that it is a dynamic process. Transportation was listed as a priority during the retreat, though, she stated, we prioritized other needs above that and wanted to lift that point up.

Mayor Gaskins agreed that she likes everything to go in sequence, though we have four areas to work on here for discussion. We will stick with transportation for now, and then in May be hyper focused on long range planning and construction and after that get to the other two. We will use this for a work plan for the remainder of the year. Lastly, she asked if there was other business.

Chair Rief acknowledged that the Joint Budget meeting is on March 5th and wondered if the agenda includes both CIP and our joint operating.

Mr. Routt said it will be mostly on City CIP, and then the schools will be the following week.

At 7:25 PM, the Mayor adjourned the meeting.