

# COMMITTEES, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

## A SOURCE OF INFLUENCE IN CITY GOVERNMENT

### Why does the City have committees, boards and commissions?

Madison's City commissions, boards and commissions play a major role in shaping the critical decisions regarding priorities, scope and levels of City services. As a recent survey of Council and committee members and staff indicates, the committee system conducts most of the preliminary work of the Council, subjecting public issues to a more intensive scrutiny from a range of perspectives greater than that of the Council or City staff alone. The committee system is one of the most effective ways for citizens to influence City policies and activities. It provides an opportunity for citizen participation in the process of government, and serves as a training ground where its participants learn and enhance their personal knowledge and skills as they work with a variety of people and issues which might not otherwise be a part of their private lives. By incorporating the technical knowledge and political resources of these committee members into Council and departmental work, the community gains a more effective government (at less cost) which is more responsive to community concerns.

### Who are committees, boards and commissions responsible to?

Except for some boards mandated under state and federal laws, it is the Council which creates committees and outlines their tasks. While the Mayor gathers and recommends appointments to committees, it is the Council which confirms those appointments. Many of the City's committees, boards and commissions work closely with a particular department or with the Mayor's Office, although each is ultimately responsible to the Council for its conduct and product.

### Types of committees.

The committees serve different functions. The nature of that function often influences the composition, major activities and reporting function for the group. Some groups focus on **policy review and development**, reporting to the Council, department head or Mayor on general subject areas like public works, transportation or public safety. Some groups serve as specialized subcommittees to the broader policy groups, or as **advisors to specialized units or programs**, such as the Pedestrian/Bicycle/Motor Vehicle Commission and the Early Childhood Care and Education Board. Some groups serve a third major function, to **hear individual cases or appeals** and render decisions on those individual cases. Such groups usually follow a more structured procedure. These include the Zoning Board of Appeals, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Ethics Board. A fourth function is served by those groups which are temporarily formed with a limited life-span in order to **study and recommend City action** regarding a particular issue. Such ad hoc groups have included the Ad Hoc Odana Road Committee, the Ad Hoc Railroad Study Committee and the Ad Hoc Committee on Vandalism.

Some groups incorporate a fifth type of function into their mission - that of **civic promotion**. These groups focus on projects which highlight particular segments of City life and generally develop extensive ties with community groups and the media, such as the Madison Arts Commission, the Commission on People with Disabilities and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Humanitarian Award Committee.

### How committees can have influence.

All of these groups work in the challenging atmosphere of City Hall, with varying degrees of political and Council involvement. Most of the work of a committee is channeled through its staff person or chairperson, who often play key roles in committee activity and liaison with resources. Committee member knowledge of the Council and of its flow of business is generally considered to be a key to the effectiveness of a committee.

The Council meets bi-weekly throughout the year to consider issues referred to it by committees, City staff or its own members. Since there are several routes for the introduction of Council business and several types of decisions on which the Council takes action, committees need to choose one of several strategies for presenting concerns to the Council. The Council may consider an issue in the form of a general report, a resolution, an ordinance or a public hearing. By voting to reject, to place on file or approve a resolution or ordinance, the Council determines the course of committee actions.

Full committee consideration of the benefits and burdens of recommendations, committee coordination of the report with other community and City department work, and prior discussion with alderpeople before the date of decision, help a committee build a solid base of support and a shared case for Council action.

### Appointment of committee members.

From time to time, committee members resign or committees find themselves with vacant positions. While a committee may suggest the names of interested people to the Mayor for consideration, most appointments are made in the following manner: An interested individual may request an application for membership from the Mayor's Office and submit a brief statement about him/herself to the Mayor, including information about his/her background and the nature of his/her interest or activity in the field of the committee's work. Supporting statements from people familiar with the individual are helpful. The submission of an individual's name through an alderperson will also increase the chances of appointment.

The Mayor selects his/her nomination from the list of submitted and recruited names and recommends an appointee to the Council for confirmation. Once confirmed, the individual is contacted by the committee staff person and notified of the next committee meeting. The major responsibility for orientation of the new committee member currently rests with the chairperson of the committee and the staff person to that committee.

For a listing of City committees and their members, go to:  
[www.cityofmadison.com/mayor/mycommit.html](http://www.cityofmadison.com/mayor/mycommit.html)