

Town of Gray
Town Council Retreat
9/16/25
OUTCOMES & NEXT STEPS

Participants:

Town Councilors: Michael Johnson, Chair; Vincent Palange, Vice Chair; Anne Gass; Charity Klinger

Town Staff: Mike Foley, Town Manager; Britt Barton, Town Clerk

Facilitators: Kristina Egan & Paul Johnson, GPCOG

Executive Summary

The Council and Town staff convened to address potential challenges related to meetings, communications, and internal dynamics. The retreat focused on establishing clear structures, improving communication norms, and identifying priorities for the Council's work in the coming year. The group is looking forward to a reset and a fresh start.

Identified Challenges

Managing and Responding to Public Input. While public comment is mostly managed well in Chambers, the Council recognized opportunities to clarify and fairly enforce the handling of public comments during meetings. There is also an opportunity to define and streamline the process for responding to emailed comments. Establishing clear expectations and consistent processes can help ensure that community input is acknowledged effectively and addressed in a fair and organized manner, while preserving precious time for the Town Council to conduct the Town's business on the agenda.

Councilor Communication and Conduct. Disagreements, misunderstandings, and even questioning motives, put-downs and rudeness among Councilors affect collaboration and staff morale. Differences in how information is shared or who is giving directives to staff leads to inconsistencies in understanding decisions, with some Councilors feeling left out of critical discussions, leaving the potential for some important decisions not being discussed in public session. Councilor and staff engagement on social media related to town business can create tension. Fostering consistent and respectful communication amongst Councilors and between the Council and staff is important to maintain a productive working environment so that the Council and staff can effectively function and serve its residents.

Staff Morale. Accusations and other negative communications from Town leaders about Town staff has influenced morale and may affect future retention. There is a low level of trust between the Council and management. Routing requests for meetings with staff and for information through the Town Manager will fulfill the Town Manager form of government

requirements. Building professional, respectful interactions can support clarity, trust, and a positive workplace culture.

Agreed Actions and Next Steps for Each

1. Public Comment

- Recommit to the public comment 3-minute limit, enforce a hard stop, require people comment from the podium, do not allow comment from the floor, do not engage in back and forth with commenters.
- Develop an approach to responding to issues raised during public comment and received through email.

NEXT STEP:

Staff or Council leadership to draft a proposed resolution for Council consideration to clarify public comment policies and how the public receives responses.

All Councilors and staff model civil discourse for the public.

2. Council Leadership and Information Sharing

- Schedule regular leadership meetings between the Chair, Vice Chair, and Town Manager to plan agendas, discuss issues, and air personal grievances in private.
- Ensure all Councilors receive the same information at the same time.
- Important decisions should be publicly discussed and formally voted on.

NEXT STEP:

Town Manager to schedule regular and recurring meetings with the Chair and Vice Chair.

3. Councilor Conduct

- The group agreed it would avoid posting about Town business on personal social media pages, and that the Town staff will continue to use the Town Facebook page to post about official Town business. If a Councilor posts on a private or official social channel, others will not respond in the comments.
- Avoid 'personal digs' in meetings against other Councilors and against staff; if needed, Chair and Vice Chair to intervene if there is toxic banter in chambers. Everything said about Councilor behavior also applies to staff behavior.

- Be mindful of the impact of words on staff morale; publicly acknowledge staff contributions and express appreciation.

NEXT STEP:

Taking the above actions is up to each individual.

4. **Town Communications**

- Provide neutral, fact-based information from official Town channels.

NEXT STEP:

Town Manager to request an opinion of the Town's Attorney about whether comments can be turned off on the Town's Facebook page to reduce potential conflicts.

5. **Staff Interaction**

- Councilors do not contact town staff directly. If Councilors want to learn from staff, or need specific information from staff, the request is routed and managed through the Town Manager to maintain clarity that the Manager directs all staff.
- Recognize the impact of decisions on staff morale and retention.
- Demonstrate respect for staff expertise.
- Consider conducting a market analysis to understand how Gray's compensation of staff compares to other communities and impacts its ability to attract and retain talent

NEXT STEPS:

- Councilors to route requests for Town staff time and staff attention through Town Manager.
- Treating staff with respect is up to each individual.
- Consider a compensation analysis.

Top FY26 Priorities

Using a dot voting system, the group identified the priorities to guide the Town Councils annual goals and provide guidance to the Town Manager when he drafts the FY26 budget

- Get finances in order (audit catch-up) – 6 votes
- Design better budget process – 5 votes
- Zoning (Commercial zoning audit/Rezoning based on comp plan) – 5 votes

- Employee support actions – 5 votes
- Future of transfer station – 4 votes
- Traffic and pedestrian safety – 3 votes
- Village Transformation – 3 votes
- Water Quality (Watershed Management Plan + SWPO) – 2 votes
- Update charter – 2 votes
- Understanding TIFs – 1 vote

Other items discussed but not prioritized included mooring ordinances, MainePERS for employees, increasing meeting frequency, and understanding financial impacts of unionization.

Mooring Ordinance (related to new housing project)
↳ Impact Fee

⑤ ●●●●● Design Better Budget Process

⑥ ●●●●● Get finances in order (audit catch-up)

① ● TIF ~~Research~~ dive into how money is used + goals of ec dev

X [Understand financials and impacts of unionization]

② ●●●●● Commercial zoning audit

③ ●●●●● Rezoning based on comp plan

⑤ ●●●●● Employee Support Actions

Priorities

③ ●●● traffic + safety (congestion) bypass ✓ (ped safety + traffic need action some VTP)

② ●●● update charter - clean-up ✓

MainePERS for employees - already voted to revisit

↑ mtg frequency

④ ●●● Village Transformation ✓ (partnership w/ DOT)

① ●●● Watershed ~~Act~~ Management Plan

① ●●● Surface Water Protection Ordinance

④ ●●● Future of Transfer Station ✓

NEXT STEP:

At an upcoming Council meeting, assign different Councilors and staff to draft Gray's highest priority annual goals, using a [SMART](#) goals template. For example: Town Manager would draft a goal with more specificity on "get finances in order" and the Chair would draft a goal related to how to "support employees". Once the goals are drafted, the Town Manager will assemble them for consideration and adoption at a Town Council meeting.

Conclusion:

The retreat established immediate steps to improve communication, clarify public engagement, and support staff, while identifying FY26 priorities for Council and Town staff action. These steps lay the groundwork for a more collaborative and transparent Council, setting the stage for a productive FY26.

The Council will need to take official actions to operationalize these outcomes, including adopting and implementing procedures for public comment and information sharing, and selecting and defining annual priorities.