CITY OF BESSEMER CITY COUNCIL RETREAT REPORT

February 2026



CENTRALINA
REGIONAL COUNCIL

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OBJECTIVES & AGENDA

Centralina Regional Council worked with the City of Bessemer City to design a retreat to prepare for the FY27 budget development process.

The objectives of the retreat were to:

- Build shared clarity and alignment around the strategic plan.
- Identify priorities that support continued advancement of strategic goals.
- Discuss a variety of growth-related topics.
- Enhance understanding of roles and responsibilities to support effective decision making.

Day 1 of the retreat included a mix of presentations, discussion, and participant activities. Centralina staff facilitated the discussion to draw out all perspectives and voices while keeping participants on track with ground rules and other techniques.

Thursday, February 26, 2026 Agenda
Breakfast
Welcome Remarks, Retreat Objectives, and Icebreaker Exercise • Becky Smith, Mayor • Josh Ross, City Manager • Kelly Weston and Shanta Watkins, Centralina Regional Council
Strategic Planning Process Overview • Centralina provided a recap of the City's process for creating the current strategic plan.
Finding Common Ground for Effective Collaboration • Centralina guided the Council through a leadership exercise.
Leadership Roles in Focus • Centralina provided an overview of roles and responsibilities within the Council-Manager form of government.
Lunch
Keeping the Momentum: Advancing the Strategic Plan • The City Manager highlighted examples of plan implementation over the past year. Council identified priorities to build on this progress.
Wrap Up for Centralina Team • Centralina concluded their facilitation segment of the retreat with a reflection exercise.
Land Use Update Discussion • Jamie Watkins, City Planner/Stormwater Administrator • Karen Mallo
Pay Classification • Hydeia Hayes, Human Capital Officer/City Clerk
Adjournment

Friday, February 27, 2026 Agenda
Breakfast
Economic Development Commission Report • Donny Hicks, Gaston County EDC
Projects Update • McGill Engineering
Natural Gas Rate Study • Jamie Ramsey, Operations & Special Projects Director • Diane Jenkins, Finance Director • Josh Ross, City Manager
Closing Remarks & Adjournment

The following report captures insights from the interactive components of Day 1 and key takeaways from the facilitated group discussion. It does not recap presentations from internal or external speakers.

STRATEGIC PLAN REVIEW

Since three new Council members took office after the strategic plan was finalized, Centralina presented a recap of the planning process during the retreat to ensure all members had a solid understanding of how the City developed the plan. This presentation included an overview of the strategic plan elements (Figure 1) and the steps taken between 2022 and 2025 to develop them. Management provided the Council with copies of the strategic plan to support this presentation.



Figure 1. Strategic Plan Elements

EXPLORING COLLABORATION & LEADERSHIP

To support the retreat objective of enhancing understanding of roles and responsibilities and strengthening effective decision-making, the agenda included a Council review of how collaborative dynamics and clear leadership expectations contribute to strong governance.

Finding Common Ground for Effective Collaboration

Centralina guided the group through an interactive exercise in which participants individually reflected on their leadership qualities, including their strengths and areas for improvement. Participants then worked in pairs to discuss opportunities for growth and how they would continue to develop in those areas.

Leadership Roles in Focus

Centralina presented a brief overview of the council-manager form of government (Figure 2), highlighting the division of responsibilities between elected officials and professional staff. The presentation explained the working relationship among the Council, the City Manager, and staff within this structure and introduced the flight analogy graphic (Figure 3), which illustrates the respective focus areas of the Council as elected leaders and staff as administrators and subject-matter experts.

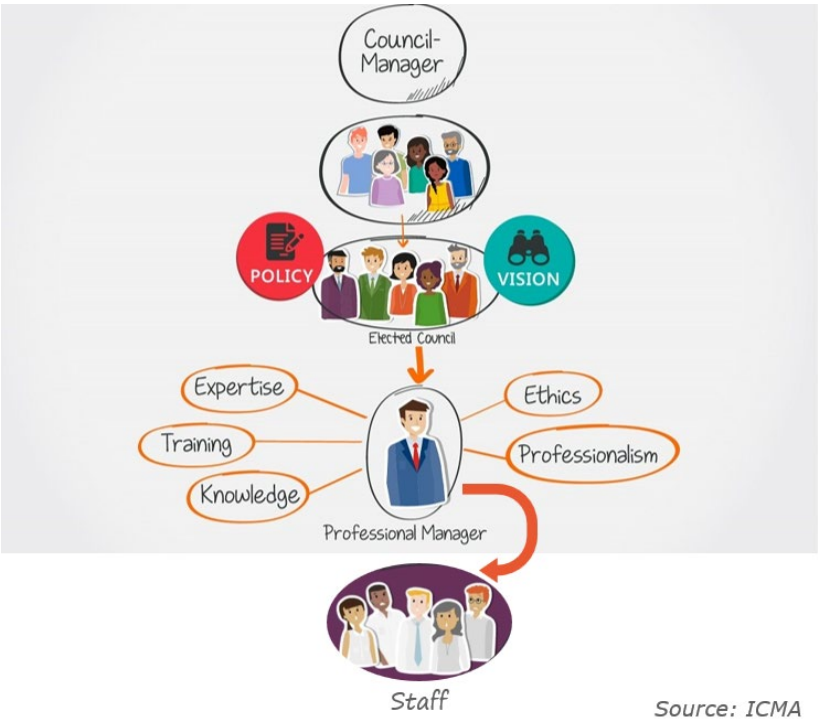


Figure 2. Council-Manager Structure

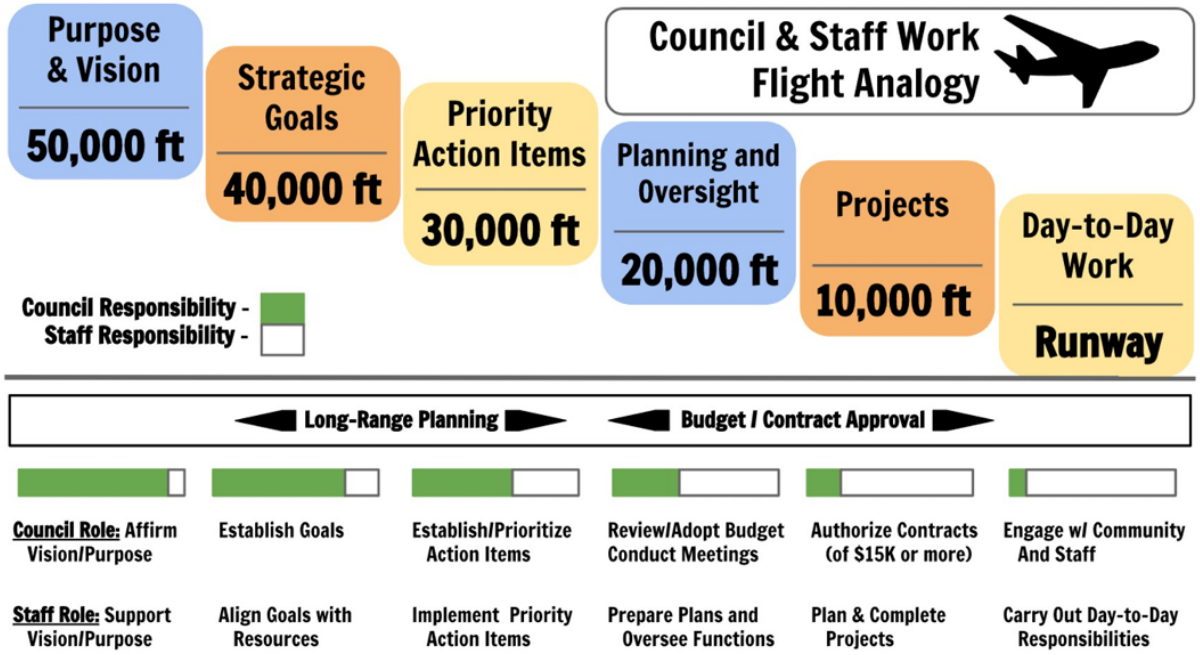
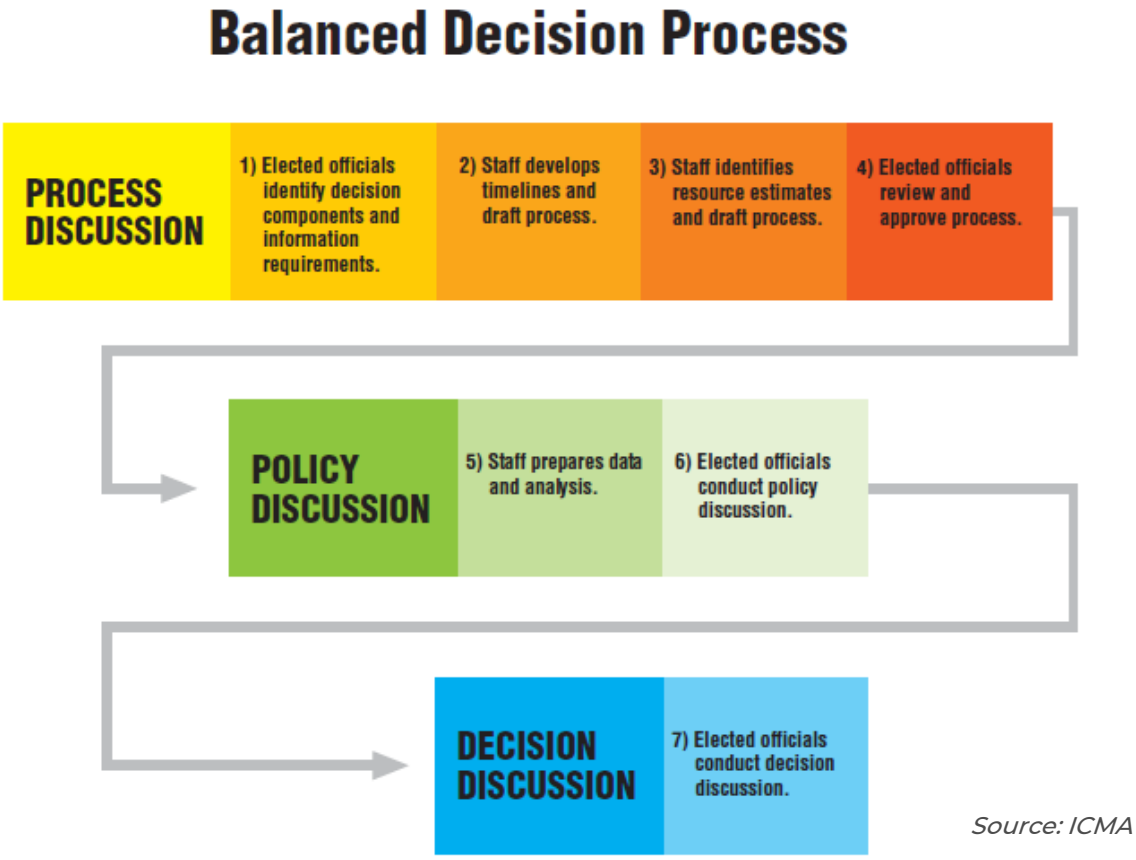


Figure 3. The Flight Analogy

As part of this segment of the agenda, the Council participated in an interactive exercise in which members were asked to distinguish between Council responsibilities and those of the City Manager and his designees. The exercise prompted meaningful conversation about these roles and the perspectives represented in the room.

Centralina also presented an overview of the Balanced Decision Process (Figure 4), a sample decision-making model that organizes complex issues into three steps: establishing the process for how a decision will be made, reviewing key information to frame the policy considerations, and reaching consensus. The model underscores that decisions should be made collectively and thoughtfully once all available information, including public input, has been considered. A comprehensive summary of the Balanced Decision Process is included in Appendix A.



Source: ICMA

Figure 4. The Balanced Decision Process

KEEPING THE MOMENTUM

During the retreat, Centralina presented a recap of the activities in which the Council and staff participated between 2022 and 2025 to develop the City's strategic plan. The City Manager highlighted several examples of the progress the City has made during the first year of plan implementation.

Centralina guided the Council through an interactive exercise in which members reflected on the strategic plan goals and strategies and brainstormed new opportunities the City could leverage to continue advancing plan implementation. To support these opportunities, participants also brainstormed policy changes, partnerships, and other solutions that do not require additional funding. The Council then participated in a dot-voting exercise to prioritize the opportunities. The following table reflects the input from this brainstorming and prioritization session.

Goal 1: Promote a desirable place to live and work that provides a healthy quality of life.

Strategies

1.1. Continuously update and review City code.
1.2. Improve and promote walkability throughout the City.
1.3. Create an arts and cultural plan.

New Opportunities to Help Move the Strategies Forward

- Improve roads (6)
- Add sidewalks (2)
- VA monument

Policy Changes, Partnerships, and Solutions Requiring No New Funding

- Partnerships with industries
- Utilize Presbyterian Church for cultural arts
- Work with NC DOT for funding assistance

Goal 2: Ensure a safe and secure community for residents and visitors.

Strategies

2.1. Conduct a public safety study.
2.2. Fund public safety needs not covered by grants or sale of property.

New Opportunities to Help Move the Strategies Forward

- New public safety building (5)
- Additional public safety positions

Policy Changes, Partnerships, and Solutions Requiring No New Funding

- Set up a fund account for a future Police Department building
- Continue hiring Police & Fire personnel

Goal 3: Invest in high quality infrastructure to support a thriving and diverse economy.

Strategies

3.1. Develop and implement a long-range plan for CIP, utility maintenance, and infrastructure improvements.

3.2. Explore ways to continuously clarify, streamline, and improve Land Development Code and unified development ordinances so that developers are improving the city.

3.3. Align building, infrastructure, and service improvements with growth plans.

New Opportunities to Help Move the Strategies Forward

- Road/sidewalk improvements (3)
- Improve existing infrastructure before building new (3)
- Remove/adjust ordinances (2)
- Attract high speed internet

Policy Changes, Partnerships, and Solutions Requiring No New Funding

- Budget appropriately
- Keep on top of all we have started
- Grant support
- Research new ideas
- Review, I.D., remove/replace

Goal 4: Provide opportunities for citizen engagement and promote volunteerism.

Strategies

4.1. Educate appointed and advisory boards to carry out City goals.

4.2. Create programs and resources that better advise the community.

4.3. Develop a communication plan that gains buy-in from Council and the public.

New Opportunities to Help Move the Strategies Forward

- Talk to businesses – ensure representation on boards (4)
- Communication (2)
- Conduct informal town hall meetings (2)
- Recruit members to serve on advisory boards
- Advertise

Policy Changes, Partnerships, and Solutions Requiring No New Funding

- Use Dylan to communicate and plan
- Provide ground rules and City facilities for meetings
- Social media
- Additional electronic message boards
- City Facebook page

Goal 5: Foster organizational sustainability that embraces innovation and creativity.

Strategies

5.1. Ensure the City continues to attract and retain high-quality professionals.
5.2. Continue staff engagement programs and offer more professional development opportunities and training incentives.
5.3. Continue identifying ways to increase service delivery effectiveness.

New Opportunities to Help Move the Strategies Forward

- Take care of City staff (9)
- Educate Council on processes (2)
- Remain competitive with pay
- Incentivize pay

Policy Changes, Partnerships, and Solutions Requiring No New Funding

- Recognize/celebrate employee successes and accomplishments
- Identify employee highlight opportunities
- Establish LinkedIn account
- Budget salaries appropriately
- Improve employee benefits

The priorities Council identified during the retreat provide staff with clear direction for continuing tactics development to advance the City's strategic plan in the coming fiscal year. These priorities will help staff focus implementation efforts and align them with organizational capacity, strategic goals, and Council's expectations.

CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

During the reflection exercise at the conclusion of the Centralina-led portion of the retreat, it was noted that the Council expressed strong agreement on the importance of valuing the City's workforce and maintaining competitive compensation. This shared focus offers a promising starting point for building consensus on the range of issues the Council will consider moving forward.

As a next step, the City may wish to encourage new Council members to participate in the UNC School of Government's training for newly elected officials to build on the foundational governance information discussed during the retreat. Another recommended next step is to determine an approach and frequency for updating the strategic plan to ensure it remains current and responsive as implementation progresses.

Additional "parking lot" items identified for future discussion include:

- Reviewing the pros and cons of adjusting the timing and process for releasing the Council meeting agenda
- Determining the appropriate form of recognition for a former City employee

Centralina remains available as a resource, as needed, moving forward.

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE DECISION MAKING FRAMEWORK

THE Balanced Decision Process

Effective and enduring public policy decisions are the result of a disciplined process that promotes vigorous and transparent debate of complex issues.

A BALANCED APPROACH TO DECISION-MAKING

Elected officials are responsible for a full spectrum of decisions – some routine and ministerial – but others that are complex and often controversial. The Balanced Decision Process model provides an outline that can be used for these complex decisions. This model requires rigorous application of process discipline that separates decision-making for complex issues into three distinct elements:

1. **Process discussion** – where agreement is reached on the process and information that will be necessary to assure high quality and timely discussion of policy issues.

2. **Policy discussion** – where information is reviewed, analyzed and discussed with the goal of clarifying questions and information prior to a final decision action. The policy discussion includes establishing and refining policy goals and a thorough discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the options and policy implications of each.

3. **Decision discussion** – where, with all the information available, final agreement is reached on the policy after a thorough and vigorous debate based on policy information and data gathered as part of the process.



This model recognizes and enhances the need for vigorous debate of policy issues. Public confidence in decisions made by policymakers is strengthened when the public sees that an open discussion and debate has occurred. Building public support requires clear disclosure of advantages and disadvantages of issues under discussion.

By mapping out the process of decision-making into clear and definable steps, complex decisions can be tackled in doable, bite-sized decisions, retaining agreement among policymakers along the way. Separating elements of the decision-making process allows for substantive and focused discussions at each of the critical steps.

Finally, delaying taking positions on policy questions until all the facts are in permits a more open policy discussion and improves the quality of the final policy decision. The process also respects the need for various levels of public participation in different types of decisions. Some decision-making that involves difficult issues with important fiscal or other impacts on residents may benefit from public input at more than one stage in the process.

ISSUE ▶ Process Discussion ▶ Policy Discussion ▶ Decision Discussion ▶ DECISION

Process Discussion Phase

STEP	DESCRIPTION	KEY QUESTIONS	ASSIGNMENT
ONE Identify decision components and information requirements	1. Identify "bite-sized" decision points. 2. Identify questions to be answered as part of each decision point and what information and data is needed to respond to questions.	1. What are appropriate decision points? 2. What questions need to be answered to make a decision? 3. What information and data is needed to respond to questions?	Elected Officials
TWO Develop timeline/draft process	1. Identify timeline required to make final decision considering factors like project/issue demands, time required to prepare data and to conduct quality policy debates.	1. Have we permitted sufficient time to gather and process information? 2. Do we have external requirements for decision timing (i.e. statutory deadlines, developer timelines, etc.)? 3. Will timing of public input be impacted by need to get data and information prior to scheduling public involvement?	Staff
THREE Identify resource estimates and draft process	1. Develop estimates of time and cost to provide data and information requested by decision-makers. 2. Draft process.	1. Can existing staff provide information? If so, what time will be required given existing workload? 2. If outside assistance is needed, are budgeted funds available?	Staff
FOUR Review and approve process	1. An initial process identifying component decisions, decision questions, data/information to be provided, resources (cost and time) required to provide data/information and a timeline is prepared for review, refinement and final approval as refined by policymakers. 2. Establish agreement on policy and decision discussion. 3. Process may be amended by policymakers from time to time as needed to reflect current issues.	1. Can policymakers agree on process as outlined? 2. What rules will apply to policy discussions (time of discussion, participation[1], will consensus rules apply or simple majority)?	Elected Officials

Policy Discussion Phase

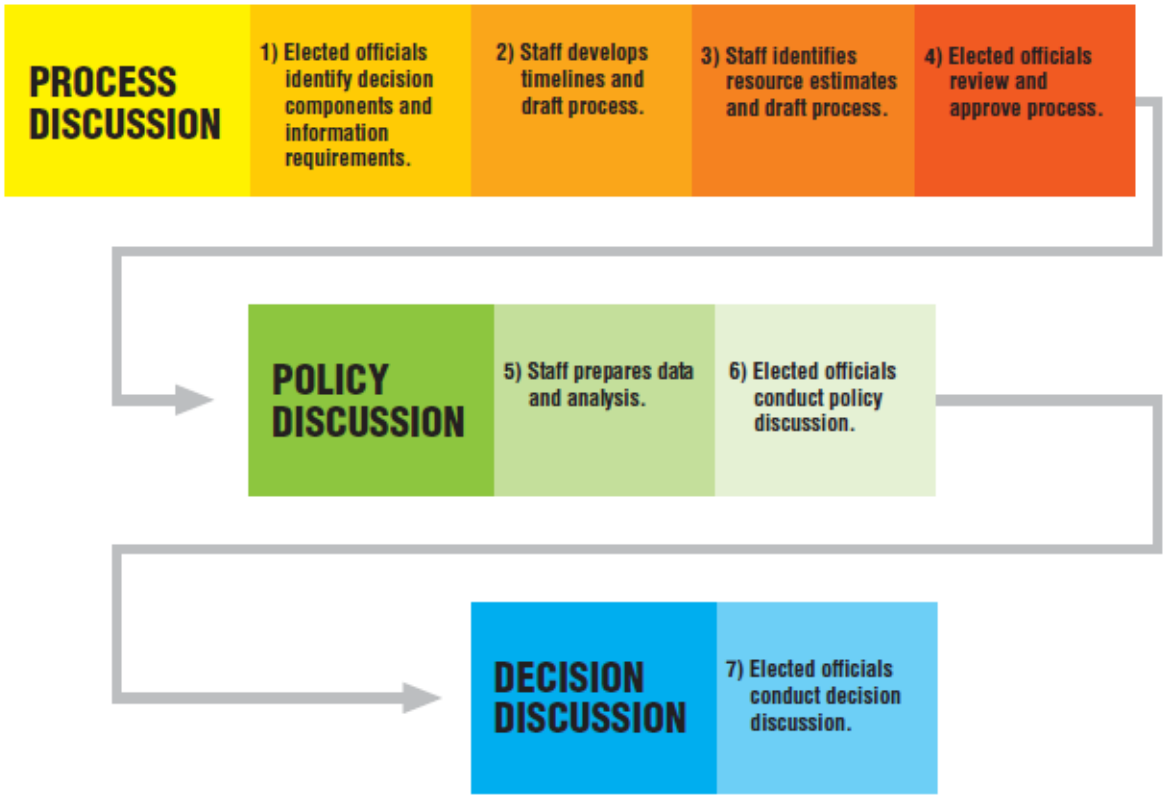
STEP	DESCRIPTION	KEY QUESTIONS	ASSIGNMENT
FIVE Prepare data and analysis	1. Conduct studies, gather data and prepare information requested. 2. Prepare "unvarnished" analysis of advantages and disadvantages of various decision options.	1. Do studies, data, and information respond to decision questions? 2. If not, what additional information should be provided? 3. Is analysis balanced and does it fully disclose advantages and disadvantages?	Staff
SIX Conduct policy discussions	1. Policy discussions occur as scheduled and in accord with agreed upon rules. 2. Policy discussions focus on vigorous debate of advantages and disadvantages of various options and not on support of particular positions. Policy goals are established and refined. 3. Any need for additional information/data as appropriate is identified. 4. No policy decisions made at meeting. **(Note this meeting may need to be repeated if additional information or data is determined to be needed).**	1. Are we following rules as agreed upon? 2. After discussion have we determined that additional data or information is needed? 3. Are we ready to conduct a decision discussion at subsequent meeting? 4. Have we clearly identified the advantages and disadvantages of decision issues?	Elected Officials

Decision Discussion Phase

STEP	DESCRIPTION	KEY QUESTIONS	ASSIGNMENT
SEVEN Conduct decision discussion	1. Decision discussion occurs as scheduled and in accord with agreed upon rules. 2. Positions and basis of positions are debated with focus on developing consensus. 3. Advantages and disadvantages of various positions clearly disclosed and discussed.	1. Have we clearly and openly discussed the critical elements to this decision? 2. Have we clearly discussed and disclosed the advantages and disadvantages of issues?	Elected Officials

[1] For example will public be invited to speak at each policy and decision discussion? Will policy and decision discussion be unregulated, time limits, etc.?

Balanced Decision Process



Consistent application of a disciplined decision-making process promotes not only good public policy but public trust as well.

Process Rules and Recommendations

1. The key to success of this model is applying discipline to each step of the process. This means that policymakers need to agree to the process and agree to "self-enforce" the rules as agreed upon at each step. Proceeding from one step to the next without agreement on accomplishment of that step will lead to failure.

2. Process, policy, and decision discussion should be clearly separated. This separation should be noted on agendas and is most effective if separated by date. This means if a discussion is scheduled for process development or review, discussion on the substantive policy should be ruled out of order.

3. Regularly scheduling time to review, update and adjust the process and the timeline is recommended.

4. It is often useful to provide regular informational updates on projects (including community feedback) as part of the agenda for regular elected board meetings. However, policy or decision discussions should not occur at the same time that the updates are provided. This will avoid confusion or mixing of those different elements.

5. Most major policy decisions can and should be broken into "bite-sized" chunks, and separate policy decision discussions should be scheduled accordingly. As an example, a decision regarding redevelopment can include separate (but clearly related) decisions on goals, target redevelopment area, type of new development desired, developer selection, how to communicate and involve the public in the process, developer concept review, terms of development agreement, project timing, etc.

6. Reaching agreement on how to most effectively debate issues is critical. Some communities adopt guidelines ahead of meetings in order to assure that all of the questions, concerns, reasoning, and eventually, positions of the policymakers are heard in a respectful fashion. Establishing these guidelines ahead of the actual discussion is most effective.

7. The traditional model of public involvement in decision-making is to communicate to the public after a decision is made. Typically the traditional model includes a focus on how the decision reflects the best interest of the community. The experience of a growing number of communities indicates that while communicating to the public after a decision is made is necessary, it is no longer sufficient to gain public support. Timely, high quality public feedback during the decision process is almost always required to assure a high quality decision. Preparing a communications plan to assure the public has adequate information prior to a decision is important, and periodic and timely public involvement is a key to success.