

Columbia Vision Commission's Five Key Takeaways From the 2019 Strategic Plan Focus Group Report

As explained to the Vision Commission, this report was designed to seek feedback from specific demographics (including several marginalized groups) within the Columbia citizenry. Although the commission recognizes this report, therefore, inherently over-represents the thoughts, concerns and suggestions of these specifically targeted individuals statistically, we also understand the importance of providing a platform to such voices. As such, views held by participants in this focus group research do not necessarily align with the majority of the general population (per the 2018 citizen survey).

The Vision Commission has identified five key citizen concerns expressed in the focus groups that should guide and drive decision making during the next strategic planning process. Page numbers following direct quotes refer to the page on which the quote can be found in the 2019 Strategic Plan Focus Group Report.

1) Economic Mobility: Focus group participants do not believe the local economy provides the same opportunity to all citizens. For example, Columbia's unemployment rate currently hovers around 2-3%, yet the poverty rate remains at 25%, which indicates that simply having a job does not allow all Columbians to adequately provide for themselves/their families.

- "There are opportunities at \$10 and salaried, but not much in between. Not a lot of middle skills jobs." (page 45)
- "Ensure all have financial economic mobility. If you are born into poverty in Boone County the chances of getting out of it are very low. One of the lowest in the United States." (page 131)

This statement is supported by the "Boone Indicators Dashboard Special Report: Economic Opportunity" published by The Institute of Public Policy at the Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri, May 20, 2019. <http://booneindicators.org/SpecialReports.aspx>

- "Hard to get opportunities if you are in a minority group: woman, person of color. Opportunities for advancement in employment are there. Discrimination in the workplace so you can't climb the ladder." (page 51)

2) Housing: Although focus group participants expressed frustration over housing costs, the Commission was unable to determine whether concerns are a resources issue, an awareness issue or just a general concern about the City's housing market and associated costs.

- "Rent needs to be regulated and be more realistic for community members to afford their monthly payments. Affordable housing is really hard. Renting is outrageous." (page 36)
- "Housing is higher for single bedroom units due to students. Quality of housing needs to improve..." (page 72)

3) City Leadership/Communication: Some feedback regarding City leadership was possibly skewed based on the City Manager transition/disruption occurring during the time the focus groups took place. Rather than include feedback about specific individuals, the Commission decided to highlight actionable, overarching themes commonly shared by participants.

- “Effectiveness of City Council. It’s subdued and not getting better. They have authority but not quite enough. When they come in their direction and the mayor doesn’t agree it’s stalled. Underlying all of that is their political affiliation. Barriers to getting things done.” (page 53)
- “Leadership in the community, lack of diversity in leadership.” (page 51)
- “The community needs to know where we go from here. There should be some kind of communication about ‘now what?’ I have been to several meeting like this and have never see[n] results.” (page 137)

4) Transit: Specific suggestions for improvement centered on longer hours and more route options.

- “A city of this size should have bus service from morning to night. Not having bus service is a major issue. Issues with equity.” (page 98)
- “Lack of concern (in the City government) around transit is a little bit scary; City keeps cutting it.” (page 101)
- “ADA approved sidewalks are not in areas with a population of adults with disabilities. Ex: William Street (Freedom House), Broadway from BCFR to the hospital.” (page 109)

5) Infrastructure: Infrastructure was a high-priority concern among seniors and persons with disabilities. Specific suggestions for improvement included aging infrastructure, bike lanes and crosswalks.

- “Bike paths are not as safe as they should be, needs improvement.” (page 143)
- “NE, off of Ballenger Road, has no lighting, cars coming towards you can’t see you. No sidewalks. Cars speed through there.” (page 99)

**The Vision Commission would also like to note that public safety was a leading concern in the [2018 citizen survey](#) but was not a consistent concern for focus group participants.*

Actionable Goals for Strategic Planning

- 1) Be more accessible to community members and seek continued feedback from marginalized and/or under-represented citizens who feel their voices aren’t heard. City leaders should hear what the community members have to say for themselves. Meaningful efforts by City leadership to reach out to those who feel disengaged and/or unheard can improve their perception of the City’s commitment to all citizens. This could look like increasing City leadership visibility at events or forums where they can get to know community members from diverse backgrounds at accessible locations in a variety of neighborhoods.

- 2) City leaders should integrate citizen feedback into their decision-making processes. The gesture of reaching out itself is not enough. Citizens targeted in this report do not feel listened to and were not entirely sure their voices would be acted upon, even though they were specifically given this platform. That is to say that, they enjoyed the opportunity to provide open-ended feedback but were unsure if anything would actually change as a result. Take action that will solve serious problems related to economic mobility, housing, City leadership/communication, transit and infrastructure.
- 3) Although the citizens represented in this report recognize the Columbia economy thrives on a student population, they want City leadership to recognize that students are not the only ones in town who need access to affordable, safe housing options and expanded access to quality public transportation.