

EMC responses to inquiries from the Cost of Government Commission

By Georjean Adams, Chair

Regarding the Environmental Management Commission, in general, I think we are doing pretty well.

1. Can redundancy and waste be reduced by combining boards/commissions that are like focused?

No. I'm not aware of another commission with an overlapping charter. However, there is a still standing Solid Waste Advisory Committee (SWAC) whose charter was met (advising DEM on updating the Integrated Solid Waste Management Plan 2019). I was on SWAC and have never received any official closure notice. There has been no activity (cost) since the Council approved the plan in early 2020, so maybe it's a moot issue?

2. Is the size of your board/commission optimized? Is island-wide representation optimized?

Yes. Having representation from each district is a good idea, as issues vary by each. Unfortunately, EMC has been plagued by vacancies (only missing District 3, right now, though).

3. Has your board/commission retained its value to the community and achieved positive results?

I think we've shown value by influencing the priorities and direction of the DEM and supporting them with the Council.

4. Is your meeting frequency optimized?

Once a month works well.

5. Has lack of quorums been a problem and affected effectiveness?

We had a tough time with an appeal hearing trying to maintain quorum - but mostly due to Covid absences. Being able to Zoom has helped make quorum.

6. Is your board/commission conforming to the County Charter or should any code changes to guidelines be suggested?

I believe we are conforming to our charter - although I find myself trying to keep EMC focused on DEM's jurisdiction, rather than other issues that are the responsibility of DOH (eg private cesspools). The only change I wish we had is driven by the state Sunshine Act which prohibits us from brainstorming and collating information and issues between meetings so we can be more efficient in laying out recommendations for voting during public meetings. I admit I'm trying to do my first PIG and having difficulty getting timely work product from members - which is a separate issue.

7. Would an audit of your board/commission be of any benefit?

No.

8. Would employing a support staff of secretaries and lawyers for the exclusive use of the Commissions and Boards so as to not distract the workload of other county employees be prudent?

We've been doing pretty well, although there has been a lot of turnover in Corp Counsel in the last year or so. We have benefitted from the experience our current counsel (Keyra Wong) has with other boards. Our secretary (Peter Sur) is a gem, but he may feel a more dedicated assignment could help.

9. What suggestions might you have for using standard A/V equipment and resources across boards and commissions, as well as standardizing how the community can interact with each board and commission remotely and/or in-person? What equipment, systems and facilities are you using in this regard?

I defer to our secretary. We've been pretty successful with remote services, with the possible exceptions of needing better audio quality from the DEM Director, and our District 4 commissioner and the public in Na'alehu have connection issues when using the phone for meetings. Being able to have a public meeting site helps some, but it's still a long trek to Kona or Hilo for them. I wonder if it'd help to be able to have participation at council members' district offices? Finding an available room can be challenging (again, I defer to our secretary).

Peter Sur's answer:

“Some of the equipment I use is personally bought and some is supplied by the County. Because each meeting room is different I bring everything in the car and hope to figure it out in the hour between when I arrive on site and when people start logging in to the Zoom. So far we have not had to cancel for lack of AV connection, although we have had drop outs of up to a minute or two due to a spotty connection. At minimum I can start a Zoom with a laptop, an Ethernet cable, a webcam, and an HDMI cable to connect to the TV screen. If the room has less equipment then I have to plan to bring more: DEM’s projector, if there is no TV screen, and also a sound system, external microphone, wireless mics, a MiFi device from Department of Information Technology, and so on.

“Chair is right that finding a Zoom-capable room can be a challenge. DEM has conference rooms at its offices in Hilo and Kona so we won’t ever fully run out of space, but they are not at the main county building locations, and so are less convenient for the public to find, and cannot fit everyone comfortably if we were to go 100 percent in person. That’s the theory. In practice we usually have only the District 4 commissioner attending every meeting in person. From a cost of government perspective, Zoom saves the county thousands of dollars due to unclaimed mileage.

“Lastly, the system works because I have had a year and a half to figure it out, but what if I’m not there? What if I get exposed to COVID? Is the meeting just canceled? I am looking at going on a trip in late June 2023 and do not have a backup. In this case having support staff well versed in hosting a Zoom – one in Hilo and one in Kona – would be useful. We could see if IT

would be up to the task, or you could recommend borrowing a secretary from another department, in the same way that deputy corporation counsels have backups.”

10. Should all meetings be held both in-person (as permitted) and via Zoom (or equivalent)?

Our commission prefers the Zoom option. It saves a lot of gas and travel time. We get more public participation in our meetings as well. Plus we have a video of the meeting for reference by everyone, including commissioners who miss the meeting. Being able to offer in-person participation helps for those with poor connections (at the cost of travel).