

A conversation with Greater Greater Washington, November 16, 2016

Participants

- David Alpert – Founder and Board President, Greater Greater Washington (GGWash)
- Sarah Guidi – Managing Director, GGWash
- David Whitehead – Housing Program Organizer, GGWash
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, U.S. Policy, the Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Mr. Alpert, Ms. Guidi, and Mr. Whitehead.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Mr. Alpert, Ms. Guidi, and Mr. Whitehead of GGWash as an update on an Open Philanthropy Project grant. The \$275,000 grant to support GGWash was awarded in July 2015. Conversation topics included GGWash's work with Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs) and the Comprehensive Plan, online organizing activities, and personnel and financial updates.

ANCs

Role of ANC commissioners

ANC commissioners perform a variety of roles in Washington, D.C., including:

- **Advising on development** – When a housing development proposal requires zoning or historic district relief, ANC commissioners review the proposal and make recommendations to the zoning board. Zoning boards take very seriously the guidance of ANC commissioners, and the amount of compromising that has to take place – over, e.g., the number of floors in a proposed development – often depends on the commission's level of support.
- **Advising on citywide issues** – such as the update to the Comprehensive Plan. ANCs are considered to be one of the main mechanisms for gauging community sentiment and are given “great weight” in city planning discussions. The Office of Planning (OP) listens very closely to their recommendations and is often hesitant to diverge from them. While there are other groups that represent community interests – e.g., civic associations – they are not considered to be as representative.
- **Working to enact change in their districts** – Commissioners can request studies – e.g., traffic or corridor studies – in order to improve their districts, or suggest specific changes to roads, public spaces, etc. Proactive

commissioners who are effective organizers can have significant positive impact on their communities. For example, new affordable housing and a second sit-down restaurant have recently been built in one commissioner's district, as a result of his community organizing efforts.

Organizing ANC commissioners

Since June 2016, GGWash has been focused on organizing ANC commissioners and building political relationships across the city. It hopes to see the commissioners come together as a group to raise both high-priority neighborhood issues and citywide issues to councilmembers.

Vacant housing bill

Over the past six months, an ANC commissioner proposed a bill on vacant housing that was picked up by the D.C. council and passed in October.

The commissioner noticed the vacant housing problem in his neighborhood and had been working for some time to find solutions. GGWash worked alongside the commissioner, helping him increase awareness of the issue and submit testimony to the council.

Other issues

GGWash would like to see ANC commissioners organize around the following campaigns:

1. **Update to the Comprehensive Plan** – GGWash had discussed this with commissioners in the past, but it was too early in the process for them to get involved. The opportunity for ANC involvement is now approaching.
2. **Limited-stop bus** – The bus service would cross much of the city, introduce a new bus service with fewer stops (and thus faster travel times), and cost about \$1.25 million. GGWash has been interested in running a campaign of this kind for some time, and it would be excited to see a win in this area.

New ANC commissioner candidates

Before the 2016 U.S. election, GGWash shifted its focus from organizing existing ANC commissioners to engaging with prospective commissioners, which GGWash believes has been successful.

Soliciting community issues and responses from candidates

Historically, voters have had little information to help them choose an ANC commissioner in their districts. Party affiliations for ANC candidates are not listed on the ballot (nor would they be useful if they were, as D.C. is overwhelmingly Democratic, but Democrats do not all agree on land use and transportation issues), and there was a lack of information available about the candidates' stances on

issues.

GGWash provided information about candidates in past elections. This year, it increased its effort to educate voters by creating the following process:

- **Crowdsourcing neighborhood issues** – GGWash asked members of the community to come up with a list of neighborhood-specific issues. Over 200 issues were submitted to GGWash as a result. These issues – concerning street intersections, housing developments, etc., in the 40 ANCs in the city – were too numerous and specific for any central expert to know about, making crowdsourcing an effective tool for gathering them.
- **Creating a questionnaire for candidates** – GGWash selected the major issues and compiled them into a questionnaire. The questionnaire was formatted so that candidates were asked only about issues relevant to their districts, as well as some citywide questions. GGWash sent the questionnaire to all 400 candidates for ANC commissioner roles. Because ANCs have not typically been a focus of attention in elections, many of the candidates were eager to respond. GGWash worked to get as many responses as possible, especially in contested races. 299 seats were available in the election, and approximately 100 of them were contested.
- **Identifying uncontested seats** – At the end of this process, GGWash also identified 20 uncontested seats and encouraged candidates to declare write-in candidacies and fill out the questionnaire. 11-12 people responded to this call to action.

GGWash's coverage of the candidates' responses

GGWash staff heard from many people who had read about the ANC candidates and their responses to the questionnaire. GGWash feels that it was able to reach a broad audience with this content.

In the past, candidates and sitting commissioners did not have a space to come together. GGWash had three meetings with the candidates and created a listserv for them. Earlier in the summer, Mr. Whitehead tried to meet with as many of the candidates as possible.

Comprehensive Plan

Building a coalition for the Comprehensive Plan update

Coalition members

GGWash has held four meetings of a coalition including representatives from the following types of groups:

1. For-profit and non-profit builders.
2. Affordable housing advocates.

3. People who provide direct services to disadvantaged communities.
4. Groups like GGWash that are focused on planning and education.

12-15 different groups have participated. GGWash is pleased with the progress being made given the diversity of the groups involved – e.g., both for-profit developers and community managers working with low-income people.

Process for consensus building

GGWash began by facilitating a discussion of values and overall objectives with the groups, rather than policy. Participants were asked to write and discuss points of mutual agreement, provisional agreement, and disagreement. By the fourth meeting, the group was discussing issues in collective terms – i.e., using “we” to talk about whether there was agreement on an issue.

GGWash staff relied on past experience, including teaching experience, to create this process. They also researched tools and best practices and consulted with staff from Housing Affordability and Livability and organizers from Portland.

Process for proposing and adopting amendments to the Comprehensive Plan

The timeline for the process will depend on the Office of Planning (OP) and its schedule.

1. First, OP is planning to create and publish a list of evaluation criteria for judging amendments to the Comprehensive Plan.
2. As of now, proposed amendments are due in the spring of 2017. This will be followed by more public engagement: OP will have an open call for amendments, allowing anyone to send them in. OP will then organize the proposed amendments, judge them based on the evaluation criteria, and recommend some to the D.C. council.

Online organizing

Comprehensive Plan book club

About 130 people have participated in GGWash’s Comprehensive Plan book club. The engagement levels have been mixed, with engagement tapering at times and then rebounding.

There are currently around ten regular contributors to the discussion and many volunteer moderators. Through the book club, GGWash was able to attract two new contributors to its blog.

Educating and creating offline engagement

Within the focus area of transit, the GGWash blog has led to some offline engagement. This has not yet happened as much with housing as this is a new area.

With its housing-related content, GGWash is focused more on educating and building awareness of foundational issues. For example, Professor Brian McCabe of Georgetown University has been writing explainers – e.g., posts describing the area median income or tax credits – to help educate the public on these topics.

Housing-related content on the blog has gone up by 35-40% from 2015 to 2016.

Personnel and financial updates

New members of the board of directors

GGWash has recruited three new board members and anticipates bringing on another member by the end of the year. The new board members are:

- **Miti Figueredo** – Director of Public Affairs and Communications for the Purple Line Transit Partners
- **Dan Tangherlini** – former Administrator of the U.S. General Services Administration
- **David Harrington** – President and CEO of the Prince George’s County Chamber of Commerce

Advocacy strategy team

GGWash is putting together an advocacy strategy team and will be working with this team to decide which policy issues to prioritize.

Financial update

GGWash is currently on track to having revenue surpass expenses.

Open Philanthropy Project grant funding

In its first two fiscal years as a nonprofit, the following percentages of GGWash’s total funding came from the Open Philanthropy Project grant:

- **January-December 2015** – 75%¹
- **January-December 2016** – 56% (forecast)

Additional funding sources

1. **Other funding foundations** – GGWash has been developing relationships with other funding foundations and has received some funding from these sources. So far, this funding is not at the level of the Open Philanthropy Project grant.
2. **Corporate sponsorship program** – GGWash is working to formalize this.
3. **Underwriting blog content** – GGWash is interested in exploring a funding

¹ Note, the \$75,000 grant from Cari Tuna was received and booked in full by Greater Greater Washington in 2015, but is being spent down over the course of the two-year grant period.

model for the “breakfast links” it features every morning on its blog.

*All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at
<http://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/conversations>*