

**CITY OF ISSAQUAH
City Council Committee-of-the-Whole**

9:00 AM
January 31, 2026

MINUTES

Gibson Hall
105 Newport Way SW

COUNCIL AND ADMINISTRATIVE PERSONNEL PRESENT

Councilmembers:

Barbara de Michele, Council President
(Excused Absence)
Kelly Jiang
Russell Joe
Tola Marts, Deputy Council President
Kevin Nichols
Lindsey Walsh

Administration/Staff:

Mark Mullet, Mayor
Wally Bobkiewicz, City Administrator
Andrea Lehner, Deputy City Administrator
Tisha Gieser, City Clerk
Dale Markey-Crimp, Assistant to the City
Administrator
Kristin Garcia, Finance Director
Autumn Monahan, Administrative Services
Director
Minnie Dhaliwal, Community Planning &
Development Director
Alexis Fitzsimmons, Economic
Development Manager

CITY COUNCIL RETREAT

Mayor Mullet called the meeting to order at 9:04 AM.

a) **Welcome & Overview**

- Public Comment
- Welcome & Introductions
- Agenda Review
- Expectations of Time Together

Deputy Council President Marts made introductory comments.

The following public comment was provided:

- Christina Bruning, resident and Board President of the Downtown Issaquah Association, shared her desire to understand what is in store for the City.

Nancy Hetrick, facilitator from Raftelis, introduced her team members Sarah Lentz and Julie Gieseke.

A summary of the meeting discussion for each agenda item is included in the facilitator's report, which is attached to the minutes.

b) **Governing Together**

- Current norms and reasons for success
- What is good governance and how to sustain it

c) **Context Setting**

- Overview of City Councilmember one-on-one interviews

- Mayor's 2026 priorities

****Lunch******d) Priority Setting**

- City Council priorities
- Areas of strategic alignment
- What success looks like

e) Wrap-Up & Closing

- Key Outcomes
- Key Takeaways
- Public Comment (None)

Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at approximately 2:00 PM.

Tisha Gieser, City Clerk

City of Issaquah, WA

City Council Retreat

Held: January 31, 2026

The City of Issaquah held a City Council Retreat on January 31, 2026. The retreat was planned and facilitated by Raftelis in coordination with City Staff.

Participants

The following members of the City Council, Mayor Mullet, and City Administrator Wally Bobkiewicz actively participated in the workshop:

- Tola Marts, Deputy Council President
- Lindsey Walsh, Council Member
- Kelly Jiang, Council Member
- Paul Adair, Council Member
- Russell Joe, Council Member
- Kevin Nichols, Council Member
- Mark Mullet, Mayor
- Wally Bobkiewicz, City Administrator

Council President Barbara de Michele was absent.

Raftelis Facilitators: Nancy Hetrick, Sarah Lentz, and Julie Gieseke

Retreat Objectives

- Affirm good governance principles
- Understand context around Council priorities and interests
- Confirm priorities for next year
- Strengthen teamwork

Retreat Agenda

- Welcome and Retreat Overview
- Icebreaker
- Governing Together
- Strategic Alignment and Council Priorities
- Priority Setting
- Wrap-Up and Next Steps

Welcome and Retreat Overview

Mayor Mullet opened the meeting and gave time for public comments. Next, Deputy Council President Marts thanked participants for being there and shared remarks, addressing the absence of Council President de Michele and ensuring all participants of her involvement in the planning of the retreat. Deputy Council President Marts emphasized how Issaquah stands at a crossroads, with a new Mayor and new Council Members, and needs to create new rules of engagement to maintain the gold standard of governing. The Deputy Council President also highlighted the complex local, regional, and federal environments and urged members to work wisely on behalf of the City.

Following the remarks, Deputy Council President Marts introduced the workshop facilitator, Nancy Hetrick, who introduced the facilitation team and reviewed the agenda for the day, which was developed in consideration of Council input in pre-retreat interviews. The facilitator also introduced

the use of a time management tool called the Bike Rack, where items that require additional discussion or follow-up could be captured. The items placed on the Bike Rack are documented on page 10.

Expectations for Time Together

Next, the facilitator asked each participant to share their hopes and expectations for the day. Participants expressed a desire to establish rules of engagement for interactions and ensure the Council goes beyond just “good governance” to be exceptional. They also wanted to find agreement on key issues and create a unified front on policy to secure continued success in the region.



Icebreaker

As an icebreaker, participants were asked to write a headline they would like to see reported in the local newspaper one year from the retreat, January 31, 2027. The headlines are included below:

- “Valve software moves HQ and 5K jobs to Issaquah” (Marts)
- “Issaquah commits to large investments in parks, trails, and open space” (Mullet)
- “Council funding strengthens nonprofit safety net in Issaquah” (Joe)
- “Issaquah breaks ground on large affordable housing project” (Adair)
- “Issaquah Council removes barriers to housing; sees immediate success” (Walsh)
- “TOD breaks ground; TOD2 funding approved; partners identified” (Nichols)
- “Groundbreaking for first office-to-residential conversion housing on East side” (Jiang)



Governing Together

Following the icebreaker, the facilitator shared themes from the pre-retreat interviews to set the tone and foundation for the discussion on governing. When asked what they *loved* about being on Council, members identified many aspects, including the ability to solve hard problems, the desire to have a tangible impact, the collegiality of the body, being up-to-date on what is happening around the City, and preserving what people love about the community. When asked what members liked *least*, the list was short: meetings can be long, and there can be a lot of information to digest. The facilitator and group agreed that Issaquah’s Council is not the norm compared to other cities and has set a high bar of performance.

The facilitator then reviewed a handout on High-Performing vs. Struggling Councils (see Appendix A) and asked for reactions and observations. In general, participants found the handout helpful, especially the attributes of struggling councils to serve as reminders of potential pitfalls or blind spots that could put Issaquah at risk. One Council Member noted that in Issaquah, the governance standard is not to be merely high performing, but to be exceptional. Another expressed a desire to better utilize staff work plans and be more involved in their creation. In response, the chain of command and the existing communication channels were noted. Overall, the group reinforced the need for continued transparency and communication between the Council and the Administration.

Reflecting on Success

Building on the conversation of the Council's performance, the group shared what good (or exceptional) governance means to them. Participants agreed that good governance means working together to achieve the common good for the majority of Issaquah residents. This includes:

- **Transparency and accessibility** so residents can engage with City officials and understand decision-making, even if they disagree.
- **Balancing the needs of the community with individual interests** and considering many points of view when making a decision.
- **Exercising flexibility** and adapting when things are not working.

The group then considered what values are important to governing. Members found agreement on the following values:

- Communication and information sharing
- Unity
- Lack of ego
- Integrity
- Respect
- Preparedness
- Generative conflict
- Consensus votes (where possible)
- Effectiveness

When asked what they want the Council to be known for, members echoed on many of the same themes as above: effectiveness, accessibility, trust, and stewardship. Members also wanted to be known for their data-driven decision-making. Members discussed how the Council can improve its communication with residents, both to highlight positive accomplishments of the City and to engage on hard issues.

During this discussion, many items arose that required future action and follow-up from staff. These items can be found in the Bike Rack section later in this report.

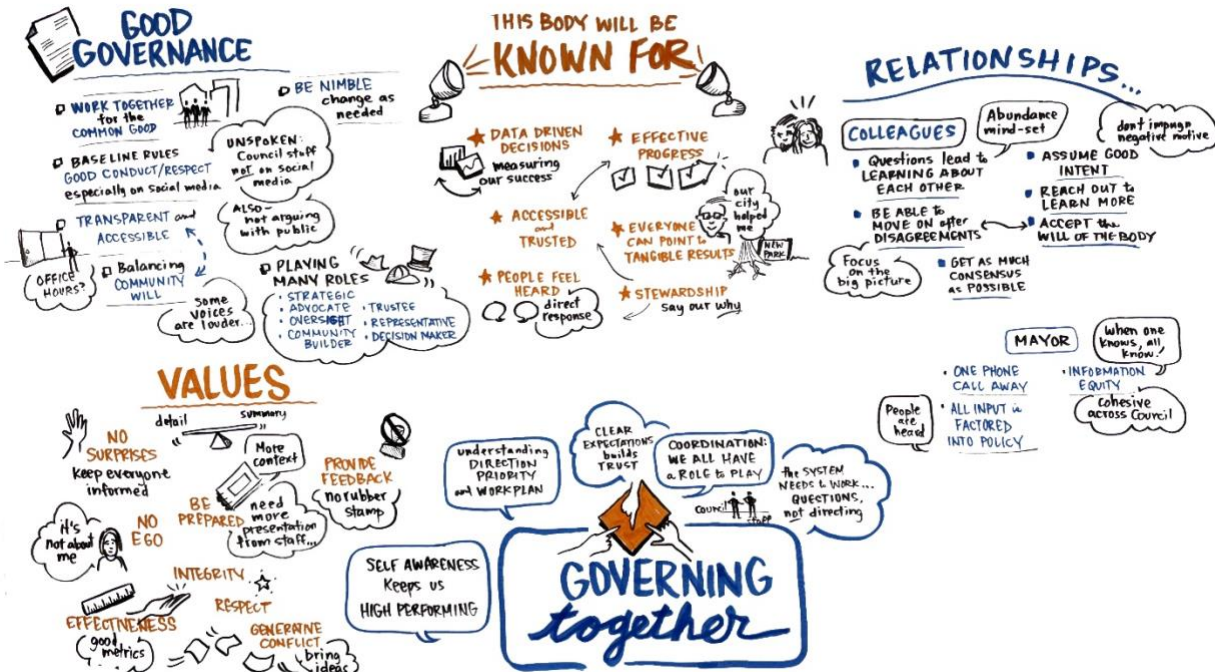
Governing Relationship

Next, the group specifically discussed the relationship among Council Members and with the Mayor. With new Council Members and a new Mayor, it was important to establish shared expectations for working together. Council Members expressed the following expectations:

- Collegiality
- Curiosity, an abundance-mindset
- Assumption of best intent

- Accepting the will of the body
- Focus on big picture vision, not minor, transactional details

When considering the relationship between the Council and the Mayor, members applauded the Mayor’s current efforts to be accessible and hoped they would continue. The group also discussed how the Mayor can ensure open and equal communication with *all* members regarding important issues. They agreed that information equity is an art, and they promised to continue working on it throughout the Mayor’s tenure. The following graphic captures the full discussion on Governing Together.



Strategic Alignment and Council Priorities

Moving to the Council’s priorities, the facilitator shared themes from pre-retreat interviews and framed the following key issues to garner feedback:

- **Housing affordability**, focused on land use code and permitting process improvements.
- **Transportation and mobility**, including a desire to reduce traffic impacts and address environmental concerns.
- **Fiscal sustainability** to keep an eye on the budget amid uncertainty and be effective financial stewards.
- **Public facilities**, including City Hall and the police station.
- **Parks and open spaces** to maintain quality and high performance.
- **Public safety and emergency management** to maintain effectiveness and continued support for the community.

Based on the initial framing, Council engaged in a rich discussion to clarify its interests. Members wanted to add a specific focus on jobs, as well as a broader discussion around the City’s goals for economic development. The Council also wanted to separate the Transit-Oriented Development Opportunity Center (TODOC) as a specific priority, disentangling it from the intersection of housing and transportation. One Council Member suggested a change in the framing of “fiscal sustainability” to “financial responsibility” to shift the focus from a scarcity mindset to one of growing the pie and exploring new revenue options.



After the Council’s discussion on the priorities, the Mayor added to the discussion and provided input on the Administration’s vision and plans for each priority. A summary of the Mayor’s input is below:

Priority Area	Mayor’s Comments
Transportation and Mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will focus on smaller projects to improve traffic (e.g., crosswalks, Newport bike trail) Long-term projects could include intelligent transportation systems Wants to prioritize noticeable improvements to increase resident satisfaction
Parks and Open Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possible parks levy extension Will come back to Council with a variety of projects the City could focus on
Housing Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledged the challenges in getting projects moving Difficult to understand mitigation fees and how to make them manageable for development Need to update code to make it easier to redevelop properties
Public Safety and Emergency Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needed investments to the police station; communicate to the public that those improvements link to the public’s safety
Public Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overlaps with public safety, specifically the police station
Customer Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledged as more of a priority for Administration rather than Council Will prioritize a change in the culture of City staff from a mindset of “no” to “how can we help?” Improve response to feedback from residents and business owners

The Mayor emphasized that it is the Administration’s role to figure out how to fund these priorities and advocated for utilizing bonding capacity to make key investments now. Overall, the Mayor hopes

to “walk and chew gum at the same time,” investing in long-term projects while making short-term, noticeable impacts for residents.

Before breaking for lunch, the facilitator gathered consensus on the top priorities to further discuss during the final hour of the retreat. The group agreed to the following order:

1. Housing
2. Economic Development
3. Transit-Oriented Development Opportunity Center (TODOC)
4. Transportation and Mobility

The group agreed that financial responsibility, public facilities, parks and open spaces, and public safety and emergency management are important, but have more consensus and can be tabled for later discussion. However, the group did briefly discuss emergency management and the need for clarity from the City on policies for dealing with possible incursions by the federal government, especially pertaining to Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations in Issaquah.

Priority Setting

When the group reconvened after a brief lunch break, they engaged in a detailed discussion of the top four priorities listed above: Housing, Economic Development, TODOC, and Transportation and Mobility. For each area, the group considered the following questions:

- What is the problem we’re trying to solve?
- What do you hope to accomplish in the next 12 months?



The City Administrator also provided feedback and next steps for each area. The following section summarizes the Council’s discussion and provides an overview of the Administration’s feedback.

Housing

In discussing the problem, the group debated what type of housing—market-rate or workforce—should be prioritized and how to create “natural affordability.” They also wondered how their existing code incentivizes rentals and smaller home ownership.

Looking ahead to what they hope to accomplish over the next 12 months, the Council Members and Mayor agreed to revisit City codes and identify barriers to development to find ways to streamline the process. Participants brainstormed an extensive list of possible barriers to investigate. These included:

- Parking requirements
- Self-certification
- Types of housing
- Floor-area-ratio
- Architectural standards
- Outdoor amenity space requirements
- Mandating underground utilities
- Tree code
- Road widths
- Impact fees

- Peer review
- Inclusionary zoning
- Setback requirements
- Wetland and stream buffer requirements
- Infill requirements
- Number of units per acre
- Transparency requirements
- Step backs
- Impervious surface requirements

The group liked the idea of bringing together key stakeholders in a roundtable setting to hear about challenges and how the City can increase development. They also expressed a desire to better track data to demonstrate progress and suggested the following metrics:

- Number of homes permitted in Central Issaquah
- Number of homes built in Central Issaquah
- Affordability data (where available)
- Size of homes built (rental and owned)

Administration Feedback and Next Steps

- Staff will review the list of code requirements and see what they can do on different timelines (three-month, six-month, nine-month)
- Much of the work will depend on staff capacity and resources
- The City has affordable housing money not yet delegated
- Plan to do a work plan through the end of 2026 and show Council at the March meeting
- Staff will come up with potential metrics and data sources
- Council has to decide if they are willing to pull back environmental restrictions to make development faster

Economic Development

Council Members agreed that in order to address the problem of economic development, they need to revisit the City's existing Economic Development Action Plan for 2024-2027 and determine if the goals are still applicable. The Council debated whether the focus of the economic development strategy should be on supporting small businesses or attracting major employers. Ultimately, members agreed that the main goal is to increase living wage jobs in Issaquah, whether that is through larger employers, small businesses, or other avenues.

The Administration will engage the Council in a review of the existing plan. The Council closed by noting the need to retain major employers like REI and Swedish.

Administration Feedback and Next Steps

- City will provide updates on headquarters and larger employers within the City
- Meeting to discuss Economic Development goals and strategies will be set by leadership for a future date

Transit-Oriented Development Opportunity Center (TODOC)

The discussion around the TODOC project was brief due to general consensus on the issues and key next steps. The Mayor provided an update to the Council on a minor concern between the private partner, Avalon Bay, and the King County Housing Authority, but reassured everyone that the project is moving forward.



Transportation and Mobility

In terms of transportation and mobility, Council Members want to improve street safety through smaller, manageable projects. This aligned with the Mayor's goal to focus on customer service throughout the City and increase resident satisfaction. The Council characterized the issue as congestion relief and discussed how to balance the focus on pedestrian mobility versus vehicle traffic.

All participants agreed that the most important goal for the next year is to continue strong advocacy for light rail expansion into Issaquah. Members also discussed the upcoming King County Metro levy and the importance of finding ways to ensure Issaquah sees a return on investment if it is to support it. Other projects that could be completed within this year are crosswalk improvements and new bike paths.

Administration Feedback and Next Steps

- The February 9 meeting will provide information on the following topics:
 - Pavement management program and pavement treatment techniques pilot program
 - Metro flex success measures and goals
 - Transportation Benefit District sales tax
 - Update on City's efforts with light rail
 - Small, high-impact projects for 2026-2027

The below graphic captures the full discussion on Priority Setting:



Wrap-Up and Next Steps

To wrap-up the session, the facilitator summarized the next steps, including the preparation of this report. The facilitator then asked each participant to share one word to describe how they are feeling and one thing they are most excited about for the next year. In general, the group expressed optimism (ranging from full-throttle to cautious), hope, excitement, thanks, and a feeling of action and progress. In terms of looking forward to the year ahead, the group was excited for developments in housing, TODOC, light rail, investments in trails and parks, and generally taking action and being responsive to residents.

The Deputy Council President, the Mayor, and the City Administrator each expressed thanks to all participants for their engagement in the retreat, and the meeting was officially adjourned.

Bike Rack

The following items were added to the Bike Rack as topics that required additional discussion or follow-up.

- Social media use guidelines/policy
- Council new business request process
- Staff presentations to Council
- Determining/updating metrics
- What Council public engagement looks like
- Emergency management and response policies

APPENDIX A:
**High-Performing vs. Struggling
Councils Handout**

City of Issaquah – City Council Workshop HANDOUT

A look at high-performing vs. struggling City Councils through four lenses: **Governance Culture, Strategic Focus, Relationship with the Administration, and Community Engagement.**

1. Governance Culture and Ethics

The Council’s primary power is legislative (law-making) and budgetary (policy and appropriation). High-Performing Councils understand they are the "Legislative Body," not the "Operations Managers."

High-Performing Councils	Struggling Councils
Unity of Purpose: May disagree on policy but respect the final vote and speak with one voice once a decision is made.	Fractured Factions: Voting blocks are predictable and rigid. Dissenting members often "campaign" against decisions after they are passed.
Respect for the Chain of Command: Go through the City Administrator or the Mayor’s Office to ensure requests are tracked and prioritized within the city’s actual budget and workload.	Informal Interference: Interfere in daily operations, bypass department heads, or try to direct the work of junior staff.
Professionalism: Debates are focused on issues, not personalities. High standards for ethics and decorum.	Personalized Conflict: Meetings are characterized by "grandstanding," personal insults, and political theater.

2. Strategic Focus vs. Reactive Oversight

The Council’s job is to set the destination; the Mayor and Administrator’s job is to drive the bus. High-Performing Councils focus on the map.

High-Performing Councils	Struggling Councils
Long-Term Vision: Are guided by long-term plans (e.g., Comprehensive Plan, Climate Action Plan, and Capital Improvement Plan) and also adhere to the adopted Annual Work Plan.	Short-Termism: Make decisions based on the loudest voices in the room at that moment.
Data-Driven Oversight: Are focused on results and ask for performance metrics to ensure the city is meeting its goals.	Governing by the Inbox: Base policy decisions on the loudest complaint, ignoring broader data or staff expertise.
Focus on Fiscal Sustainability: Ensure short-term budget decisions do not lead to long-term financial challenges or the inability to address needs.	Focus on Line-Item Expenses: Overemphasize small items while ignoring long-term structural deficits.

3. Relationship with the Administration

Success in a Mayor-Council model depends on a "no-surprises" relationship between the Council, the Mayor, and the City Administrator.

High-Performing Councils	Struggling Councils
Mutual Trust: View the Administration as partners in delivering services. The Council trusts staff expertise; staff feel safe providing "bad news" or honest assessments without fear of reprisal.	Climate of Fear: Staff are hesitant to provide honest data if it contradicts a member's agenda. High turnover in senior leadership may result.
Information Equity: Insist on a system where the Administrator briefs the entire Council equally, preventing "favored" members from having an edge.	Back-Channeling: Individual members cut "side deals" with the Mayor or the Administrator, leading to a breakdown of trust within the Council body.
Clear Expectations: Provide the Mayor with clear policy direction so the Administrator can execute projects without fear of the goalposts moving.	Vague or Shifting Goals: Provide contradictory direction, then criticize the Administration for failing to "read their minds."

4. Community Engagement and Transparency

How the Council represents the people to the Mayor—and the Mayor's plans to the people—is the ultimate test of high-performance.

High-Performing Councils	Struggling Councils
The "Bridge" Role: Act as a conduit, bringing neighborhood concerns to the Administration's attention through the proper, established channels.	The "Agitator" Role: Use constituent complaints to publicly "grandstand" or embarrass the Mayor/Staff during meetings.
Unified Advocacy: Respect the legitimacy of the process and support the city's ability to implement the decision once a majority of the Council votes.	Sowing Discord: Dissenting members actively work to undermine or sabotage projects after they have already been approved and funded.
Educational Leadership: Explains the "why" behind difficult trade-offs (e.g., why a tax increase is needed for a long-term benefit).	Populist Pandering: Avoids difficult truths to maintain popularity, leading to eventual systemic failure.

Summary

- High-Performing Councils realize that their power lies in collective action (votes) rather than individual interference (directing staff). Struggling Councils often fail because they try to act as "mini-Mayors," leading to a fragmented city government and a demoralized professional staff.
- Good governance attracts high-quality city staff, which leads to better services, increases resident trust, and attracts better candidates to run for Council. Struggling Councils drive away talented staff, which may lead to service degradation, increased resident frustration, and "protest candidates" winning seats; thus, continuing the cycle of friction.