

Geographical Planning
April 14, 2020
Public Participation Memo

With the ongoing COVID-19 situation, all of the topics included for this city commission meeting were related to the virus. I watched the meeting that took place on March 18, 2020 at 10:00 a.m. This meeting took place at the Bozeman Council Chambers and included the legislative department. Since this meeting happened right after the stay-at-home order was put into place in Montana, two commission members were attending the meeting telephonically. Also, members of the general public were able to attend the meeting online and state their concerns through the phone.

The first issue discussed was Resolution 5159, the decision to declare an emergency situation in Bozeman and the Gallatin Valley. Because of the Coronavirus, more funding and resources are needed in the valley. This declaration of emergency would allocate more resources and funding to the city of Bozeman. This declaration follows a national declaration of emergency given by the president, and a declaration of emergency in the state of Montana presented by the governor. The last step in this process was for Bozeman to declare an emergency. Throughout the meeting, the reasons for this new declaration were continuously explained. The goal of this repeated explanation was to make it very clear to the public what this declaration means and what impacts it would have on their lives. It was also extensively recognized that the current steps taken toward the pandemic have been thoroughly thought out, and lots of outside consultation from agencies such as the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has taken place. Different commissioners asked many questions just so that this declaration was made extremely clear to the public. None of the commissioners expressed concerned over the ordinance, but there were some questions about the involvement of surrounding cities such as Belgrade and West Yellowstone. This resolution passed, and the city of Bozeman was put into a state of emergency.

The next issue discussed was Ordinance 2047, “adopt an emergency ordinance of the city of Bozeman granting temporary authority to the city manager to approve contracts and expenditures in furtherance of emergency declaration and suspending state and local procurement requirements.” This ordinance would give most power in the future to the city manager. This is done as a precaution, as having all commissioners in the council chambers building puts these city officials at risk of contracting the Coronavirus. By giving power to the city manager, less people would need to be present for decision making regarding COVID-19. This ordinance would also postpone all future non-essential agenda items. Only issues involving the virus are to be discussed throughout the next 90 days under this ordinance. Some officials were concerned that they wouldn’t be consulted about future decisions, but the city manager assured them that they will be consulted, just not face to face in the council chambers. This ordinance also passed with a 5/5 vote.

Throughout the meeting, every council member was extremely thorough in their explanations. This was because they know that members of the public are very worried about this situation, so clear communication between council members and the public is required. They were also sure to ask any potential questions. For example, the deputy mayor expressed concern that the COVID Hotline for Bozeman was not accessible after 5:00 p.m. She asked if there were any other people members of the public could contact about this issue after 5:00. The city

manager then gave a list of other contacts. These types of questions make it very clear to the public what is going on.

Analyzing public participation during an event is very interesting, as the public does not have much say in this situation. Council members gave members of the Bozeman community the opportunity to call in during the meeting and ask any questions about the ordinances that they might have. Despite this option, no phone calls were received, and no input was given by the community. I do not think this is due to a lack of public participation, but rather due to the fear around the whole situation. We as a community have taken advice given by officials, and followed any rules set into place due to this new virus. I think that Bozeman community members have faith in decisions made regarding this situation. If this were a meeting about a new traffic pattern, or a new school being built, I am sure that multiple people would have called and given their opinion, as these are highly opinionated issues. But with a public emergency such as this, people seem to listen to officials. I would be curious to see if there would be more public participation if questions were asked in person instead of telephonically.

With issues so unique like those discussed above, it is difficult to apply a level of public participation to Arnstein's ladder. Usually, I would agree that Bozeman community planners involve the community in ways described at the top of the ladder. But now, community involvement lies somewhat lower. For this specific meeting from March 18 that I watched, very little participation or involvement by the public took place. A majority of participation included informing and consultation levels, or rungs three and four. From the Arnstein's Ladder reading, the informing level of the ladder involves the one-way flow of information from government officials to the citizens. In this meeting, the council members stated that Bozeman is in a state of emergency, and citizens had no say in this. This is because declaring an emergency is a very strict thing and many guidelines are followed. It is just too complex for citizens to have much say in. I think that the council members did a very good job of informing the public on what this declaration means. I also agree that this decision is not one that should be made by the public, but by informed, educated government officials. The consultation rung of Arnstein's ladder is also included, because officials give community members the option to call them either during or outside the time of the meeting. At the end of the meeting I watched, the mayor even encourages all members of the public to call him with any questions or concerns that they might have. It is not that the city of Bozeman is not involving their citizens, it is just that there is not a lot that the community can be involved in during a situation like this.

Additionally, the public was given no say in the decision to transfer powers to the City Manager. Again, this was an action that needed to be done in response to COVID-19. Quick action was needed, and this gives the City Manager enough power to allocate resources in a way that is needed. It should be noted that the City Manager is following strict guidelines and is not making the decisions all by himself. I agree with the council's decision to transfer this power, and I think it is necessary given the current conditions.

For the city of Bozeman, I would recommend that more mediums for public concern are created. This could be in the form of more COVID Hotlines, online forums, and online surveys. I think that the public's opinion does matter in this situation, even though it is very much a top-down decision-making process. As this state of emergency continues into the coming months, the opinions and viewpoints of Bozeman's community members should be taken more into account. This lockdown will likely have a great impact in the overall mental health of our community, and city officials should know how to allocate this.

This is a time where the say of the general public is not extensively taken into account, and officials are making most of the decisions. This is very necessary for the health of our community. Although the declaration of emergency may not be ideal, the citizens must follow the guidelines put in place by the City of Bozeman. Overall, public involvement is on the lower side of Arnstein's ladder, but this could change as we move into the future.

No meeting agenda was available for this meeting, so below is the table of contents instead:

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- Agenda
- Resolution 5159, Ratify the Interim City Manager's Declaration of Emergency for Covid-19 Pandemic
 - Resolution 5159 Memo
 - Resolution 5159
 - Covid-19 Emergency Declaration

- Ordinance 2047, Adopt an Emergency Ordinance of the City of Bozeman Granting Temporary Authority to the City Manager to Approve Contracts and Expenditures in Furtherance of Emergency Declaration and Suspending State and Local Procurement Requirements (4/5 Vote Required)
 - Ordinance 2047 Memo
 - Ordinance 2047