



Key Takeaways

- Mayoral transitions are a challenging affair, with hundreds of personnel, structural and policy decisions required to be made in a very short period of time.
- There are different ways to structure a transition team, ranging from a tight circle of advisers to a more expansive network of committees representing the diverse interests of a city.
- Transition subcommittees can be an effective tool when designed properly. Too large, the subcommittee can be unwieldy and unproductive. It is important to have a subcommittee large enough to include a diversity of backgrounds and perspectives, but small enough to allow for substantive conversations and policy solutions to be developed.
- An effective transition team will help focus and define an incoming executive's policy agenda. A transition subcommittee can research and consult subject matter experts and help turn campaign promises into sharper, more achievable policy recommendations.
- The transition period can also provide an opportunity to solicit feedback and buy-in from the electorate through public meetings and town halls. Giving residents a voice in the transition helps create a sense of partnership and buy-in to the work of the Mayor.
- Transitions require significant financial resources beyond the provision of documents and briefings outgoing administrations typically provide.

Column 1 – Models of Transition and Governance

Political campaigns, at least competitive ones, are an exercise in madness. After months of an endless grind of campaign events, the candidate and their team sprint to the finish line. They work around the clock, knowing that if they lose, they're all unemployed. Then, if they win a prize like the Mayor's office in Philadelphia, they confront the daunting task of taking over an organization with more than 20,000 employees and a dizzying set of governing responsibilities, in a hurry.

The Committee of Seventy offered four transition training sessions to the 2023 Mayoral candidates. Senior staff of the eventual winner, Mayor Chelle Parker, attended the first session, which focused on the transition process itself. It was led by three experts who have guided governmental transitions across the country.

Michelle Thomas has worked on governmental transitions since 2006, when she helped then-Mayor Cory Booker take the reins in Newark, New Jersey. One question an incoming executive faces is what kind of transition structure to create – a tight circle of trusted advisors who can be nimble and make decisions quickly, or a sprawling network of committees involving political, civic and community leaders?

“We’ve done it with 300 people assigned to committees and subcommittees, and we’ve done it with 25,” Thomas said. “Our recommendation is always to cast a wide net and to have your transition team reflect the entire diversity of your city.”

The Parker team clearly chose the expansive route in forming her transition team, [enlisting close to 600 members](#) in the effort. The transition team was led by a number of senior advisors and organized into a twenty-three person steering committee, with thirteen subcommittees dedicated to specific policy areas.

In designing an effective transition team, Thomas said she’s found over the years that too many members on policy subcommittees can be unwieldy. “The sweet spot is really about 12 [members],” she said, “because then you can have more rich conversations, and committee members can build relationships and solve problems together.”

Thomas also cited the importance of having a diversity of stakeholders represented in each subject area. She described working with Steven Reed, who became the first Black mayor of Montgomery, Alabama in 2019. “His economic development committee included the most wealthy landowner in the state of Alabama and a nonprofit community development corporation leader and every kind of body in between,” Thomas said.

Ideally, an effective transition team will help focus and define an incoming executive’s policy agenda. Thomas said Reed’s transition team came up with more than 60 recommendations, and Reed managed to get them implemented in his first term, including an increase in real estate taxes approved by voters to improve the city’s schools.

When asked how much weight an incoming mayor should give to a transition committee’s policy recommendations as opposed to promises made during her campaign, Thomas said, “that’s exactly what the transition is for, isn’t it? How you move from politics to policy.”

“When we’re managing transitions, we read news clips and the candidate’s platform and get an understanding of what was promised in the campaign, then align those [promises] with the conversations happening in the transition subcommittees,” she said. Having a transition subcommittee do research and consult subject matter experts on a campaign promise can turn it into a sharper, more achievable policy recommendation, she said.

The session also heard from Cleo Hirsch, a Senior Fellow at the Maryland Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement. Hirsch was Director of Maryland Governor Wes Moore’s 2022 transition to office. The Moore transition operation was, well, big.

“Our core tenets were to be the most diverse and inclusive transition in Maryland’s history,” Hirsch said, “and during the three- to four-month process, we engaged close to 10,000 people.”

That included 265 members of the core transition committee, 2,559 people who signed up as “at-large” members to submit input, thousands more who applied for jobs and board appointments, and more than 5,000 who participated in town hall meetings. That might sound like a transition mob, but Hirsch said it was thoughtfully designed.

Facilitators at the town hall meetings divided attendees into break-out sessions for in-depth discussion “so it wasn’t everyone just waiting their turn to speak for two minutes, but rather a more authentic sort of dialogue,” Hirsch said. The result was a set of detailed policy proposals, many of which were adopted by the legislature.

It was a lot of work to manage, Hirsch acknowledged, “but it was worth it because people felt seen and heard, and they felt just as excited about the incoming administration on inauguration day as they did on election night.” The Moore transition team and the Maryland Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement drew on their experience to produce a [Civic Transition Toolkit](#) to assist other elected officials.

Andrea Batista Schlesinger, a partner at HR&A Advisors who advises city leaders on governmental transitions, also spoke at the session.

Despite different approaches, one thing everyone interviewed agreed upon is that mayoral transitions need serious funding – for staff, executive search firms and other expenses - and far too little is available from public sources. In Philadelphia, the incoming mayor can form a transition committee and solicit private donations, but they’re confined to the same contribution limits that apply to political campaigns.

City Ethics Board Executive Director Shane Creamer said the restriction is there for the same reason campaign contributions are limited. “If someone contributes a six-figure donation to transition expenses, there’s a potential that money could influence decision-making in the future,” he said.

Parker transition committee co-director Aren Platt said they have experienced staff working long hours as volunteers because there’s no source of funding to pay for them. And he said it’s a bad use of a Mayor-elect’s time to spend hours on the phone soliciting contributions within the legal limits to fund her transition effort. “I think the laws as currently written do not take into account the realities and the benefits of a strong, well-funded transition operation,” Platt said.

Thomas agreed, and said there’s a way to share the burden. “In an ideal world the publicly-funded part would be the outgoing administration developing transition documents for the incoming executive,” she said. “Engaging the community in policy recommendations is something that private philanthropy should pay for.” In Philadelphia, outgoing mayor Jim Kenney created [a transition committee](#) to provide information and assistance to his successor. While this is a good first step, more could be done in preparation for the next mayoral transition.

Hirsch said one reason transition funding doesn’t get addressed by local governments is that officials in office who would have to get it approved have already fought their way through the transition process, and won’t have to do it again. “It’s like this chaotic and often painful process, but one way or another you get through it,” Hirsch said, “and then your priorities are elsewhere

and nobody really has the motivation to think about transition.” In short, there’s little incentive to spend political capital to help the as-yet unknown mayor who will succeed you.

Hirsch said support from local civic groups, like this one, could make a difference. “The Committee of Seventy resources and supports transitions in Philadelphia in a really profound way that doesn’t exist [in] most places,” she said. “I think it really is special, and I think it would be really cool to think about the broader policy implications of that and how you could propose legislation to ground that more in law and publicly available resources.”

Dave Davies is a journalist who spent decades covering Philadelphia politics and government. He is currently a contributor to NPR’s Fresh Air with Terry Gross.

Additional Resources

- [Civic Transition Toolkit](#)
- [Mayor-Elect Chelle Parker Transition Information](#)
- [Steven L. Reed Mayoral Transition Report](#), Montgomery, Alabama, 2019
- [Governor Wes Moore Transition Report](#), Maryland, 2022