

Meeting of the 2025 Allegheny County Government Review Commission

Date: Wednesday, December 3, 2025

Time: 6:00 PM

Location: 206 County Courthouse, 436 Grant St, Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Present: Rohit Acharya, Member; Matthew Barron, Member; Tracey McCants Lewis, Member; William McKain, Member; Evan Frazier, Member; Gretchen Moore, Member; Mark Foerster, Member; Robert Vescio, Member; Michael Witherel, Member; James Reid, Allegheny County; Ernest Rajakone, Allegheny County; David Lassman, Carnegie Mellon University; Robert Helwig, Allegheny County; Ken Varhola, Allegheny County; Brett Scruton, Member of the Public; Ben Murphy, Carnegie Mellon University

I. Call to Order

Rohit Archarya, Chairman of the Commission, called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m..

II. Roll Call

Acharya conducted a roll call, with all members of the commission indicating their presence.

III. Pledge of Allegiance

The members stood and recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

IV. Restatement of Purpose of the Government Review Commission

Acharya introduced a PowerPoint presentation to guide the meeting. Acharya restated the purpose of the commission: to study and evaluate the charter and county government in the service of providing advisory recommendations through its final report submitted to the people of the county.

V. Welcome and Opening Remarks

Acharya welcomed the committee. Acharya expressed his enthusiasm for collaborating with all members of the commission. Acharya noted that himself and Vice Chairman Mark Foerster had a couple meetings since the previous commission meeting to discuss the process for the commission's work. Acharya expressed a strong sense of alignment between himself and Foerster on this

matter. Acharya expressed a desire for commission input on its work processes. Acharya encouraged all members to feel comfortable using the listserv for communicating information to fellow commissioners.

VI. Public Comment on Agenda Items

Acharya asked if there were any members of the public who would like to comment on agenda items. Brett Scruton, a state organizer representing a non-profit organization, Common Cause Pennsylvania, indicated he would like to comment.

Scruton introduced himself to the commission and introduced two policy proposals related county redistricting: abolition of prison gerrymandering and the establishment of an independent redistricting commission.

Scruton explained prison gerrymandering as a redistricting practice of counting incarcerated individuals as part of the population in the district in which their prison or jail is situated rather than their home address. Scruton proposed that Allegheny County institute an ordinance against this practice.

Scruton stated that Allegheny County's politically-appointed redistricting commission makes its redistricting process susceptible to gerrymandering. Scruton proposed that Allegheny County adopt an independent citizens' redistricting commission.

Scruton expressed Common Cause Pennsylvania's wish for the commission to consider these proposals for its recommendations. Scruton provided physical copies of his comment and policy memos on these topics.

The commission thanked Scruton for his comments.

VII. Approval of Minutes

Acharya asked the commission for any comments on an approval of minutes from the previous meeting.

Gretchen Moore indicated that the draft minutes inaccurately referenced a likely 6-month timeline for the commission's work. Acharya concurred that this was inaccurate. Moore suggested a revision to state there was a general discussion of the timeline.

Foerster made a motion to approve the minutes with revisions. Moore seconded the motion. Acharya put the motion to a vote. All members voted aye.

VIII. Discussion of Commission Process and Methodology

Acharya began a discussion of the commission's process and methodology. Acharya explained the Brainstormer, Architect, Carpenter, Judge framework for developing ideas based on freely generating ideas, implementing structure, refining ideas, and evaluation at the end rather than the beginning.

Acharya introduced a hypothetical timeline for the commission's work, where a final report is released in November 2026 and finalized in October 2026; and recommendations approved in September 2026 and finalized in August 2026.

Acharya opened a discussion surrounding the hypothetical timeline as well as logistical questions of the commission, such as frequency of commission meetings and committee meetings, in-person and remote options, and time of day for meetings.

Robert Vescio stated that the commission timeline will be predicated on committee timelines. Vescio added that viewing November 2026 as a goal rather than a timeline would be ideal.

Moore noted a need to spend time to ensure due diligence through speaking and listening to a wide range of people. This includes speaking to former commissioners about what worked and didn't work from prior commissions.

Tracey McCants Lewis commented on the time involved in gathering information and scheduling meetings. McCants Lewis noted that the commission could be waiting for information from sources outside of its control and may want flexibility to account for that.

Robert Helwig noted that the commission must submit its report within 1 year of appointment.

McCants Lewis stated that in an experience on the prior commission, flexibility for a committee was necessary.

Helwig asked if there were ways for the commission to speed up delayed responses to request. McCants Lewis mentioned that the commission had gone through multiple channels.

Evan Frazier asked about the consequences of not finishing the report within 1 year. Helwig stated that there is not a consequence, but the charter specifies this requirement.

James Reid stated that reassessment is a pressing matter for the county as there are active lawsuits surrounding this topic. Reid noted that the ability of the commission to form useful consensus and influence policy decisions on items such as reassessment and the county's climate action plan would be appreciated. Ernest Rajakone commented that a prioritization of workstreams could be a good idea.

Foerster recommended that the commission be unaffected by political pressures and be primarily focused on doing a thorough job with all the time available.

Vescio commented that the commission should be aligned on a philosophy of short-term vs. a ten-year view of the county. Vescio stated that lawsuits of some sort will always be present. Vescio stated that the commission should be focused on realistic, nimble recommendations, especially as pertains to economic development and taxes.

Evan Frazier stated that the commission will need to have a strong understanding the trends within Allegheny County to have more context for their recommendations.

Acharya began a discussion of two active resource workstreams for the commission: 1) a project to benchmark Allegheny County with other counties in the United States with Acharya as a commission lead and Ben Murphy and Nate Edenfield as resource leads and 2) a review of prior commissions' recommendations with Robert Helwig as a resource lead.

McCants Lewis stated that she would be happy to get in contact with law clinics at University of Pittsburgh and Duquesne University for resource help.

Acharya asked David Lassman about resource capacity for Carnegie Mellon University students. Lassman responded that work-study typically involves about 10 hours per week, confirmed by Ben Murphy. Lassman stated that we could incorporate more students as necessary.

Acharya explained that each workstream will have a commission lead and encouraged commissioners to think about what type of workstreams they would like to lead.

IX. Review of Past Government Review Commissions

Acharya turned it over to Helwig to discuss his work on the review of past commission recommendations.

Helwig referenced a spreadsheet sent to the commission to summarize recommendations, relevant documents, and actions taken related to the recommendations for both the 2005 commission and 2015 commission. Helwig noted the actions taken portion is not exhaustive. Helwig commented that he had not incorporated case law yet. Helwig noted that mergers and consolidation had been involved in a recommendation for the 2005 commission but not the 2015 commission.

Acharya asked how many recommendations from these commissions were adopted. Foerster stated of the 22 recommendations of the 2015 commission, few were implemented. Foerster stated that it is possible there were too many recommendations.

McCants Lewis agreed that a lower number of recommendations could be better provided they are thorough.

Acharya commented that the report should be engaging to public in its legibility and persuasiveness. Acharya noted that the investigation process for these topics should be included in the report.

Frazier asked how the 2015 recommendations were shared with the public. Foerster responded that the commission made a presentation to the city council and to the executive.

McCants Lewis noted that there are more opportunities now to connect with the public via social media.

Foerster stated that there could be an opportunity for a press conference at the end of the commission's work.

Matthew Barron stated that a committee could look at public outreach.

Moore asked for more details on what the investigation process might look like. Acharya responded that the county executive and city council are putting together a list of items to look at. Acharya also mentioned the All in Allegheny plan published in 2023 as a reference. Foerster stated that each committee can engage in the investigation process as they see fit, such as having elected officials or executive departments come in. Vescio asked if these appearances were at the committee level. Foerster responded affirmatively.

Barron asked how sunshine laws relate to committees. Helwig responded that he would look into it further.

Ken Varhola, Chief of Staff for Allegheny County Council, asked if there would be votes for committees. Acharya responded affirmatively. Varhola stated that sunshine laws would be in effect.

McCants Lewis asked if Zoom would be allowed for committee meetings. Helwig responded that he would look into this.

On the topic of the recommendations review, Moore asked if there was knowledge on why some recommendations did not have any action taken. Varhola responded that some part of it related to actions being in the hands of officials.

Varhola introduced himself as Chief of Staff for the County Council. Varhola offered staff help, including that of Jared Barker, Director of Legislative Services for the County Council. Varhola stated that he would email the listserv his contact information.

Moore indicated that she was interested in being the commission lead for the recommendations review workstream. Acharya stated that Moore is the lead now for that workstream.

X. Review of Topics

Acharya initiated a review of topics for consideration for the commission. Acharya stated that he received a list of topics from commissioners and employees. Acharya's presentation displayed these topics in the form of problem statements.

Acharya presented public health topics such as county funding and capacity constraints; pandemic readiness plans; and post-COVID service demand changes.

Acharya presented municipal government topics such as county vs. state funding issues such as can be seen with a Court of Common Pleas history; first-class county vs. second-class county implications; and fragmentation of services over many municipalities. William McCain asked if this was in reference to authorities or municipalities. Acharya responded that it was mostly in reference to municipalities.

McCain commented that disincorporation and consolidation had been important topics in Pennsylvania. McCain stated that Pennsylvania has the most units of government in the nation. McCain noted that the appetite for reducing the units of government may be stronger now than in the past.

Vescio asked what a realistic recommendation for disincorporation and consolidation might look like. McCain noted that combining police forces has seen some success in the state.

Michael Witherel commented that the commission getting into this topic will provoke strong opinions from the public. McCain commented that police chiefs would be displeased. Barron stated that he would not mind that.

Witherel stated that he had recently represented Wilkinsburg on matter related to this topic.

Vescio stated that it is important to not have these topics viewed as bail-outs for cities.

Varhola stated that Pitcairn and Monroeville had issues with infrastructure as relates to consolidation.

Acharya presented a topic related to public facility and stadium agreements.

Acharya presented a topic on cybersecurity and AI in government. Acharya noted the need to balance increased efficiency and ensuring due process. Frazier asked if any counties are examples of balancing this right now. Acharya responded that he had recently judged a case competition related to AI in government and noted an emphasis on being careful about AI's usefulness in government being about synthesizing rather than generating. Barron noted that he had been working with a San Jose-based company, GovAI, that was a leader in this space.

Acharya presented a topic on economic development, land-use, and workforce systems; and opportunities to harmonize countywide administrative policies.

Acharya presented a topic related to the current property assessment system not providing a predictable, regular, equitable, or fully modernized approach.

Acharya presented a topic on the governance structure of the county not fully reflecting the Home Rule Charter or the needs of a modern county.

Vescio stated that it will be important for public comment on topics to happen early and that there should be a timeline on that.

Moore commented that a type of town hall could be beneficial.

McCants Lewis stated that the commission will be getting some type of public comment through the whole process.

Vescio commented that submissions for public comment in writing could be ideal. Vescio recommended that there be a due date ideally in January for a public comment to be considered as a topic of study for the commission.

Ernest Rajakone offered his help on this effort to collect public comments.

Barron stated that digital tools would be good for this effort, as it could help to open the comments as wide as possible.

Vescio stated that the commission would want to avoid some repetitiveness of comments being very similar to All in Allegheny, for instance.

Acharya stated that mid-January would be a good timeline for having the public comment tool implemented.

Foerster asked how the commission will design the tool for public comment. James Reid responded that the commissioners could be involved in what it looks like in terms of geographic representations and in-person opportunities.

Acharya commented that the public comment heard from Common Cause Pennsylvania at this meeting was ideal.

Barron stated that the commission can work with county IT to have a web form pushed out. Barron noted that the commission will need to decide on parameters and how to be specific.

Acharya asked how much time would be ideal for public comment through this channel. McCants Lewis responded that three weeks would be ideal.

Acharya asked if there was a commissioner who would like to lead this workstream. Barron volunteered as lead. McCants Lewis also indicated wanting to be involved.

XI. Public Comment on General Items

Rajakone stated that no public comment on general items had been requested.

XII. Adjournment

Before adjourning, Acharya asked the commission for input on meeting time and format. Acharya indicated an openness to Zoom and also suggested working lunches as a good option.

McCants Lewis noted having responsibilities for evening hockey games for the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Acharya stated that 1.5 hours would be an ideal block of time for meetings.

Acharya stated that he will send out a poll to get a better understanding of commissioner preferences.

At 7:46 p.m., McCants Lewis motioned to adjourn the meeting. Frazier seconded the motion.