

Audit Review Survey Critique and How to Improve

An open letter to Portland's Office of Management and Finance

Overview

After many years of community research, advocacy, and members of the public raising concerns about the lack of transparency, accountability, and harm caused by the City of Portland's Enhanced Services Districts (ESDs), we are excited to see progress being made by the City to finally involve community members in Portland to be involved in shaping the future of ESDs. Even if it's long overdue.

How this process unfolds has significant impacts on those of us who live (including and especially unhoused people), work, and spend time within the districts, which is why we have stayed critical of the ESD audit review process since the day the audit was published. Too often, the City of Portland's attempts to do public outreach for various public policy, programs, etc. have felt like an afterthought.

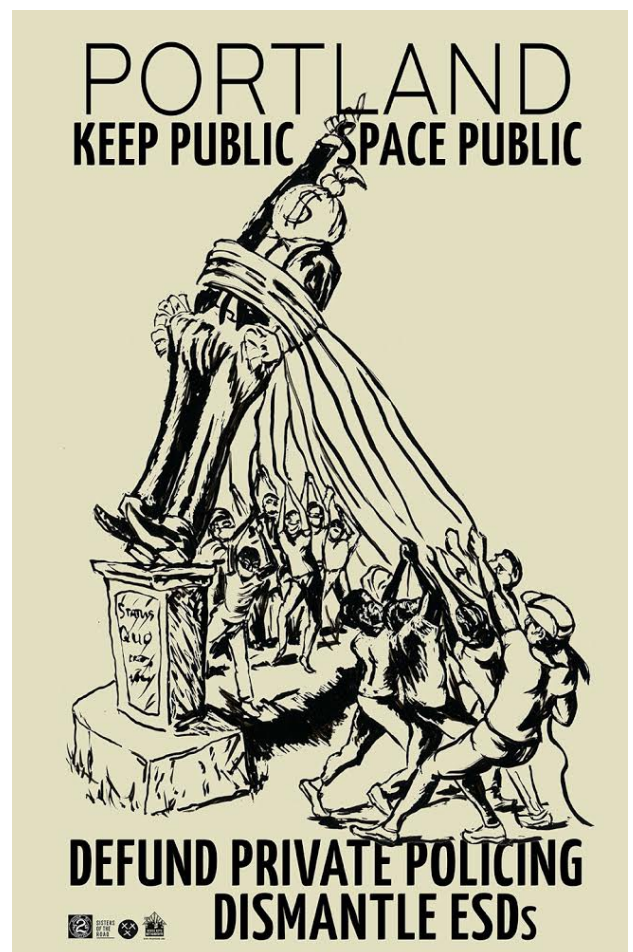
This time we have a chance to do it right.

Much of the process thus far has been a major improvement from the process that unfolded during the Clean & Safe contract renewal process last year. For example, we appreciate the listening sessions being open zoom meetings, allowing for two way conversations, as opposed to closed off zoom rooms where participants are only allotted a few minutes to speak while their microphones are controlled by the host.

With that said, we still have concerns with how the public input portion of the audit response is playing out thus far.

In particular, we have several critiques regarding the survey drafted to gather public input. For most of us, even those of us who are extremely knowledgeable about ESDs, we found ourselves struggling to fill out this survey.

Our purpose for writing this critique is not only to express our frustration and concerns with the current survey, but also to help you, Office of Management and Finance (OMF), improve upon the next survey you intend to release in August as part of the second round of gathering public input for this historic and extremely significant audit review process.



Accessibility Concerns

Arguably, the most daunting part of filling out this survey for many of us was just how long it is. We understand how comprehensive the issue is, but regardless, many people are not going to fill out a survey if it's going to take them 15 minutes or more (which for several of us it took over an hour). This is especially difficult when there is no option to skip questions or any way to save your answers and return to the survey. There is also no indication of how much progress you have made towards finishing the survey. With a long survey, eventually people are going to get tired of it and may start quickly selecting answers without putting much thought into it in order to just finish, if they bother to complete it at all. This means the answers collected are likely not representative of the actual opinions of the people who filled it out.

If you really wanted to cover such a wide breadth of topics it would make more sense to split the survey into multiple shorter surveys on the varying topics. That way if people feel strongly about certain topics they can fill out those surveys without having to answer all **77 questions** you posed in this survey. Much like how the listening sessions were designed in a way to allow people to choose to go to the listening sessions focused on topics they want to provide feedback on, why wasn't this done with the surveys?

The very first question posed in the survey exposes a huge flaw in the survey design. It asks for the person filling it out to provide their name, email, and subsequently we are required to share demographic information. This does not allow people to anonymously fill out the survey which is something many people may feel more comfortable doing. Lack of anonymity can influence how people answer questions because they do not want their name attached to the answer provided.

Another glaring reason this survey raises accessibility concerns is because the survey can only be filled out online. This excludes anyone who does not have access to a computer or a reliable internet connection. Additionally, the survey and the explanatory slide decks are not formatted for cell phones and are cumbersome and difficult to navigate without a larger screen. These aspects are especially a concern when one of the main issues with ESDs, which prompted the audit in the first place, is their treatment of unhoused people. Making the survey fully online excludes a lot of people living on the streets who may not have access to an online survey. The lack of cell phone accessibility is also discriminatory towards anyone who does not have regular access to a larger computer or tablet screen.

The survey is also only available in English, excluding many people whose first language is not English. We were told at the first listening session translation of the survey would be available upon request but considering how many Spanish speakers live, work, and spend time in ESDs, at the very least Spanish translation could have been provided pre-emptively.

Finally, the survey provides information and links for people to find more information regarding the various functions of ESDs, however, having to navigate outside the survey for terminology and explanations adds another layer making it more difficult for people to participate in the survey.

Problematic Framing of Questions

Beyond the accessibility concerns barring people from filling out the survey, we believe the survey did not allow enough opportunity for people to provide their own, unique ideas. Instead, the survey was framed in a way where people had to rate their thoughts on predetermined potential recommendations. This would make more sense for the second survey where people are presented with the draft recommendations to give feedback on, but we would have rather seen the initial part of the public input gathering stage to be from the bottom up versus the top down (i.e. allowing people to come up with their own ideas versus presenting a list of ideas for people to choose from).

We recognize the very last question at the end of the survey allows people to write in whatever they want, but for many, they are not going to remember every idea they thought of while filling out the survey. Having open-ended questions interspersed throughout the survey could have allowed more opportunity for people to share their own unique ideas instead of just going along with the limited visions OMF has for the future of ESDs in Portland.

This is one of our predominant concerns we have about how the “Governance” section is framed. There is a list of pre-determined possible governance structures for people to rate. Since this is only the beginning of the public input process for the audit response, this doesn’t allow space for community members to express their own unique ideas for potential governance. By itself, it’s not terrible to have people rate their thoughts on different ideas regarding how ESDs are governed; **however** these questions should have been followed up with the option for people to either write in their own ideas or get into the nuance of why they answered the questions the way they did.

We also found the survey to be filled with loaded and leading questions, revealing the inherent biases of those who designed it. This was not only apparent in the questions themselves, but also the way some of the sections of the survey were introduced.

For example, we took issue with the framing of the section introducing “allowable programs”. The section asks participants to “rate each of the following programs based upon your general view of each.” **This does not specify people should rate the programs based on whether or not they think ESDs should be the entity to provide these services, but rather what people think generally of these services.** We understand this may not have been your intention, but it does make it very confusing for those of us filling it out.

Many of the services listed are things people are generally supportive of but may be opposed to ESDs providing those services. Due to the framing of this section people may answer saying they are “highly supportive” of some of the services despite not wanting ESDs to be in charge of those services. As a result, the City may take these answers and recommend ESDs continue these services while it’s entirely possible many of the people who chose “highly supportive” don’t actually support that recommendation.

The prior section, focused on governance, is introduced with a statement that reads: ***“The primary challenge of governance structures is balancing the need to have rigid forms of oversight while retaining flexibility needed for adaptability and innovation beyond the confines of Citywide policies and programs.”***

This statement, in and of itself, is extremely biased. Not everyone may consider this to be the primary challenge. Inserting an opinion statement before introducing the questions can play a role in influencing how people respond to the following questions. This is not the only example of this kind of statement being used to introduce survey questions. Another example includes: ***“The primary challenge of representation are ensuring those affected by the district's programs have a voice in how they are run while maintaining the voice of those who pay the property management license fee.”***

This statement assumes that we must maintain the voice of those who pay into the ESD. Depending on how you read it, it can also imply that ratepayers should have a major say in how ESDs are governed by virtue of having the privilege and wealth to own property downtown. From our perspective, the inherent design of ESDs is fundamentally flawed because they are set up in a way to prioritize the voices of property owners in determining what happens in public space. For those of us who believe this, the voice of ratepayers is not of major concern to us as the survey would lead us to believe.

Again, both of these statements kick off the next section with the opinion of the survey designers, whether intentionally or not, this can influence how participants approach the questions and what kind of answers they put down. At worst, this is an intentional choice to lead people into the answers the ultimate decision-makers want the public to agree with so they have justification to continue business as usual while justifying it by pointing to the survey as “public input”.

In regards to how the actual questions were framed, we found similar issues of biased framing. For example, participants were asked to rate the following statements on a Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

- 1) ***Though not perfect, historically enhanced service districts overall have had a positive impact on the community.***
- 2) ***Enhanced service districts historically have overall negatively affected vulnerable members of the community.***

Notice a difference in the way these two questions are framed? The first one refers vaguely to “the community”, implying the community as a whole. The second one refers to “vulnerable members of the community”, implying that negative impacts of ESDs have **only** impacted “vulnerable members of the community”. This assumes that ESDs have had a positive impact on everyone and it’s just certain sectors of the community who do not benefit. Are they not also part of the larger community? And is this to say those who do not fall into the vague category of “vulnerable members of the community” haven’t experienced negative impacts of ESDs?

How could this survey (and future surveys) be improved?

During the first listening session Shawn Campbell said there would be another survey when the draft recommendations come out for the public to fill out. This is an opportunity to learn from the mistakes of this current survey and gather meaningful input from community members before bringing the recommendations to City Council in September. So we hope you're reading this, OMF.

First and foremost, as highlighted in the first section, do not make any of the questions required. We also recommend making the survey fully anonymous so as to not discourage people from filling it out who do not want to share their identity. We suggest you also address the other accessibility concerns brought up in the first section, such as providing a copy of the survey in Spanish without people needing to request translation, creating a paper survey people can fill out and return, and creating a series of smaller surveys given the burdensome length of the current survey.

Assuming this second survey will also act as a presentation of the proposed recommendations it is acceptable to continue to use a Likert scale to gauge public perceptions of what has been drafted. In addition to this, however, we recommend following these questions with open-ended questions that allow community members to write in why they either support or do not support the recommendation. This also gives space for people to provide further input to help sharpen the recommendations or even propose recommendations that have not been thought of yet.

We hope the second half of this audit response allows the opportunity to return to the drawing table if the recommendations are not aligned with what community members want. If not, this leads us to believe the recommendations you come up with in July are already set in stone and the survey and listening sessions happening in August are just for show.

