

# REPORT

## The City Council's Assessment of the City Manager's Performance

06.14.21

### JESSI BON IS THE RIGHT LEADER FOR THE CITY

The Mercer Island City Council evaluated Jessi Bon's performance as City Manager from February 18, 2020, when she officially assumed that role, through April 30, 2021. The City Council invited the members of the Leadership Team to participate in the performance assessment. The City Council's and Leadership Team's assessments were similar and very positive.

Both the City Council and Leadership Team found that Jessi possesses the characteristics, qualities, and attributes that they want and need in a City Manager. The past fifteen months have presented the City with unprecedented challenges stemming from the COVID-19 global health pandemic. Jessi met those challenges with resilience, fortitude, courage, and grace. She made tough decisions that put the City in a strong financial position today. She has been extremely responsive to the community, City Council, and employees. And the tactics she's employed lay the foundation to achieve long-term strategic goals.

This report summarizes the City Council's and Leadership Team's assessments of Jessi's performance as City Manager in five areas: 1) knowledge, planning, and use of resources; 2) managing people; 3) conflict resolution and consensus-building; 4) communications; and 5) integrity, personal attributes, and professional growth. These categories generally follow guidelines from the International City/County Management Association [ICMA] for assessing the performance of city and county appointed officials.

### KEY FINDINGS IN FIVE AREAS

#### 1. KNOWLEDGE, PLANNING, AND USE OF RESOURCES

The City Council and Leadership Team agree that Jessi Bon is an excellent leader. Among the key strengths of her leadership are:

- Her knowledge about municipal government and how the "weak" Mayor form of government is intended to operate.
- Her knowledge of the community's history to which she is deeply connected.
- Being adept at reading the strategic and political tea leaves.
- Being a forward thinker who spends time thinking and strategizing about the impacts and outcomes of decisions and the City Council's direction.
- The courage to make difficult decisions in a crisis situation (e.g., COVID staff cuts).
- Excellent listening skills.
- Superb attention to detail that results in a quality work product—seldom makes mistakes.
- An amazing ability to keep track of and manage multiple work streams.
- Being extremely helpful to Councilmembers, City employees, and the public.

- Being competent and well versed in municipal finance.
- Her knowledge of applicable laws and regulations.
- A commitment to making decisions that are based upon the best science available, facts and data.
- A commitment to acquire sufficient information in order to make informed, intelligent decisions in a timely manner. However, she does not wait until every single piece of information is available because then no decisions would be made.
- Being an inclusive decision-maker who seeks advice of and creates opportunities for staff to become involved in decision-making. Therefore, she is “building the bench” by preparing the City’s future leaders.
- Demonstrates respect for her legal team, insurance provider, and risk management delegates but recognizes that as City Manager the direction, responsibility, and accountability lie with her.
- Able to form a plan quickly and identify early in the process the resources that are needed.
- A cool, calm, and steady demeanor when facing major challenges and making difficult decisions.
- Appreciates and understands the staff workload and knows when to delegate and when she should do the work.
- A willingness to give senior staff room to show their skills and grow during City Council meetings and elsewhere.
- An ability to use consultants in a fiscally prudent manner.
- A commitment to minimize the City’s liability.
- Not being hampered by perceptions of how it should be (which perhaps underscores her advantage of being relatively new to a city manager position).
- A willingness to “roll up her sleeves” to learn what is going on in the organization.

Some City Councilmembers said that the amount of work that Jessi, the Leadership Team, and the City staff accomplished under the circumstances was remarkable.

During 2020 and the first quarter of 2021, Jessi demonstrated her skills and acumen in this category by:

1. Taking an aggressive stance at the start of pandemic to dramatically reduce expenses. This put the City in a much stronger financial position.
2. Reorganizing staff and City departments creatively.
3. Orienting and supporting three new Councilmembers so that they could succeed.
4. Supporting the entire City Council during a particularly stressful time that included remote rather than in-person meetings.

Looking ahead to 2021-’22, these suggestions were offered to help strengthen her performance.

- Remind Councilmembers of their legislative and policy-making role and push back on any members who cross the line to begin to micromanage City operations.
- Continue to pivot from tactical actions to long-term strategic thinking and planning.
- Do not over promise, and be clear about mapping timelines when additional priorities are added or resources are lacking.
- Advise the City Council as early and often as possible when there are inadequate resources—financial or staffing—to address an issue.
- Consult with the City Council. Even in cases where the decision is clearly yours to make, consider the City Council’s counsel for significant decisions with long-term implications.
- Educate and train staff to strengthen their performances to be able to delegate more and avoid exhausting yourself.

## 2. MANAGING PEOPLE

The primary findings from the City Council and Leadership Team’s assessment of Jessi Bon’s performance in managing people are:

- The City Council and Leadership Team greatly respect Jessi. The Leadership Team sees her as a consummate teammate who supports and appreciates them as partners on her team.
- She is compassionate and empathetic.
- Jessi is committed to hiring quality employees and reaches out to her network to recruit. She makes sure that people in managerial and supervisory positions have the skill set needed or have the potential to gain the skills. She is also dedicated to “building the bench” and hiring staff that could move into leadership positions when current employees retire or leave.
- She gives employees opportunities to grow and shine, such as giving them time in front of the City Council.
- She is quick to spotlight the good work of staff.
- One of her many good attributes is humility and her insistence that any public recognition of the City’s services be directed toward staff and away from her.
- She is willing to make difficult personnel decisions and withstands criticism that comes with it.

As City Manager, Jessi demonstrated her managerial skills and acumen through these accomplishments:

1. Made a large number of excellent hires in a very difficult market. She’s also retained and promoted the right employees to best serve the City.
2. Convened the Leadership Team and other staff for focused meetings that produced the City Manager’s Proposed Budget for the 2021-’22 biennial budget. A byproduct of these sessions was a unified team that together faced huge barriers and great stress.
3. Given the challenges associated with operating in a remote (COVID) environment, Jessi did a great job of keeping all employees moving forward together.
4. Mentored employees in key positions, such as the new Finance Director.
5. Instituted a new citywide mentoring program for new supervisors.
6. Worked hard and strategically to improve past human resources practices regarding recruitment, evaluation, and retention.
7. Used her City Manager reports during City Council meetings to spotlight excellent staff work and give appropriate credit and thanks to them.
8. Also circulated emails commending employees for extraordinary performances or when commendations came in from the public.

Looking ahead to 2021-’22, an area to build on is staff development. When staff’s work product does not meet expectations, avoid taking over and, therefore, adding to your workload. In the short term, coach staff where deficiencies exist so that these instances become opportunities for them to develop and grow. In the long term, strategically “build the bench” to groom the next generation of City leaders.

## 3. CONFLICT RESOLUTION

These are the primary findings from the City Council’s assessment of Jessi Bon’s performance in resolving conflict and building consensus, including taking direction from the City Council and forging compromises:

- Before making decisions, she listens to a variety of opinions and appropriately factors them into her decision-making process.

- She confirms when she understands what she has heard and does not hesitate to ask City Councilmembers for clarification if she is not sure what she has heard.
- She has a difficult job with seven disparate bosses. She hears everyone. While Jessi often has an opinion, there's no question that Jessi, as Mercer Island's Chief Executive Officer, seeks and follows the direction of a majority of the City Council.
- There are diverse opinions on the City Council and in the community. Jessie does her best to incorporate all the feedback.
- She manages a philosophically split City Council, and handles tough issues and occasional public disrespect directed at her team or colleagues with grace, which is one of her superpowers.
- Jessi has been effective in helping everyone see the issues and in encouraging Councilmembers to talk among themselves to try to resolve issues. She intentionally has not taken sides.
- She is extraordinarily conscientious of the requirement that she answer to the will of the majority of the City Council.
- She recognizes and values the interests and concerns of the minority, even though she does not get sidetracked.
- Jessi listens respectfully to Councilmembers who vote in the minority on an issue and offers them useful insights and advice.
- As a Mercer Island resident with three small children, she can relate to many of the issues raised by the Mercer Island community.
- Her conduct at meetings with third parties where she is representing the City has been positive; she has been a strong advocate for the City.

The Leadership Team added these experiences and observations:

- Jessi listens well to all Councilmembers. She makes an effort to meet with them individually while also recognizing the City Council leadership. Her finger is truly on the pulse of the City Council and her ability to build consensus is significant.
- Jessi supports the direction of the City Council, and expects her team and staff to do the same.
- Jessi is a problem solver; it's an area in which she strives. She has a keen ability to immerse herself in the data, ask good questions, and work to find swift resolutions. Some problems require time and resources which she works with the City Council to address.
- Jessi is often the voice in the room who offers "a third way."
- She is nearly impossible to negotiate against. She is highly persuasive, extremely kind, and often hilarious, which makes for an all-persuasive combination that brings people together.

In working with the City Council during the remainder of 2021 and 2022:

- If projects are revised or cancelled, inform the City Council as soon as possible so that the Councilmembers are not surprised or caught off guard.
- Continue to show respect and understanding to Councilmembers who are in the minority on an issues, but balance that need with the need to move forward in implementing the decision of the majority.

## 4. COMMUNICATIONS

The primary findings from the City Council and Leadership Team's assessment of Jessi Bon's performance in this category are:

- Consistently seeks clarification on the direction given by the City Council so that she and others are clear on that direction and often repeats what she believes she heard so that accurate interpretation is heard.
- Does an excellent job keeping the City Council up to date via email and phone calls (weekends are no exception).

- Provides outstanding concise written communications.
- Makes herself readily available for conversations with Councilmembers on an ad hoc basis.
- Replies to Councilmember communications so that everyone is in the loop and does a nice job summarizing conversations.
- Repeatedly says publicly and privately that she wants to make sure all seven Councilmembers have the same information for decision-making purposes.
- Makes herself available to the public and incorporates their feedback.
- Pays attention to community concerns and voices (some of the City's most vocal critics express appreciation for Jessi's responsiveness).
- Works hard along with her staff to keep the community informed, e.g. they have placed additional emphasis on communications during the pandemic and work to hear both sides of an argument. It should be noted that this level of responsiveness is very time consuming and can be tiring.
- Staff said that Jessi goes above and beyond any level of City Manager communication to the City Council, employees, and the public that they've witnessed at other cities.
- Maintains visibility in the community (living on the island with three small children allows her to relate to many of the City's constituents) and community members relate to her, too.

Jessi's accomplishments during 2020 that demonstrated her commitment to communicating with the City Council, employees, and the public:

1. Increased communication and used more communications tools to keep employees and the public informed during the pandemic.
2. Updated the City's website to make it more user-friendly, therefore demonstrating Jessi's and the Leadership Team's understanding that this community needs to be well-informed and demands access and transparency.
3. Garnered the community's support, which came to realize that she doesn't have an easy job and that she is working hard to represent their best interests.

Looking ahead to the rest of this year and through 2022:

- Continue the one-on-one meetings with Councilmembers because they are: a) consistent with the message that each Councilmember is her boss and has access to her, and provides the opportunity for candid conversations; and b) the opportunity for the City Manager to share with each Councilmember suggestions on how the elected officials might act in performing their duties and how they might relate to staff to foster more of a team atmosphere.
- Jessi appears to be available and responsive to the public 24/7. This drive, while admirable, may need to be tempered to avoid "burn out."

## 5. INTEGRITY, ATTRIBUTES, AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

The primary findings from the Council and Leadership Team's assessment of Jessi Bon's performance in this category are:

- Holds ethics in the highest regard and brings that perspective into her work.
- Speaks honestly, candidly, and with discretion.
- Believes in the transparency in government actions.
- Treats Councilmembers, employees, and residents with respect.
- Demonstrates empathy.
- Thinks outside the box in complex situations.
- While there are more constraints today on how government can respond to problems relative to the private sector so there may be fewer "inventive" solutions available to government, Jessi and her

Leadership Team do not hesitate to look for as many options that the City can take within these constraints, and they discuss the consequences and risks associated with each option.

- Reaches out to people she sees as experts to fill in her own knowledge gaps.
- Demonstrates resiliency and adaptability (underwent trial by fire with COVID and her ability to manage during the pandemic is the best example of someone who is adaptable and her resiliency has been her hallmark this past year).
- Puts all of her energy into this role and has great stamina despite the never ending list of challenges.
- The City is fortunate that her family is supportive because being a City Manager is NOT a job with “normal” working hours. Balancing professional and personal lives in this situation is a challenge.
- Possesses a very good sense of humor, which she uses effectively to diffuse tensions.
- Imparts to the Leadership Team and employees a sense of fun.
- Willing to question why things are done a certain way, and encourages if not rewards staff who find a better way of doing business.
- Sees everything through an equitable lens.

Jessi demonstrated the qualities and characteristics in this category by:

1. Expertly handled the confluence of the City's General Fund financial crisis and COVID-19 impacts.
2. Finding new ways to offer professional development opportunities for staff despite a shrinking budget. The City's mentor program is working to build the "bench." Jessi challenged the Leadership Team to identify growth opportunities for staff. She blended job positions tasked staff with responsibilities that may have previously been outside their normal job-descriptions. These actions have had positive impacts on building the Mercer Island team and building professional skills despite shrinking professional development budget lines.

In the next year-and-a-half, Jessi should:

- Continue to challenge the status quo and look for creative ways to approach the City's business.
- Ensure she has a balanced work/home situation to minimize a “burn out.” To avoid it, she needs to continue to grow and develop the staff's capacity.