

September 25, 2022

Dear EJ Council:

I've reflected on our meeting last week, and I'd like to share my feelings with you. To move through this situation in a good way, I am circulating this memo internally. Public release would likely reinforce a perception that the Council is not moving forward in solidarity.

In brief, I felt disturbed by the tenor and the substance of the conversation. I was dismayed and exasperated that we were not able to do the substantive work that was on our agenda that day. When I remarked several times that I felt "driven" by the conversation to a destination where I was not prepared to go, I meant that I felt bullied and blindsided by the effort of some Council members who were determined to force a change in the agenda, disregard an agreed-upon decision-making process, and violate the norms we adopted at our very first meeting that are memorialized as ground rules. In essence, it was an unproductive, unreasonable, and untenable public meeting of the EJ Council. A meeting like that compromises our standing with the public, our communities, and our partners. We should never have a meeting like that again.

With that said, I want to take up the related issue of the memo circulated by some Council Members which presaged the tenor and substance of the meeting, which was posted publicly, and not addressed directly in the meeting. The memo was published just hours before the Council meeting and took the Council Staff and Council Members by complete surprise. Some Council members and staff arrived at the meeting not having seen the memo or with little time to process its meaning. The result of this blindsiding was confusion, distress, and consternation among Council Members and others not included in the conversation that led to the memo. Confusion, distress, and consternation are not conducive to an effective, productive meeting—and unsurprisingly—we didn't have one. Agenda items, agreed upon by Council members and central to our mission, which many depend upon for benefits and actions of their own, were not addressed.

In addition to the blindsiding effect of the memo's release, it also came with demands and a timeline for Council action not on the approved agenda and was at variance with previous decisions guiding the meeting. No Council Member and none of the signers of the memo asked for an amendment to the agenda at the start of the meeting. Is it now a norm of the Council that Council Members can meet privately, come to agreements of their own, and make public demands for Council actions outside of previous Council-wide agreements and established norms? Is this how we want to conduct our business?

I was disturbed by other features of the memo. It created a schism in Council membership—in public and in full view of those who wish us failure—by distorting our formal Council roles and separating those members who directly represent communities from Council Members who apparently, do not. On the other side of the memo's line drawn in the sand are the remaining Council Members, who have scores of years of expertise borne of activism, study and—yes—

organizing, representing, advocating for, and struggling on behalf of *their* communities, for Environmental Justice.

As the memo notes, we know there are, hundreds of communities in Washington State that are facing daily conditions of environmental racism and health disparities. None of us live in all these communities, yet we are tasked to advocate for them in the arena of the Council. We don't speak for them—they speak for themselves—but all Council Members are tasked with being their advocates—and advocates for the principles of Environmental Justice. Early on, the Council pledged to act in ways with one another that reflected our values and the values of Environmental Justice—equity, voice, empowerment, solidarity across difference, anti-oppression, and the primacy of community and cultural sovereignty. In many ways, the memo violates this early commitment by the Council.

The memo and its enactment in the Council meeting, focused on co-chair leadership. Yet, rather than instilling confidence, the impact of the memo and the meeting left me feeling skeptical of the leadership proposal. The drive to subvert agreed-upon process and norms, the blindsiding of Council staff, creating an arbitrary distinction between Council Members and apportioning power on that basis, and failing to anticipate the effect of the memo on Council Members, the public, partners, and the Council mission itself, urges a more deliberate, careful, and cautious approach to leadership selection. The memo and the meeting were not conducive to building trust in the Council. I suggest the Council consider ways to capture and utilize the full range and experience of Council Members and support our common value of equity in leadership.

Finally, a comment was made at the end of the meeting which could presage more of the same: The idea that because there is not an “established process,” Council Members can operate as they see fit, according to their own read of the situation and their own needs for action. This is not a norm for Council success. As we know, the Council is continuing to establish processes governing how we go about conducting ourselves and Council business. The memo and the meeting highlight the need to move quickly and with due diligence to establish ethical norms. The Council recognized this need early in our convening. Many Council Members have multiple roles, responsibilities, and are members of networks with varied interests. These all need to be clarified to the satisfaction of all members.

In balance, I see value in and agree with most of the points of the memo. I imagine that most Council Members who were not signatories would see the value of those points in the memo and agree with few or no qualifications. Those points of agreement could have come from the Council as a whole and been a strong statement of our values and intention, had there been solidarity instead of splitting Council membership. Yet, as written and delivered, there was a heavy hand revealed in the memo. When enacted in the meeting, it prevented essential work from being conducted, confused Council Members, and could mislead the public about the foundational work we've done and Council solidarity. Honestly, I feel this misdirected and clumsy move to exert control over the Council is as damaging or more so, as the late establishment of the Council itself and the ensuing stress we've experienced since.

In moving forward from this meeting, I suggest we consider again having a neutral facilitator, as we focus on the work ahead, especially the work between now and the new year. In the absence of a neutral facilitator in the short term, we should support Council Staff in their facilitation with careful pre-planning, agreements, and sharing facilitation as often as possible. Council Staff have provided us with an up-to-date list of work for us to prioritize. Councilwoman Batayola is assisting in sorting out the implementation steps of the work. Workflow meetings the Councilwoman is having with staff are open to all Council Members, and we should expect to be kept informed. I see this and all Council work as a collaborative process. In my view, a volunteer and collaborative role is not a privileged position unless the Council decides it is.

I also suggest that we move forward from the standpoint of Council solidarity and discuss the memo as a Council. As we do, let's understand and appreciate the enormous amount of productive work that we have accomplished to this point.

Early in the process of forming the Council, in fact right out the gate, we were thrust into a crisis with Ecology. Now months in, we've had, (hopefully) not a crisis, but an internal growing pain, that we need to integrate into our identity as a Council and to move through in a good way. The first step in that is discussing the memo as a full Council.

--Running Grass