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**The issue**
Portland, Oregon, is often seen as the capital of the U.S. alternative food movement. The city’s commitment to building and sustaining a healthy local food system appears to be matched by a political climate of progressive food and land use policies. In 2002, the Portland Multnomah Food Policy Council (PMFPC) was established as a response to the growing public interest in cultivating a sustainable local food system. However, this promising citizen advisory board was dissolved in 2012.

Although surprising at the time, further research highlights the many challenges faced by the PMFPC (and by FPCs in general) that inevitably led to its dissolution. The main challenges include the disparate agendas between PMFPC members and staff liaisons, different perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of the council and its procedures, and disagreement over the expertise required of its members. Key takeaways from the story of the PMFPC are the importance of fostering more productive relationships and effecting local food policy change to prevent the decline of an FPC’s efficiency and its perceived irrelevance by elected officials and council members.

**Research findings**
One of the main frustrations expressed by former PMFPC members was the council’s lack of autonomy, authority, and influence. They perceive a failure on the part of government to facilitate two-way communication and productive public engagement in the policy process. Staff liaisons and council members often had disparate agendas and disagreed over who should be driving the agenda. Council members viewed staff liaisons as “gatekeepers” who controlled access to the political process and sought to impose their own agenda on the PMFPC, while staff liaisons believed that council members lacked interest in their projects. Because of their inability to work as “co-producers” of policy, share power, and achieve a public partnership, they were unable to have a meaningful policy impact they hoped for.

Another major problem was the PMFPC’s lack of a formalized strategic planning schedule. This affected the charter and scope of work. In addition, the council began to lose direct communication and cooperation with city and county commissioners. They instead communicated almost exclusively through government staff liaisons. This contributed to its inability to participate in and develop both long- and short-term advocacy strategies for the public.

PMFPC members also had different perceptions on the roles and responsibilities of the council, its individual members, and the government staff assigned to support them. There was no consensus on who was responsible for providing the necessary policy literacy training and capacity-building. Their disagreement resulted in an overall dearth of literacy and navigability of the policy process, which only made them feel more powerless, ineffective, and ill equipped to engage in policy meaningfully.

The PMFPC’s disagreement and the significant changes in their members was another source of
challenge. Initial members of the PMFPC were considered “the cream of the crop,” representing people from different sectors of the food system. However, it lacked racial and cultural diversity. There was controversy over how “expertise” should be defined in relation to the recruitment and appointment of council members. Some opposed granting membership to those who lacked professional ties to food systems, but could share lived experiences. In addition, the requirement that PMFPC members attend monthly council meetings could be prohibitive for many community members, such as those who were not able to take time off from work, had difficulty arranging transportation, and/or had limited English proficiency. Although council members expressed their commitment to cultivate and mentor new underprivileged members, they failed to follow through. The PMFPC’s composition also changed with the growing presence of new food systems-related organizations. While these new organizations reflected a growing local food movement, they did not necessarily hold a strong policy lens, which diluted the influence and necessity of the council in the policy arena. This made it difficult to continue to recruit more influential members, which reduced the council’s political power.

There was also confusion about the role of the PMFPC in regard to its involvement in policy-making, projects, and programs. The distinction between these categories were unclear to members, resulting in a disagreement over their roles and responsibilities as council members representing the interests of the public. Ultimately, this hindered the council from engaging effectively in meaningful food policy.

Conclusion
The downfall of the PMFPC shows us the challenges of public participation in food policy. The authors address the key problems and provide the following recommendations for both citizens and government agencies in order to foster more productive relationships and effect local food policy change.

- **Problem #1: Lack of planning and evaluation**
  Solution: Generate a robust strategic plan and planning process and conduct biannual process evaluations and annual impact evaluations.

- **Problem #2: Confusion in capacity-building**
  Solution: Develop shared definitions of “projects,” “programs,” and “policies” and maintain a clear understanding of what type of work is appropriate for the council to engage in; provide regular policy literacy and capacity-building trainings and agree upon who is responsible for their design and implementation; and establish and maintain realistic expectations for council members.

- **Problem #3: Misguided communication pathways**
  Solution: Foster two-way communication between council members and government staff; and provide regular opportunities for FPCs to directly present recommendations and receive feedback from elected officials.

- **Problem #4: Biased membership and representation**
  Solution: Negotiate a transparent membership recruitment and selection process; clearly define “expertise” with varying perspectives of the term; and maintain connection with the communities the council represents, and seek input from the public regularly.

The authors emphasize that the challenges faced by the PMFPC speak to the broader arena of public participation in the policy process. It is critical to negotiate, agree upon, and clearly articulate the roles and responsibilities of council members, government staff liaisons, and elected officials in contributing to a productive public process that empowers citizens, serves government officials, and holds all parties accountable. Even amidst conflict, a sustained effort must be made to foster trust between citizens and local government; to evaluate the usefulness of established roles, structures, and processes; and to make the changes necessary to maintain the relevance of an organization throughout its life.