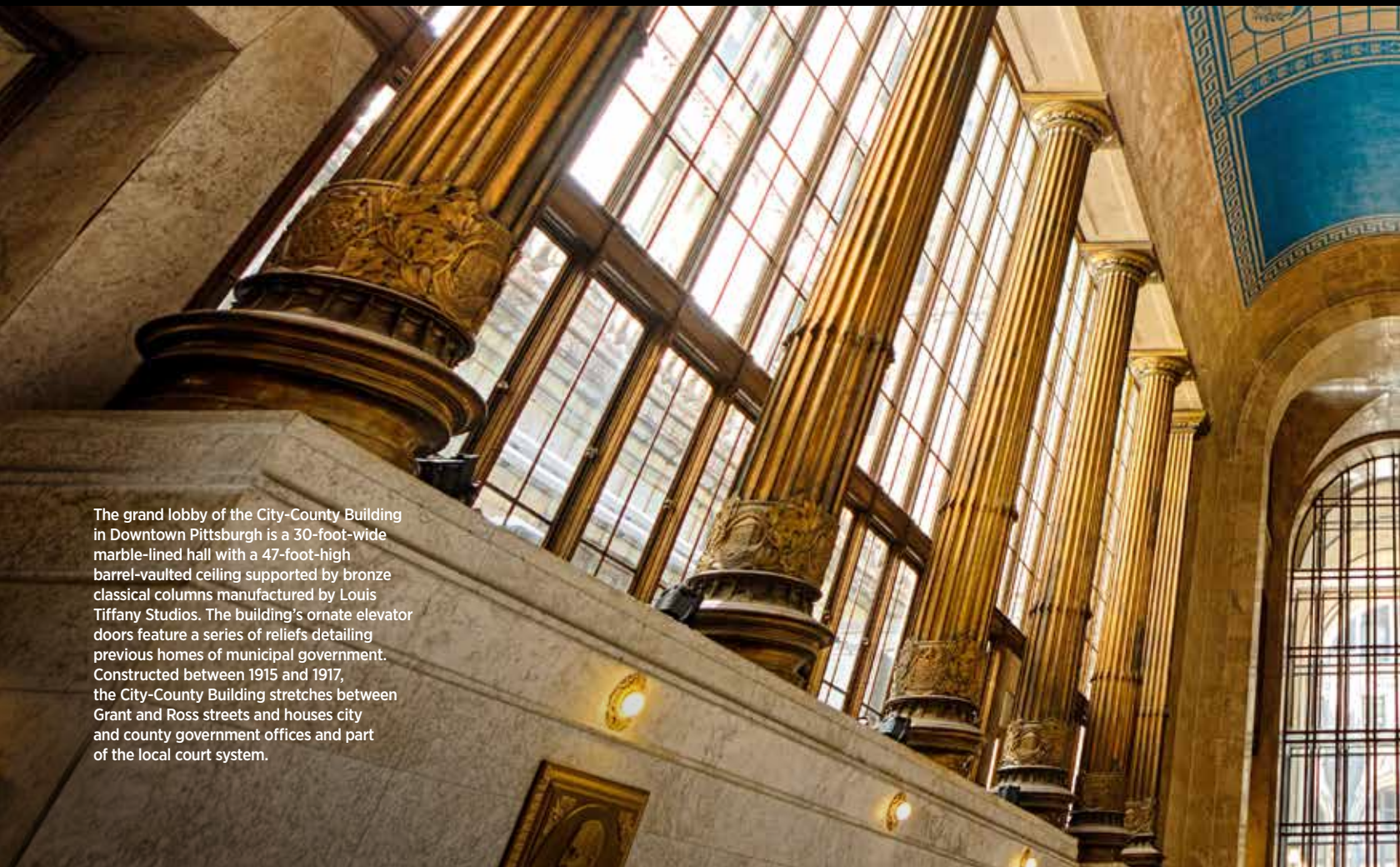




TRANSITIO



The grand lobby of the City-County Building in Downtown Pittsburgh is a 30-foot-wide marble-lined hall with a 47-foot-high barrel-vaulted ceiling supported by bronze classical columns manufactured by Louis Tiffany Studios. The building's ornate elevator doors feature a series of reliefs detailing previous homes of municipal government. Constructed between 1915 and 1917, the City-County Building stretches between Grant and Ross streets and houses city and county government offices and part of the local court system.



N S U P P O R T



Changes in government administrations at any level can be fraught with challenges. To help reduce transition difficulties at the local level, The Heinz Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation have funded reports on Pittsburgh and Allegheny County government operations to help prepare incoming officials.

By Donovan Harrell

A

s newly elected took office in 2022 and 2024, respectively, they including staffing shortages, budget



Margaret J. Krauss/90.5 WESA

leaders in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County faced complex governance challenges, constraints and deteriorating infrastructure.



During a May 31, 2023, news conference, Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey announced plans for a bond issue to raise \$30 million for affordable housing. Standing behind Mr. Gainey at the City-County Building in Downtown Pittsburgh are members of his staff, City Council and the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh as well as housing advocates and residents affected by housing issues.

To help ensure a smooth transition, The Heinz Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation collaborated to support studies of government operations that resulted in reports for Mayor Ed Gainey and County Executive Sara Innamorato containing assessments of practices and procedures and recommendations for improvements.

Compiled into comprehensive “guidebooks,” the research findings by consultants The Thomas Consulting Group Inc. and HR&A Advisors were designed to provide road maps for both administrations and to help lay a foundation for transparency, community engagement and efficient governance. For the Endowments, these efforts were part of its Democracy and Civic Participation portfolio, which has included assisting leaders in making informed decisions while fostering trust between government and residents.

Matthew Barron, Sustainability program director for the Endowments and head of its Democracy and Civic Participation initiative, said increasing public engagement in political and governmental processes was key to driving the investment in the government analyses and reports.

“One of our primary goals is to get more people engaged in the process of not just elections but in the process of government itself,” he said. “[This includes] citizen engagement in government and citizens’ awareness of what’s happening in their government and the levers that they can use to influence the decisions their government makes and to make their voices heard in those processes.

“The goal was really to pull back the curtain and show people how government works, what kind of critical decisions get made, and then to provide avenues for people to get involved in that.”

Donovan Harrell is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer. His last stories for h were in Issue 1, 2023, and included a main story focusing on the importance of urban farms and gardens in the Pittsburgh region during the COVID-19 pandemic and an accompanying story on the food-sustaining benefits of a new bee vaccine.

A VITAL INVESTMENT

The Heinz Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation were motivated to invest in transition support for local governments, foundation officials said, because they had a clear understanding that such changes can be difficult and disruptive if not properly managed. The officials explained that their interest in assisting with the transition process stemmed from their belief in the importance of stable governance and transparency as well as public engagement.

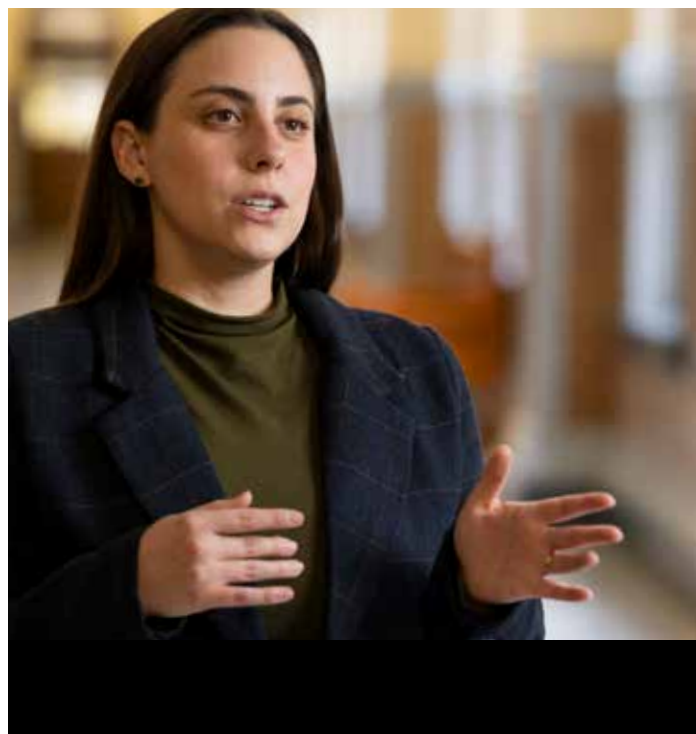
“We really wanted to figure out what was the best way to support a smooth transition of power, and to ensure that the Gainey administration could [start] in the right direction without having to take lots of time trying to figure out where the roadblocks and the stumbles were,” said Phil Koch, vice president of policy and community impact at The Pittsburgh Foundation.

Conducting the studies was complex, involving months of interviews, research and community participation. For the City of Pittsburgh guidebook, the Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation worked with The Thomas Consulting Group to produce a detailed series of transition reports for Mr. Gainey. Compiled between October and December 2021, the “Pittsburgh Government Guidebook” provided a comprehensive picture of the state of Pittsburgh’s public sector. It included insights into staffing needs, budget allocations and ongoing projects across all city departments.

“That information was critical to us in gaining an understanding of what we were walking into on day one,” said Jake Pawlak, deputy mayor and director of the Office of Management and Budget for the City of Pittsburgh. “[It] could inform our decisions about what to continue and where to change direction or change focus, what the pitfalls might be, what were issues that needed to be resolved early in Mayor Gainey’s leadership. It set a baseline that was really necessary.”

According to Mr. Barron, many of the recommendations for the transition processes have been implemented, particularly around affordable housing. One particular effort stemming from a report recommendation saw the Gainey administration leveraging the city’s ability to borrow money in the bond market to invest directly in affordable housing. The city went on to do a multimillion-dollar bond offering that was used to fund affordable housing initiatives, Mr. Barron said.

Another issue the city guidebook highlighted, Mr. Pawlak said, was the severe deterioration of public services, including significant staffing shortages in the Bureau of Police, Bureau of Emergency Medical Services, and the Department of Public Works. No new police recruit classes had been hired since



Joshua Franzos

the pandemic in 2020, leading to critical gaps in the city’s police force. One of the most immediate outcomes from the report was the reopening of the Pittsburgh Police Academy with updated community-oriented training. The first recruit class started in July 2023 and graduated in March 2024. The guidebook’s recommendations helped the Gainey administration prioritize this action as a necessary step to address the city’s staffing crisis.

Additionally, the launch of the Freedom House EMT Training Academy in February was another direct result of the guidebook’s recommendations and was aimed at recruiting and training a new generation of emergency medical technicians from historically underserved communities, Mr. Pawlak said.

The report also highlighted the need for infrastructure improvements, particularly after the early 2022 collapse of the Fern Hollow Bridge, which connects the city’s Squirrel Hill neighborhood to the Point Breeze and Regent Square neighborhoods and the borough of Wilkinsburg. The administration used the findings to streamline processes and increase funding for bridge repairs, street maintenance and other critical projects, Mr. Pawlak explained.



Leah Friedman, community affairs and special projects manager, Office of Allegheny County Executive Sara Innamorato

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Pittsburgh is extremely fortunate to have such a strong, vibrant philanthropic community. It's a blessing of our heritage, and much of Pittsburgh's success has been possible thanks to the leadership and partnership of [that] community.”

Jake Pawlak, deputy mayor and director of the Office of Management and Budget for the City of Pittsburgh



“In a lot of cases, we have found ways we could make things faster and more efficient, and that has paid huge dividends, both in making the way we do our work better, but also in making our employees stay invested,” he said.

COMMUNITY INPUT MATTERS

For the county executive’s administration, the Endowments and several foundations, such as the Pittsburgh and Buhl foundations, along with local nonprofits, such as the justice-focused Pennsylvania United and One Pennsylvania, partnered with HR&A Advisors to help produce an assessment report similar to the one produced for the City of Pittsburgh.

Introduced in April 2024, the “All In Allegheny Action Plan” revealed a similar range of workforce challenges, particularly in human services and public safety. The county faced more than 1,000 open positions when Ms. Innamorato took office, including in essential services such as health care and emergency response.

However, what set the Allegheny County transition apart was the significant level of community engagement involved in creating the All In Allegheny guidebook. More than 19,000 residents participated in surveys, public forums and small-group discussions between November 2023 and April 2024 to help provide a wealth of data on the issues residents deemed most important, said Leah Friedman, the community affairs and special projects manager for the county executive’s office. These included affordable housing, public safety, infrastructure and workforce development.

The unprecedented scale of the community engagement process was a demanding but ultimately invaluable process in generating the guidebook, she said.

“One of the challenges on the front end was that there had never been a community engagement effort that was as big, as diverse or inclusive as the engagement that we set out to complete,” Ms. Friedman said. “This had never been done before, and a lot of people had never engaged with the county government before in this way, so it took a lot of education.”

The All In Allegheny plan includes 91 action items, each with a clear timeline for completion in six months, one year or three years. One of the most significant outcomes of the plan is the 500 in 500 initiative, which is a partnership between the county executive’s office and the Department of Human Services. The program aims to make 500 units of affordable housing available for individuals exiting the shelter system within 500 days of the initiative’s launch, which was in June of this year. The units are expected to include new construction, purchases and collaborations with partners.

According to Ms. Friedman, this initiative, shaped by the community engagement process, directly addressed the county’s housing crisis, particularly for those exiting homelessness.

In addition to housing, another key outcome based on recommendations from the All In Allegheny plan focuses on expanding access to voting, Ms. Friedman said. In alignment with the county’s “vibrant democracy” policy priority, the county added five satellite ballot drop-off locations for the 2024 primary election. For this year’s general election, the county expanded this effort by adding even more satellite locations, where residents also had access to additional voting services.

Another recommendation from the transition process was to have the county take steps to hire more staff to take advantage of federal funding programs, Mr. Barron said.



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He highlighted the county's efforts to reform its Clean Air Fund, ensuring that it is better utilized for environmental justice issues.

Residents who contributed to the plan said county government leaders had not asked about their priorities or ideas before, Ms. Friedman said, and residents showed they're ready to let their voices be heard.

"I think the level of engagement and response that we received from communities throughout Allegheny County proved that community members are willing and ready to shape the government that represents them, and we can really see those voices as a partner as we move forward," she added. "And that's why we kind of hope to always be working in a way that is in collaboration and coordination with the community, rather than just top-down, because we know that we can build that trust, we're able to be responsive and the community is ready to help."

Allegheny County Executive Sara Innamorato has a laugh after signing her first executive order, Allegheny Hire, Inspire, Retain, Empower and Save (AGH H.I.R.E.S.), which is designed to improve the county's recruitment strategies, employee retention and training programs.

PHILANTHROPY'S STRATEGIC VALUE

Strong partnerships with philanthropic organizations have been instrumental for the Gainey administration, according to Mr. Pawlak.

"Pittsburgh is extremely fortunate to have such a strong, vibrant philanthropic community," he said. "It's a blessing of our heritage, and much of Pittsburgh's success has been possible thanks to the leadership and partnership of [that] community."

These partnerships remain central to the city's efforts, he explained, and there are hopes to expand and deepen them further.

Mr. Koch highlighted The Pittsburgh Foundation's unique position in working alongside both private foundations and government.

"As a community foundation, we have a role to play in working with government, private foundations and the community to develop strategies to strengthen democracy," he said. He added that he believes that addressing the most pressing issues in southwestern Pennsylvania will require cross-sectoral collaboration, with foundations, government and corporations working hand in hand.



Courtesy Allegheny County

Looking ahead, officials with city and county administrations said each is committed to transparency and continued engagement with their residents.

The Gainey administration plans to promote transparency through direct public engagement, Mr. Pawlak said.

“We established the Office of Neighborhood Services early in the mayor’s administration specifically for the purpose of ensuring that we had deep and meaningful engagement with the public to let them know what we’re working on and to hear their concerns.”

The City in the Streets initiative, in which the mayor and all city departments visit different neighborhoods each month, is a direct extension of this philosophy.

“We’ve invested heavily in engagement around our budget process to ensure that residents are more deeply included,” Mr. Pawlak added. Although these efforts were not specifically structured around a transition report or guidebooks, the goals of participation and engagement remain embedded in the administration’s approach, he said.

Ms. Friedman echoed the commitment to transparency through the county’s forthcoming Action Plan Tracker. This tracker, which launched this fall in October, will allow the public to see real-time updates on the progress of the 91 action items included in the All In Allegheny plan.

“It’s going to give transparent updates to the public, to anyone who was involved in the transition planning, attended a community meeting or took the survey,” Ms. Friedman said. “We want to make sure that we are looping back with the community, acknowledging the time and ideas they contributed and showing them where we are in delivering on the promises within this plan.”

The guidebooks produced for Pittsburgh and Allegheny County have set a new standard for how philanthropy can support government transitions, Mr. Barron said, adding that the Endowments has had inquiries from other cities around the country looking to replicate the success of the reports.

One of the most positive outcomes from both processes has been increased resident engagement, according to Mr. Barron.

“When people were given access to detailed information about what the city and county do, they were better equipped to be involved. It created more mechanisms for resident engagement and feedback,” he said.

The guidebooks provided the Gainey and Innamorato administrations with valuable recommendations for addressing critical challenges, including union contracts and staffing issues, Mr. Barron explained. And looking ahead, the Endowments plans to continue supporting the development of transition reports for local government.

“It’s proven itself to be of great value to the community,” he said. **h**



Joshua Franzos

For more information



Pittsburgh Government Guidebook

The Heinz Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation worked with The Thomas Consulting Group Inc. to produce a detailed series of reports for Mayor Ed Gainey before he assumed office in 2022. The “Pittsburgh Government Guidebook” provided a comprehensive picture of Pittsburgh’s public sector that included information about staffing needs, budget allocations and ongoing projects across city departments.



All In Allegheny Action Plan

To support County Executive Sara Innamorato, who took office in January 2024, the Endowments and several local foundations and nonprofits partnered with HR&A Advisors to produce the county assessment report. Development of the “All In Allegheny Action Plan” also included a high level of community engagement, with more than 19,000 residents participating in surveys and discussions about issues such as affordable housing, public safety, infrastructure and workforce development.