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CLUSIVE

HOW PASCO IS STEERING AWAY FROM ACRIMONY AND TOWARD HARMONY BY ELEVATING DIVERSE VOICES

by KIRSTEN DOBROTH
photographs by KIM FETROW

Dancers take the stage in downtown Pasco at the city's 2019 Cinco de Mayo Celebration.

When *Cityvision* last visited Pasco council chambers four years ago, the city was roiling in crisis following the fatal officer-involved shooting of Antonio Zambrano-Montes, a Mexican immigrant worker who, while high on meth, had been hurling rocks in the middle of a busy downtown street. Addressing a large crowd filled with emotion, Mayor Matt Watkins encouraged restraint, understanding, and patience.

"I'd like to be able to tell everybody what's going to happen in the coming weeks, exactly what council is going to do and what we should do, but I'm not going to have an answer to that tonight," he said at a city council meeting in February 2015. "I do know that myself and my fellow councilmembers are going to sit and listen to you tonight, and staff is going to listen to you, and we are going to listen together."

Pasco's seven-member council (one Latino and six Caucasians representing a majority-minority community where 56 percent of the population identifies as Hispanic) sat attentively for more than 30 minutes as citizens filed up to the podium and aired their grievances. One after another, they demanded that their city take action not just to address the shooting, but to confront a fundamental inequality many believed had contributed to the tragedy: the demographic disparity between Pasco's elected leaders and an increasingly diverse population.

"One of the things that's unique about Pasco is that it doesn't try and put down the negative things that happen in the community," Watkins observed at the time. "It doesn't sugar-coat things. If we have a challenge, we talk about it, we work through it."

And that they did.

In May 2015, three months after the shooting, Pasco's council passed Resolution 3635, declaring its intent to lobby the state Legislature to pass the Washington Voting Rights Act to allow the city to establish an election-by-district system, enabling five of the city's seven council positions to be chosen by voters within electoral districts instead of by citywide general election as the current law required. A year later, when that effort proved fruitless, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sued, asserting that Pasco's election system was in violation of the federal Voting Rights Act. Instead of contesting the suit, the city partnered with the ACLU, taking the case to federal court, which ultimately greenlighted an election-by-district plan for the November 2017 ballot that brought profound changes to Pasco's council, and to the city itself, when only two incumbents—the city's sole Hispanic councilmember, Saul Martinez, and Mayor Watkins—were reelected.

"The change in the election process brought on five new councilmembers, and in my case I went from being the second-youngest councilmember to literally the oldest overnight," says Watkins, who describes himself as the "50-year-old white guy" who led Pasco through both the tumult of the Zambrano-Montes shooting and the process of revising the city's election rules after the ACLU lawsuit. "So, the council representation matches the age of our community much more closely, and we also went from one Latino councilmember to three."

ONE OF THE NEW COUNCIL'S first actions was the adoption of Resolution 3820, creating an Inclusivity Commission, a seven-member panel of grassroots community members who would hold city leaders and staff accountable for "embracing diversity and promoting equality among our workforce, residents, businesses, and visitors." It would also help advance the difficult, ongoing process of communitywide dialogue and soul-searching that the Zambrano-Montes shooting had initiated.

"I think [the shooting] was a flashpoint in 2015, and the way that it was handled here and that it didn't turn into a Ferguson is a story in and of itself," says Michael Morales, Pasco's deputy director of Community & Economic Development. "But the impetus for the Inclusivity Commission was really related to the changes in government brought about by the Voting Rights Act lawsuit, and the new members that emerged and ran for office really were interested in not just being able to represent their districts, but getting their districts more engaged—because they [hadn't been] for many years."

Pasco City Manager Dave Zabell tasked Morales with serving as the city's staff liaison to the Inclusivity Commission. Morales, who was born to migrant farmworker parents in Grandview (a community of 11,000 45 minutes west of Pasco with an 82 percent Hispanic or Latino population), had first cut his teeth in community development while trying to build migrant Head Start centers in Franklin County. A self-described "jack of all trades when it comes to municipal government," Morales also had concerns about creating an effective group to handle an issue like inclusivity. "We didn't want it to implode," he adds. "The goal was: Don't let it turn into a political axe that doesn't serve any purpose."

As mayor, Watkins was to appoint the seven-member panel following interviews with the entire council, and Morales was asked to coalesce a broad spectrum of Pasco residents willing to serve and speak on behalf of their communities. They picked leaders from the Latino community: Jesse Campos, director of the local Boys & Girls Club; Delia Tobon, a Pasco School District teacher and parent advocate; and Maria Torres Mendoza, a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) beneficiary with a degree in mechanical engineering who's president of the local Dreamers Club. But they also tapped a variety of other community figures like Peter Rieke, the first paraplegic to summit Mount Rainier under his own power; Kyle Saltz, a veteran and an officer with Hanford Patrol; Jeffrey Robinson, a hotel worker who is also autistic and gay and an LGBTQ advocate; and Abraham Regunta, a representative from Pasco's Indian American community who works as a project manager at a faith-based service provider.

"It's a group of more natural leaders and also not-so-classic leaders," explains Watkins. "We felt like each person didn't need

KIM FETROW PHOTOGRAPHY

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—**MATT WATKINS** MAYOR, CITY OF PASCO

Members of Pasco's Inclusivity Commission (from left) Delia Tobin, Kyle Saltz, Jesse Campos, Jeffrey Robinson, and Community & Economic Development Deputy Director Michael Morales in downtown Pasco

(from left) Michael Morales; youth attending the 2019 Pasco Cinco de Mayo Celebration; Delia Tobin at the Inclusivity Commission's outreach booth

to be someone who could be the chair of the group, but someone with a vision or a perspective that they could articulate."

About a month before the group's inaugural meeting in July 2018—when it was still in the process of establishing its basic structure—the Inclusivity Commission's purpose was tested after the Pasco Police Department faced backlash for engaging US Border Patrol instructors to provide free crisis Spanish language training for its officers. Some Latinos, while supportive of the department's efforts to better connect with residents since 2015, viewed that decision as insensitive to the community, given the current state of immigration policy implementation and fears of deportation that had already had a chilling effect. The Latino Civic Alliance (a statewide civic engagement organization that lobbies for the Latino community) sent a letter to the mayor demanding the termination of the department's chief, a request Watkins deemed "out of touch," noting, as many observed, that the alliance was headquartered 80 miles away in Yakima and did not represent the concerns of local residents. Some members of Pasco's Hispanic community cried foul over what they saw as more intimidation from local law enforcement, and both opponents and supporters confronted Pasco's city council, demanding that the new Inclusivity Commission step into the fray.

"It was controversial," recalls Morales. "Someone had the idea to use the Inclusivity Commission to discuss the issue, and we kind of laid out 'here's why it's not appropriate to do this' and asked what could be the alternative." Ultimately, Pasco's council debated the letter and decided to take no action, defusing the controversy.

That trial by fire helped clarify the group's mandate, which starts at the municipal level with both educating city staff about the fundamentals of inclusivity and learning from city staff about the challenges they face in realizing that goal. The police department proved to be a natural—and important—place to start. "You can't have an Inclusivity Commission weigh in on a police department's training or training practices when you don't understand all the training that goes into the police department," says Morales. "We had a really good overview with them on all their training programs, the commission offered suggestions for improvement, and we have continued to support each other from there."

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—MICHAEL MORALES CITY OF PASCO COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DEPUTY DIRECTOR/ INCLUSIVITY COMMISSION LIAISON

The commission has also identified youth outreach as an important goal, both by connecting the area's young population to their municipal leaders and by including them in local decisions. "At least two of our departments are heavily involved with our city's youth, both in Parks and Recreation and the police since we have school resource officers, so there's a lot of contact there," explains Morales. "It's important to get that perspective if we're going to be looking at suggestions on how we can improve the service and delivery of our programs into the future. An added benefit is that we cultivate new talent and leadership for city boards, commissions, employment, and even city council."

AT A SEDATE CITY COUNCIL WORKSHOP on April 22, 2019, after Watkins gave a report about a VIP taco crawl of the city's taquerias, he invited Inclusivity Commission Chair Jesse Campos to kick off the meeting by unveiling the group's freshly minted workplan.

"It's an honor to be in front of you today," said Campos. "We have a great group of people who are passionate to impact the City of Pasco. I am really honored to be in this position and excited to be a part of that."

Morales took the stand and walked the council through a 15-minute PowerPoint presentation. After revealing the Inclusivity Commission's motto ("Where diversity and equity are goals, inclusion is the path"), mission ("A strategic partner of Pasco's city council, which promotes inclusive policies and programs"), and vision ("Creating, improving, and sustaining an inclusive organization, i.e., the City of Pasco, which empowers and unifies the people"), Morales outlined the primary goals and objectives committee members intend to pursue over the next two years.

To realize its first goal ("Foster an environment that includes, accepts, respects, and appreciates all members of the community"), the commission plans to create a youth subcommittee for middle and high schoolers.

"In trying to create something different, we used the same process we did before: voting-age residents of Pasco going through the application process, being interviewed by the city council," Morales explained. "Nothing's wrong with that, but if we're going to be talking about policies and programs that are going to be sustainable, we really want to hear from people who are going to be voting in a few years and understand that my experience as a Mexican American growing up in eastern Washington is not necessarily the same as somebody in middle school or high school right now."

Next, to make its work accessible to the community, the commission will have a portal on the city's website and its social media channels, staff an "inclusivity booth" at city-sponsored festivals

KIM FETROW PHOTOGRAPHY

At Your Service

Q&A MAURICIO GARCIA

Cities of Service Deputy Director Mauricio Garcia discusses the importance of citizen engagement and how city leaders can build trust at the local level.

Why is local government the place to start with citizen engagement?
From a local level, the city mayor, the chief executive, the head of sanitation, etc., all see their citizens every day and interact with them. It's a very colloquial approach, and there's a partnership and trust that needs to be there because of that. It's a great model for the state and national levels to emulate; if it's not happening locally, chances are it's not bubbling up to higher levels of government.

Cities of Service is a national nonprofit that helps local governments connect with citizens; how does it do that?
We support a coalition of more than 270 cities across the Americas and Europe. (In Washington, Lynnwood, Marysville, and Seattle are members.) In some cases, we provide grants to cities to design and implement initiatives with citizens. In addition, we provide grantee cities (like Seattle) two AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers to serve as on-the-ground representatives for connecting citizens, neighborhood associations, and nonprofits with city hall.

Then what happens?
We'll jump on the phone every other week, providing assistance in terms of program design and metrics to track impact. We might ask questions you may not have thought of before—or you haven't wanted to think about—but we ask for the benefit of the program and the benefit of the citizens. We also help problem-solve specific challenges.

In 2018 Cities of Service launched its Engaged Cities Award; what was the idea behind it?
The award gives credibility to the work cities are doing alongside their citizens and helps other cities see different ways of tackling issues that citizens can tackle with them. We know cities are often strapped for resources, so when they're able to do a lot with very little, that needs to be recognized—not only so the citizens see the value that the city provides, but so they feel a sense of pride and develop a level of trust with leaders.

Who received the award last year?
Tulsa, Oklahoma, did

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Members of Renton's Mayor's Inclusion Task Force (from left): Violet Aesquivel, Benita Horn, Dr. Linda Smith, Caleb Mayberry, Preeti Shridhar, Balwant Singh, Hamdi Abdulle

MAJORITY REPORT

In Renton, serving diverse communities keeps city government relevant.

PASCO, OF COURSE, ISN'T ALONE in its quest to court a diversifying population for leadership positions in local government. In Renton, a westside majority-minority city that's grown by 150 percent in the past three decades (from 41,688 residents in 1990 to 104,100 in 2018), a dedicated Mayor's Inclusion Task Force has been a part of the fabric of local government since 2008. That's not surprising, given that Renton's nonwhite population has expanded by over 165 percent in the past 20 years, a trend that's driven by growth in tech jobs in nearby Seattle and at companies like Kaiser Permanente and Boeing's Commercial Airplanes Division, which are headquartered within the city.

"There is no doubt we are one of the fastest-growing minority cities in the country," says Renton Deputy Public Affairs Administrator Preeti Shridhar, who notes that 85 different languages are spoken by students in the city's school district. Renton's Mayor's Inclusion Task Force—originally called the Community Liaison Group—was formed in the wake of the Hanukkah Eve windstorm of 2006 that devastated western Washington and left 14 dead. In Renton, some residents in minority communities brought barbecues and propane heaters inside their homes to stay warm during the widespread power outages that followed the storm, resulting in two cases of carbon monoxide poisoning. To Shridhar, that was unacceptable.

"Communication was key, and that was kind of an eye-opening thing: that we really needed to have better ways to reach out to our communities," she says. Vowing to do more than just translate and distribute safety information pamphlets that might never get read, she collaborated with the city's emergency management department, brought an AmeriCorps volunteer on board, and launched the Community Liaison Group.

Shridhar, who came to the US from her native India in the mid-1980s and has been involved in municipal management in King County for the past 25 years, has helmed the Mayor's Inclusion Task Force since its inception. While the group may have been inspired by shortcomings in the city's response to a natural disaster, its mission has evolved into a more introspective evaluation of how effectively the city interacts with its quickly growing and changing population. "How do you make sure that we as government are relevant and meeting the needs of the communities who are now calling Renton home?" Shridhar asks. "That was the launch point."

More than a decade later, the Mayor's Inclusion Task Force contains various subgroups led by one of more than 30 Task Force members representing 14 different demographics, ranging from Sikhs to seniors. She points to a range of successes—from free blood sugar and blood pressure screenings held at the city's various places of worship to the Renton Police Department's recent hiring of a Vietnamese patrol officer—as examples, small and large, of where the task force has influenced local decision making.

King County, which is becoming increasingly ethnically and racially diverse (248,000 of the 451,000 residents who moved to the area between 2000 and 2017 are foreign-born), has been following Renton's example. "We formed a group with other city leaders that are doing similar things called Governing for Regional Equity and Inclusion, and we actually had our first conference last year," says Shridhar. "We have monthly meetings to share our progress on different topics."

The community's embrace of the Mayor's Inclusion Task Force is on display every September at the Renton Multicultural Festival, which last year was awarded a Certificate of Excellence from the Puget Sound Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. The event celebrates the city's diversity with cultural performances—and subtly highlights the continued importance of city leaders connecting with all of Renton's cultural groups.

"I'm from an immigrant community," says Shridhar. "So there's this understanding of, on the one hand, wanting to hold on to my cultural roots, and at the same time wanting to belong."

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSHUA HUSTON

and events, and invite residents to attend quarterly meetings that will rotate between electoral districts and include a cultural component, like ethnic foods and performances. The group will also work to improve the accessibility of council meetings by providing translators when significant issues emerge, and it will investigate and mitigate any barriers that might discourage attendance, such as residency status. The commission will assign liaisons to represent it at meetings of city boards, commissions, and committees. Finally, the commission will introduce an annual "inclusion audit and scorecard" to rate the inclusivity, equity, and diversity of all city-sponsored events, staff hires, and contracts put out to bid.

"That sounded a little scary to me when I first heard from the commission," said Morales. "But if you're going to make recommendations for change, you want them to be backed up by data."

With that, councilmembers were invited to comment.

"You folks ate the elephant one bite at a time," said Councilmember Pete Serrano, an attorney for the US Department of Energy in Richland and an adjunct professor at WSU's Tri-Cities campus. "Give yourselves a hand: we gave you two pieces of paper and said, 'Go and do!' and you went and did and came back with recommendations. . . . Thank you. I see a lot of great opportunity to reach people we had hoped to reach with this."

PASCO'S INCLUSIVITY COMMISSION had its official public debut two weeks later, at the city's Cinco de Mayo celebration. The event, which draws more than 10,000 spectators from around the Tri-Cities each year, kicks off with a Friday night parade that sees folk dancers in vibrantly colored garb and mariachi marchers twirl and weave their way through Pasco's downtown. And Pasco's mayor, the self-described "50-year-old white guy" who led the city through one of the most tumultuous periods in its history, was twirling and weaving with them, doing his best not to look uncomfortable as he cloaked himself in this freshly unfurled banner of inclusivity.

Watkins, who will step down as the city's longest-serving mayor this fall, says his 10 years on the job—which spans 16 if you include his service on city council before being elected mayor in 2010—has given him unique perspective he'd like to share with local officials who might be struggling to bridge the gap between local government and increasingly diverse demographics that are changing and challenging cities across the state. "Pasco has had this history of being a bit insular, and we've got some of the bigger socioeconomic challenges of our peers in the Tri-Cities, but being able to talk about that is important because it's a part of our history," he says. "I think being a student of history has probably helped me out the most as a leader."

His immediate plans include traveling the world—starting in Southeast Asia and working his way west—and taking a sabbatical from his day job as a software engineer. Asked about his reasons for leaving now, just as the Inclusivity Commission embarks on this next phase of Pasco's history, his logic is simple. "It's important to finish your term up and be able to say, 'Hey, community, this is your challenge now,'" he explains. "And I feel good about doing that and about my time in Pasco."

As members of the community begin to meet and be inspired by a new generation of leaders, emerging in part because of the work of the city's Inclusivity Commission, they seem to be responding in kind: *Challenge accepted*.

something that was very low-cost and very innovative: they were sitting on tons of data, but didn't have the in-house capacity to bump data sets against each other, so they created a program called Urban Data Pioneers to have citizen volunteers help them dissect data as it relates to priorities the mayor set out.

How does the program work?
It groups citizens and city staff in different fields of expertise (like data science and project coordinating), then they use data sets to inform particular issues (like blight, or whether trucks of a certain weight and size were causing potholes) to help inform both policy and how the city could invest more money in their particular budget.

What's another city to watch when it comes to engagement?
The city of Detroit is doing a great job. They have a Department of Neighborhoods that serves as unelected representatives for communities and does everything from capturing complaints to setting up different resources to supporting the different neighborhood associations. They really are the engagement ambassadors, and they have the commitment from the mayor, which drives this kind of energy.

What innovative strategies are on the horizon when it comes to engagement and action?
I think there's a lot of untapped opportunity with technology data to really plug citizens into that conversation. There's a spectrum of engagement—on one end you have the traditional volunteerism of putting a shovel in the ground and planting trees, but on the other end you have the design of policy and services, and I think there's a lot of opportunity for the tech space to really leverage the entire spectrum.

How does the current climate of dissatisfaction with leadership at the national level impact citizens' engagement with their local electeds?
I think you're seeing the role of the mayor, the role of the city being elevated. You might be checking out at the grocery store and see the mayor, chief of staff, or local councilmember; at the national level, that's not the case. Just by the nature of it being that localized, you're on the hook—or should be—for having a level of genuineness, sincerity, and trust.

What inspires you most about the engagement work you're doing with city government?
As a city leader, you can be involved in so many different ways. The change that local government can make in partnership with its citizens is real. You can see it, and in many cases, it can inform statewide and national policy. Or at least it should. There's a capability for democracy to exist and thrive on the local level, and that's what we're seeing from our work.