

TO: HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL

FROM: CITY MANAGER DEPARTMENT: COMMUNITY SERVICES

DATE: APRIL 6, 2009 CMR: 174:09

REPORT TYPE: STUDY SESSION

SUBJECT: Human Relations Commission Recommendation on Building Civic Engagement by Designing and Managing Productive Meetings

This is an informational report and provides background information for the Council study session on its 2009 priorities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes the Human Relations Commission's (HRC) recommendation to use City meetings to help realize the City Council's priority of civic engagement for the common good. The HRC believes that designing and managing productive meetings so that they increase the understanding and practice of civic engagement offer a considerable payoff. This report identifies ways to develop meetings to address civic engagement and proposes a pilot project to be considered for implementation by the City Manager as part of the Council's priority.

BACKGROUND

At its January 8th meeting, the HRC approved the submission of a concept paper and pilot project to the City Council that involves designing and managing productive meetings to increase the understanding and practice of civic engagement for city staff and residents. The concept paper evolved from numerous discussions between the HRC, Palo Altans for Government Effectiveness (PAGE), and the Palo Alto Mediation Program, regarding the City Council's civic engagement priority for 2009.

DISCUSSION

The HRC, in conjunction with PAGE, has taken one of the most common, every day events, meetings, and developed a concept paper and pilot project to design and implement "effective meetings" that will foster civic engagement and community building.

The concept paper identifies the stages of effective meetings:

- Preparing an agenda: state in a few lines what each item is about and what action is sought.

- Beginning the meeting: place the meeting in context and clearly express the meeting purpose; identify how the meeting relates to other issues and how it enhances civic engagement.
- Conducting the meeting: introduce meeting participants (when possible), expect disagreements and use techniques to achieve mutual understanding.
- Meeting debriefing: provide a meeting evaluation for all participants that assesses the meeting in terms of how consistently it was informative, fair and focused. Did the meeting achieve good civic engagement outcomes? How were the outcomes achieved? If the outcomes were not achieved, what accounted for the lack of success? Meeting leaders need to assess meetings to determine what changes are needed to improve future meetings.
- Potential tools for successful meetings: develop a job description and training for meeting leaders, e.g., chairperson and commission/committee members. Provide informational pamphlets to the public and skill building workshops/lectures on civic engagement. Have the City Auditor periodically conduct a study on social and civic capital development and civic engagement to assess achievements toward the Council's civic engagement goals. Establish a Civic Engagement Advisory Council (CEAC) composed of city staff and community members to advise the City Manager and perform outreach to the community.

The concept paper recommends the development of a Civic Engagement Pilot Project that would involve the CEAC. The CEAC would identify interested city boards and commissions to participate in the pilot project. The pilot project involves the following components:

- Training for participants, e.g., communication and facilitation skills;
- Workshops with participants to create customized civic engagement meeting materials for effective meetings;
- Observe and assess participants' meetings in order to enhance civic engagement outcomes;
- Develop, implement and assess the meeting evaluations for the participating commissions/committees.

The HRC has volunteered to be a participant if the pilot project concept is adopted by the City Manager.


In conclusion, the concept paper and proposed pilot project propose that, by designing and conducting public meetings that purposefully aim to achieve civic engagement, the City will have another means for becoming a more effective, more cohesive and more progressive community.

RESOURCE IMPACT

The HRC's civic engagement pilot project recommends development of civic engagement public information materials, e.g. pamphlets summarizing the skills, rules of the road, and anticipated civic engagement related outcomes of meetings. The HRC also recommends hiring consultants to conduct training sessions for pilot project participants and to assess and design meetings toward achieving civic engagement goals as stated in the Pilot Project description. The contract costs printed materials and consultant services would not exceed \$7,500. If the City Manager proceeds with the pilot program, staff would develop a funding plan.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Building Civic Engagement into Civic Business by multiplying the value of Meetings

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ATTACHMENT A

BUILDING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT INTO CIVIC BUSINESS

by

MULTIPLYING THE VALUE OF MEETINGS

The Palo Alto Human Relations Commission (HRC) and Palo Altans for Government Effectiveness (PAGE) are strong advocates of civic engagement. We believe that designing and managing productive meetings so that they increase the understanding and practice of civic engagement offer a considerable payoff. This joint paper and the attached outline of a pilot project are meant by the HRC and PAGE as a contribution to the work of the City Council and staff in moving civic engagement forward. The target audiences are those who lead and participate in meetings of Palo Alto public bodies. The HRC would itself volunteer to be one of the pilot projects noted at the end of this paper.

Introduction: What is the Opportunity?

The Palo Alto City Council adopted Civic Engagement as one of its four priorities for 2008 and on January 10th adopted Civic Engagement for the Common Good as a priority for 2009. When a Council priority decision is made, it's natural to look for the big steps that signal action on that priority to the community. This paper is not meant to replace such steps, but rather to look in an unlikely place and take one of the most routine things we do—hold meetings—and exploit its potential for responding to the Council's priority. Peter Block, one of the nation's leading thinkers about community building, noted in his 2008 book, *Community*, that . . .

What makes community building so complex is that it occurs in an infinite number of small steps . . . It calls for us to treat as important many things that we thought were incidental.

We believe that city meetings offer a spacious parcel of civic soil for cultivating civic engagement and thus community. So we have asked two questions: what would be different about meetings where enhancing civic engagement is the fraternal twin of the stated agenda; and how might those kinds of meetings be designed and managed? This intended contribution to your work on implementing civic engagement is about our answers to those questions.

Civic Engagement: a Definition

Civic engagement is part of a family of ideas including civic and social capital that are among the working parts of a well-functioning community. We are defining civic engagement as being a player, a stakeholder in how decisions are made as well as what those decisions turn out to be. Holding oneself and others accountable for the community-building aspects of both process and result is a critical element of civic engagement.

Breaking the term down into its two parts makes its meaning still clearer. "Engagement" signals more than just attending the meeting and making your point. If advocates only assert, then they aren't listening. There's no reason, then, to expect that others will listen to them. When no one is listening, there's no engagement. When, however, participants show up open minded but not empty headed, they're there to talk *and* listen. The talk should be about teaching and the listening should be about

learning. The setting that meetings provide must—if genuine civic engagement is the goal—be a potent enabler of teaching and learning.

“Civic” points to the public square but not just to that location. It’s also about the motives one brings into that special place where we work out shared issues. It’s about expressing one’s point of view in ways that illuminate its relationship to the well-being of the community and its members. In our view, “civic” is more process than picture, more verb than noun. “Civic” treats teaching, learning, empathy, and the cultivation of good will and trust as the building blocks of the agreements that define community well-being. Meetings need to make *civic* a basic element of how and why *engagement* happens. “Engagement” without a civic compass is scattered, noisy, and contentious; “civic” without authentic engagement is hollow, abstract, and uninspiring. “Civic” and “engagement” need to be joined at the hip.

Two community assets make civic engagement possible. One of these is *civic capital*. When citizens and staff develop skills in civic leadership and public processes, civic capital builds up. It enables them to see how the work they do promotes productive forms of engagement and a working sense of how a genuine community differs from a crowd. The other is *social capital*. It happens when enlarging staff’s and citizens’ knowledge of the community grows, when the civic work they do is personally meaningful, and when they get to know each other as people as well as individuals occupying roles.

The Analysis: Meetings That Grow Civic Engagement

Meetings often follow a predictable course: the agenda has been set, the meeting is called to order, and the agenda begins. From one perspective, this process is businesslike. From another, it is mechanical and, while decisions get made, seldom does it leave a glow of civic pride.

In following a civic-engagement-building meeting from its beginning to end, we can also see more clearly the kinds of tools that would help. Where possible, we have suggested in parentheses what sorts of civic assets are being built or reinforced.

Stages

1. Beginning the meeting

- a. Express the purpose and context of the meeting so that all the participants can appreciate what sort of a public process they will be part of and what their contribution can be. Design the process in a way consistent with civic engagement development. Clarify problems and assumptions; be sure the necessary facts and other materials are available. (Civic capital)
- b. Prepare the agenda so that it states in a few lines what each issue is and what result is sought (i.e., avoid using so few words that the topic is only named, leaving no clue why it is on the agenda).
- c. Make available different models for different kinds of topics, situations, and results, e.g., dialogue, working through conflict, having difficult conversations, etc. (Civic capital)
- d. Make the connections to other agencies or events clear, as well as connections to related past and potential matters. (Social and civic capital)
- e. Have a workable idea of what elements of civic and social capital you intend to be integral to the meeting. Express a few ways in which you intend to make the meeting one that enhances civic

engagement?

2. Conducting the meeting, i.e., getting its business done in ways that enhance civic engagement.

- a. Clarify the aims so they are clear to all participants from the beginning.
- b. When needed, have participants introduce themselves to each other. (Social capital)
- c. Encourage participation. Enable all points of view to be respectfully heard. (Social capital)
- d. Build relationships in the process of solving problems, e.g., have individuals work together between meetings to clarify topics and analyze options. (Social capital)
- e. Expect disagreements and have a working knowledge of techniques for making the meeting safe for them. (Civic capital)
- f. Use techniques and supply information to assure mutual understanding (such as active listening and similar communications skills), issue clarification, and the assessment of the consequences of alternative decisions. (Civic capital)
- g. Build into the group's repertoire skills for dealing with unusual circumstances, e.g., conflict management. (Civic capital)
- h. Capitalize on staff support as a resource. (Civic capital)
- i. Manage the meeting so that new ideas can be absorbed and used. (Civic capital)

3. Doing a post-mortem, i.e., looking for the elements that made the meeting successful or disappointing as an enhancer of civic engagement.

- a. How well did participants understand and appreciate the reasons for the outcome(s)? (Common good)
- b. Did they feel that the process was informative, fair, and focused? (Common good)
- c. Did they learn something about getting public business done well that will be useful in another time and setting? (Civic capital)
- d. Were they able to empathize with others at the meeting regardless of what side of an issue they were on? (Social capital)
- e. Did the meeting make good use of everyone's time?
- f. Were the civic engagement goals of the framers and leaders of the meeting achieved?
- g. What accounted for good civic engagement outcomes?
- h. What accounted for disappointing civic engagement outcomes?
- i. How can future meetings be improved based on what was learned from this one?

Potential Tools for Success (to be created beforehand, borrowed from successful sources, or evolved by participants)

1. For the chairperson

- a. A charge expressing the chairperson's responsibility to run an effective meeting that promotes civic engagement.
- b. Initial training in meeting design and management as well as in models for different kinds of processes and for meetings that work for everyone, not just those one agrees with.
- c. Coaching and training in civic engagement and building civic and social capital.
- d. Techniques for evaluation of meetings and using evaluations to improve future meetings.

2. For the participants on the committee or commission

- a. A charge or job description that emphasizes the civic engagement aspects of meetings.
- b. A set of guidelines on how participants can contribute to making meetings instruments of civic engagement.
- c. Training and coaching similar to that provided to chairs.

3. For the involved public

- a. A pamphlet that describes the Palo Alto way of doing business such that civic engagement is a priority and describing the approaches and skills necessary to build it
- b. Means (e.g., workshops, lectures, day-long “internships,” etc.) for acquiring skills necessary to enhancing civic engagement.
- c. Tools for use by the public in evaluating meetings.

4. For the City Manager and Council

- a. A benchmark study of social and civic capital development and civic engagement to be conducted periodically by the City Auditor.
- b. A Civic Engagement Advisory Council (CEAC) composed of city staff and community members who can act both to advise the City Manager and to play an outreach role so that the ideas and tools can be exported to nonprofits and elsewhere. Its work would involve assessment of pilot projects, described next.

Learning Through Pilot Projects

Goal:

Design, run, and assess one or more pilot projects on making meetings more effective instruments of civic engagement. Using civic engagement (CE) trainers (they could be drawn from the Palo Alto Mediation Program or similar professional groups expert in group dynamics.), the outcome of the pilot would be to grow a greater understanding of what works, skill building techniques, learning how to apply ideas to practice, and how to expand the pilot(s) more broadly.

A written report from the CEAC would be provided to city staff, elected officials and the public describing the project and the outcomes achieved. The report would also contain recommendations for application of the tools developed by the project to other City entities.

Process:

1. Creating a pilot test project

The CEAC would be the steering committee for this pilot program. Its first task would be to identify public boards and commissions that would potentially be appropriate for a pilot project. A solicitation letter would be sent to these public bodies to determine initial interest. The CEAC would meet responders for an in-depth discussion of the proposed project. Based on the responses, it would select one or more city commissions or committees for the pilot project. Note that the HRC will volunteer to conduct one of the pilot projects.

2. Preparation

The CE trainers would conduct in-depth discussions with the members of the selected bodies and also observe one or more public meetings conducted by them. Based on the further information

obtained, the CEAC would design the components of the pilot project, with expectations for all participants including qualitative and quantitative outcomes.

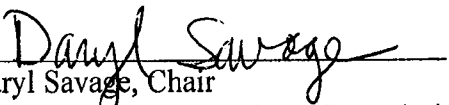
3. Potential components for pilot projects

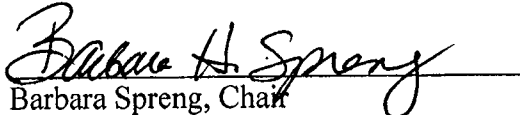
- One or more training sessions with the participants. The training would include communication skills and facilitation skills as well as training in understanding civic engagement principles such as building civic and social capital. The training could include interactive exercises such as role plays of meetings.
- Workshops among professionals and representatives of the participating groups that would include creating custom versions of the civic engagement materials for creating effective meetings that include debate and respect, speaking and listening, and advocacy and empathy. The parties would also interactively develop their versions of guidelines for chairs, members, the public, etc.
- Collaborate on two or more meetings of each pilot group, including coaching and further observation at these meetings followed up with in-depth debriefing sessions with the participants. These would examine what assisted and what interfered with meeting the civic engagement objectives.
- Focused additional training sessions when need is revealed by the debriefing conclusions.
- Development and administration of evaluations and surveys for both the piloting group and the participating public to determine the impact of the project, including the extent to which civic capital, social capital and other civic engagement goals have been realized.

Conclusion

Designing meetings as instruments of enhancing civic engagement is like building the base of a pyramid. There will be other programs higher up, such as a leadership program and a citizens' academy, but the base is where the foundational concepts, skills, and attitudes begin. This paper and proposed pilot program are about how to use meetings to foster civic engagement and attention to community building and the common good. It will, we hope, be read as an unfinished but provocative sketch of an idea to make Palo Alto a more effective city and a more cohesive and progressive community in which to live and be an engaged and productive citizen.

Respectfully submitted:


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