Summary Title: Downtown Streets Team

Title: Downtown Streets Team Response to City Request for Information on Harassment Allegations

From: City Manager

Lead Department: Planning and Development Services

Recommendation
This is an informational report and no Council action is required.

Background
This report transmits the Downtown Streets Team’s (DST) response to the City Council’s request for a report on the harassment allegations by former employees of DST against executives at the firm and covered by local media. On June 15, 2020, the City Council adopted the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) draft 2020-2025 Consolidated Plan and draft 2020-21 Annual Action Plan. The Council also discussed the sexual harassment allegations against DST and directed staff to request a report on the harassment allegations by the end of August.¹

Staff reached out to DST and received the first of two letters included in Attachment A. After an initial review, staff communicated to DST that the letter did not appear responsive to the Council’s request for a report and sought additional information. A second letter was transmitted to the City by DST, which is also attached. Following receipt of the second letter, the City’s Human Resources Director engaged the DST’s Director of Human Resources, Chief Operating Officer, and Board Chair to encourage the agency to submit a more comprehensive report. The DST maintains it has been responsive to the City Council’s request and transparent about the harassment allegations. As such, DST’s position is that the attachments are sufficient. These letters are being transmitted to the City Council for its consideration; no further staff

¹ Action Minutes from City Council Meeting:
https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/civicax/filebank/blobdownload.aspx?t=48693.29&BlobID=77871
action is anticipated on this matter.

Attachments:

Attachment A: Correspondence Provided By Downtown Streets Team  (PDF)
September 16, 2020

Dear Palo Alto City Councilmembers,

I am writing to address your request for a response to the allegations made against the organization.

Downtown Streets Team has always taken all claims seriously. The allegations are the first of its kind in our history. The Board of Directors proactively hired a top investigatory firm to launch a comprehensive, independent, and confidential examination of the claims. Their findings were that most of the claims were completely unfounded, and the others were greatly exaggerated. Furthermore, a clear and confidential internal reporting process was in place during the time of the allegations, which was not accessed by the claimants.

The allegations are many years old, and Downtown Streets Team has made many organizational changes to ensure we are above reproach and that each employee’s experience is a positive one.

Since then, we have hired a Director of Human Resources with direct access to the Board of Directors and a Board-level HR governance committee. Furthermore, we’ve signed up as a co-employer with the top professional services provider in the Country, Insperity. This partnership comes with increased HR resources and training for each employee and the organization as a whole. Lastly, we’ve updated our employee handbook with high professional standards and two avenues to report complaints anonymously.

Our Board and leadership team are confident that these changes will provide more layers that this type of allegations will not happen again. As an organization, we have improved as we have grown from two employees to eighty.

As the hometown of Downtown Streets Team, we are incredibly grateful for the City of Palo Alto’s continued support of our mission, which is more critical than ever. Please reach out if you have any questions or need anything else from us.

With our deepest thanks,

Elfreda Strydom
Chief Operations Officer – Downtown Streets Team – www.streetsteam.org
(650) 504-6565 • elfreda@streetsteam.org
October 15, 2020

Dear Palo Alto City Councilmembers,

1. In regard to the investigation conducted by an investigatory firm:
   a. What was the scope of the investigation and/or specific charges being investigated as stated in the investigatory report?
      DST retained the services from Law Offices of Amy Oppenheimer to investigate a complaint DST received from five former female employees with various concerns stemming from their time at DST.
   b. How many interviews were conducted?
      1) An online survey was sent to all employees to assess the current work environment after many changes and updates to the policies, procedures and practices to address some of the concerns.
      2) Twelve individual employee interviews were conducted.
   c. How long did the investigation take?
      Approximately 11 months.
   d. How many hours of work went into the investigation?
      Law Offices of Amy Oppenheimer spent 250 hours on the investigation
   e. How many pages was the final report?
      44 pages
   f. What standard was used for the outcome or finding? (This is typically stated in the written investigatory report.)
      The investigator analyzed the facts and determined whether the allegations were with or without merit under a preordinance of investigation standard. “Preordinance of the evidence”, for the purpose of this Report, means that the evidence on one side outweighs, or is more than, the evidence on the other side. This is a qualitative measure, not a quantitative standard.

2. In addition to the appointment of a Human Resources Officer, what changes have been implemented (e.g., new or changes to policies, practices or other organizational/systemic changes)
   In addition to appointing a Director of Human Resources, the Board has created an HR governance committee to oversee all policies and procedures. Furthermore, DST signed up as a co-employer with the top professional services provider in the Country, Insperity. This partnership comes with increased HR resources and training for each employee and
the organization as a whole. We’ve updated our employee handbook with high professional standards and two avenues to report complaints anonymously.

3. What tangible outcomes have been achieved since the appointment of a Human Resources Officer and other changes described in #2? The HR Director has been educating DST management on HR best practices such as the employment life cycle, evaluating performance, developing employee relationships, and incorporating different perspectives and views. Lastly, the HR Director has been responsible for building and managing a new system to recruit, attract, hire, train, and motivate DST’s employees. The change in policies and training motivates DST staff to perform at the highest level possible and maintain an organizational culture of high morale.

With our deepest thanks,

Elfreda Strydom
Chief Operations Officer – Downtown Streets Team – www.streetsteam.org
(650) 504-6565 • elfreda@streetsteam.org