CITY OF PALO ALTO
MEMORANDUM

TO: Palo Alto City Council Colleagues

FROM: Mayor Larry Klein and Council Members Pat Burt, John Barton and Yoriko Kishimoto

DATE: April 7, 2008

SUBJECT: Colleague’s Memo Requesting support for a pilot program involving “Open City Hall” on-line Civic Engagement Initiative

Background:

The City Council has adopted Civic Engagement as one of its top four priorities for 2008. We would like to initiate a pilot “Open City Hall” on-line service to create another channel to increase citizen participation in decision-making.

We face great challenges in protecting our economic base, re-investing in our infrastructure for the 21st Century, continuing to provide a diverse array of services, and addressing our generation’s environmental protection crisis. We must be more innovative in soliciting ideas and feedback from our residents and businesses.

Palo Alto residents have strong opinions and valuable ideas to share, but few can regularly attend City Council meetings. Between family obligations and work, it is challenging to attend meetings, and many find it intimidating to speak in public.

Proposal:

We propose using our city website to pilot an “on-line” channel for the community to provide their input about council agenda items supplementing the public input we already receive. This is the way it would work:

When an agenda is published for an upcoming meeting, substantive agenda items can be posted to the Open City Hall page of the City website (see attached). An announcement is emailed to interested Palo Alto subscribers who visit the page.
Participants can:
* read the agenda item and other information posted by City Officials
* read what other Palo Alto residents and businesses are saying, and
* post their own opinion

If on-line forums are not structured carefully, blog debates can quickly drive away many civil, thoughtful participants. We propose implementation of a pilot trial of the Kitchen Democracy forum. From pilot programs including over 3500 participants in the East Bay, the prototype at KitchenDemocracy.org has been promising in promoting civil discourse through several key features:

* A yes/no framework to focus comments towards the issue and away from one another. Open City Hall would summarize key yes/no questions from a given agenda item. Participants must classify their statements as “yes”, “no”, “maybe” or “neutral”. This enables the website to display the “yeas” and “nays” on separate pages, discouraging writers from attacking specific opposing viewpoints.

* One statement per issue: Participants are limited to one statement per issue. They are free to change their statement or make it as long as they wish, but not make multiple statements. This discourages individuals from dominating the forum with multiple posts.

* Anonymous comments from real people. Participants have the option to sign their statements or remain anonymous. They are required to confidentially provide their real name, home address and email address. Along with other security measures, this free, confidential registration makes it difficult for any single person to post multiple times under fictitious identities.

Request:

It is our hope that the net result is that Open City Hall can significantly increase participation.

We therefore ask our colleague’s support in directing staff to bring this item to the Policy and Service Committee to identify and clarify any policy or implementation issues such as:

* working with City Clerk and City Attorney’s office to ensure adherence to Brown Act and other legal requirements
* responsibility for framing and posting the questions for public feedback
* initial budget for pilot program and funding source, with proposed $50 per agenda item
The Problem

Even though most Palo Alto residents have strong opinions about Palo Alto issues, it's tough fitting City Hall meetings into their busy schedules.

At the same time, busy Palo Alto City Officials can't talk to every resident, and it can be hard to see trends in residents' opinions.

Our Response

Open City Hall is a dedicated on-line channel for citizen participation. This means:

- busy Palo Alto residents can participate in the public comment process on City Agenda Items, and
- busy Palo Alto City Officials can inform residents while seeing trends and good ideas from residents -

all from the convenience of everyone's own computer on their own schedule.

www.PeakDemocracy.com
The Public Comment Process...

How It Works

As soon as the agenda is published for an upcoming meeting, agenda items are posted on the Open City Hall page of the Palo Alto City website. An announcement is emailed to all Palo Alto subscribers, who then visit that page and

- Read the agenda item and other information posted by city officials,
- Read what other Palo Alto residents are saying, and
- Post their own opinion.

Palo Alto City Officials can read those statements and analyze trends using Open City Hall analysis tools. In a fraction of the time it takes to listen to comments at city hall meetings, City Officials gather input from 10 to 20 times as many residents – and from a much broader cross section of Palo Alto residents, too.

www.PeakDemocracy.com
For Busy Palo Alto City Officials...

Full Service Solution

No Palo Alto information technology resources required

Open City Hall is available from Peak Democracy as a service. There is no need to install special software or use any internal technology, expertise or infrastructure. Start your Open City Hall service simply by pasting a couple lines of html (provided by Peak Democracy) in one of your website pages; everything else happens on Peak Democracy's servers.

No significant change to existing process

Follow your existing process for setting and documenting agenda items; our Open City Hall service inserts them into your on-line forums. The only additional task required is to name each agenda item and write a short yes/no question which starts the community discussion. Peak Democracy will handle the rest.

www.PeakDemocracy.com
Civil, Civic Engagement

The Internet in general – and blogs in particular – can be nasty and contentious. Open City Hall is not a blog. Designed to foster civil, civic engagement, Open City Hall is a safe place where personal attacks and off-topic rants happen rarely, if ever.

The 'yeas' and the 'nays' appear on separate pages, keeping comments focused on the issue, rather than attacking each other. Moreover, residents can post their statement signed or anonymously, making it easy to express an opinion without interfering with important relationships with others in the Palo Alto community.

Residents are restricted to only one statement per issue, and are required to confidentially provide their real name, home address and email address to Peak Democracy. Along with other security measures, this free, confidential registration makes it very difficult for any single resident to post multiple times about one issue and dominate the forum.

www.PeakDemocracy.com