TO: HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL
FROM: CITY MANAGER DEPARTMENT: CITY MANAGER’S OFFICE
DATE: OCTOBER 6, 2008 CMR: 398:08

REPORT TYPE: REPORTS OF COMMITTEES AND COMMISSIONS

SUBJECT: Policy and Services Committee Recommendation to Approve a Pilot Program to Implement “Open City Hall” Online Service

RECOMMENDATION
The Policy and Services Committee and staff recommend that the City Council approve a pilot program to implement “Open City Hall” online service as an additional means to further engage the residents of Palo Alto in the decision making process and adhere to one of Council’s top four priorities (Civic Engagement) for this year. The elements of the pilot program are as follows:

- 6-month pilot program at a cost of $6,200 ($5,000 set up fee + $200/month)
- Hosted on www.OpenCityHall.com
- Initially, staff will select 1-3 key Council agenda items to use as discussion topics each week on the forum during the pilot program
- Peak Democracy staff (founders of Open City Hall) will monitor the forum
- An evaluation of the program will be conducted at the end of the 6 month period. Guidelines to indicate the success of the program have yet to be determined; however, staff has identified key areas to evaluate:

  - **Participation** – Staff will look at the amount of traffic the forum attracts and how much of the participation comes from residents who are unable to attend the Council meetings. This is the primary demographic the program looks to target. This will help staff identify outreach and marketing methods.
  - **Discussion Items** – Staff will monitor the number of comments that each discussion item draws in. This will give staff a sense of the capacity to either handle more or less discussion items per week.
  - **Resources** – Staff will evaluate the overall benefits of the program relative to the cost of implementation, which includes staff time and other necessary resources. Staff will keep a record of the time and resources spent on the program.

COMMITTEE REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS
On September 9, 2008, the Policy and Services Committee reviewed and discussed the “Open City Hall” online discussion forum (CMR: 366:08, Attachment A), and voted 3-1 to recommend
that Council approve the implementation of a 6-month pilot program. Staff presented the
elements of the program and requested input from the Committee on three key areas:
marketing/outreach, prioritizing of agenda item(s) to be posted, and identifying success
indicators to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Committee members offered some initial
thoughts on the three areas and addressed technical and implementation questions to Peak
Democracy staff, who were in attendance to present the updated program to the Committee.

Discussion between staff, Committee members, and Peak Democracy staff revolved around the
technical aspects of the program. Peak Democracy staff stated that the site could be modified to
accommodate the needs of the City, such as linking City information from the site and providing
any necessary adjustments and updates to the site as the program progresses. Concerns regarding
the monitoring of the forum were also addressed. Peak Democracy staff assured the Committee
that their experience in working in cities with large community involvement will enable them to
handle the high volume of traffic that could potentially come through the site. Peak Democracy
would review all comments that are submitted and ensure a respectable turnaround time to post
each comment on the forum. At the request of City staff, Peak Democracy could post an update
of the results of the discussion item within 24 hours of the end of the Council meeting each
week. It was also noted in the discussion that the cost of the service changed from $50 per posted
item to a flat monthly rate of $200 with a $5,000 set up fee.

In regards to the three key areas of the program for which staff requested input, the Committee
offered suggestions for possible outreach outlets and decided that for the initial pilot program
only a few key agenda items would be posted on the forum for discussion. Staff would select the
key agenda items from each meeting for posting. In terms of evaluating the success of the pilot
program, several suggestions were offered, such as conducting a participant survey and looking
at other similar programs to see how they are evaluated.

The Committee passed the motion to recommend to the City Council approval of the 6-month
pilot program, at the end of which, the Committee will review and evaluate the overall benefits
of the program and then decide whether or not to continue beyond the pilot program.

ATTACHMENTS
Attachment 1: CMR: 366:08 (with all attachments)
Minutes from September 9, 2008 Policy and Services Committee meeting

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