



## CITY OF PALO ALTO OFFICE OF THE CITY CLERK

March 16, 2015

The Honorable City Council  
Palo Alto, California

### **Colleagues' Memo From Mayor Holman, Council Members Burt, Schmid, and Wolbach Regarding Strengthening City Engagement with Neighborhoods**

#### **GOAL**

Palo Alto residents are engaged and care deeply about proposals that enhance or may harm our quality of life. To further support strong neighborhood participation in civic affairs, we propose initiating several actions to better integrate the understanding, consideration, and actions of our City government with neighborhoods' interests and concerns.

#### **BACKGROUND**

The City has made great strides in making information available including the very informative Development Services Construction Updates and the Open Data Portal. Use of various social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and Next Door have enhanced City outreach and communication with citizens and neighborhoods. This memo seeks to build on those accomplishments with additional focus on communication with neighborhoods, adding much more face-to-face contact.

Palo Alto is comprised of 37 neighborhoods, each impacted by decisions that are considered or made by City government. Whether the event is led or supported by City planners, Public Works, Utilities, the City Manager's Office, outside agencies such as VTA, Caltrans, or even developments in another community, it is incumbent on the City to make best efforts to inform its citizens. Further, the neighborhoods often have very different characteristics and interests from one another as acknowledged in our Comprehensive Plan Goal L-3: "Safe, attractive residential neighborhoods, each with its own distinct character and within walking distance of shopping, services, schools and/or other gathering places".

The current "Know Your Neighbors" Grant Program provides grants for promoting neighbors getting to know one other. While this program has been very popular, frequent comments about the program include that the grant money is spent on permits for use of public facilities or street closure permits for block parties, leaving little funding for the event itself. The proposed programs below would be the City's first comprehensive neighborhood engagement initiative.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Based on research of other cities' programs and community members' comments, we recommend that the following proposed City actions be referred to the Policy and Services

## Committee:

1. Recognize neighborhood associations and provide placement on the City Community Partners webpage, <http://www.cityofpaloalto.org/partners> with links to a map of the general neighborhood area and to the association website or other contact information. The City should review the process for recognition in consultation with neighborhoods and explore agreement on some basic standards and requirements regarding governance and association responsibilities for outreach and inclusion, as a recognized neighborhood association.
2. For recognized neighborhood associations, the City should explore guidelines and costs for providing periodic free use of available public facilities for public meetings and events as well as insurance coverage under the City's policy.
3. Provide small, one-time start-up grants for neighborhood associations to be used to attend the United Neighborhoods of Santa Clara County's Annual Conference and toward neighborhood association initiation activities.
4. Support neighborhood associations in distributing relevant City information to members, including information about upcoming community meetings or events, notification about proposed projects in their neighborhoods, City initiatives, emergency preparation events, County proposals, Public Works or Utilities projects, Caltrain, VTA or neighboring communities' plans.
5. Each neighborhood association will be encouraged to identify a designated "Communications Officer" as information liaison with the City.
6. Hold annual town hall-style meetings with City Council representatives and appropriate City staff and focused on different regions of Palo Alto. The meetings shall encourage both individual and neighborhood association participation.
7. Evaluate creation of an Ombudsperson program with the neighborhoods to follow up on neighborhood or resident issues and facilitate conflict resolution when needed.

## **DISCUSSION:**

Certain of these proposals may be adopted and implemented ahead of others. It is our intention that the town hall-style meetings would commence early this year, and the Ombudsman program would likely take more time and possibly need to be considered in the budget cycle.

## **STAFF IMPACT:**

Staff impact and resources necessary to support this program may be significant, depending on the scope of the program components ultimately adopted. Research and discussion regarding impacts of the program will be necessary, including legal and risk implications along with staffing and funding aspects. These need not be deterrents to proceeding, just

acknowledgment that a more formal and interlinked relationship will also require some more explicit standards and monitoring and reporting. The most effective city neighborhood programs are formalized in this regard. Staff acknowledges that this discussion can first take place during the Policy and Services referral and discussion.

Department Head: Beth Minor, Acting City Clerk

