



City of Palo Alto

COLLEAGUES MEMO

DATE: May 24, 2021

TO: City Council Members

FROM: Council Member Cormack, Council Member Stone

SUBJECT: COLLEAGUES' MEMO REQUESTING COUNCIL REFER A PROPOSED PROGRAM ALLOWING NEIGHBORS TO DIRECTLY CONNECT WITH EACH OTHER AND A POTENTIAL VOLUNTEER NETWORK FOR THE CITY TO THE POLICY AND SERVICES COMMITTEE

Situation

Due to the pandemic, we have begun living more locally, seeing neighbors on the street and in the hallways who used to be elsewhere during the day -- at work, school, appointments, or activities. Many of us walk in our immediate neighborhoods, visit our closest park, shop at nearby stores, and order takeout from the nearest restaurants. Our neighbors constitute our closest community.

At the same time, the need for real-time information and action has increased, just when the city has fewer resources than before. We can see this in the desire for more services and need for immediate information about our open spaces, libraries, and other programs. The increased visitation to our parks and school fields has created more landscaping needs and trash.

In recognizing these needs and the new way in which we live and work, we recommend that the City consider creating a program to build neighborhood leaders. These ambassadors could be connected to the city to flow information and opportunities up, down, and across. The city and the people who live here would both benefit from establishing strong local connections who are plugged into the city's information structure.

Benefits

For the block, the benefit is to connect immediate neighbors to each other and the city, to help take care of themselves, and to provide knowledge about and volunteers for the city. Each block would have a team leader and develop according to the needs and interests of the immediate neighbors (this type of organization is sometimes called a mutual aid society). This program will help connect neighbors and create closer community connections, put residents in the lead by soliciting the needs of individual blocks through the neighborhood leaders, and connect blocks with the city in order to provide the necessary resources for greater community development.

For the city, there is the opportunity to target information to blocks and block leaders. For example, when the Utilities Department turned off electricity to blocks for pole replacements and needed to make a change after notification, having the capability to easily identify a point of contact would have helped reduce concerns about the requested changes. We have seen during these recent crises that people's need for timely and targeted information is increasing and while not everyone subscribes to or pays attention to the various social media platforms, they can be quickly reached with a virtual or physical note from a neighbor nearby whom they know and trust.

What ambassadors could do

- Create and maintain a list of neighbors including contact information and any skills, interests, or household items available to share, along with any pets or special needs in the household
- Communicate to the block on a regular basis about any changes in the immediate area like road or park renovations, back to school dates, new neighbors, etc.
- Identify needs for volunteers in the community, such as park/school weeding and clean up, or creating costumes for an elementary school play, and coordinate with the city, the school district, and other neighbor groups to do that safely
- Provide a welcome letter to anyone who moves into the neighborhood
- Support any existing ESVs and CoolBlock leaders and identify new ones, as needed and appropriate
- Schedule occasional social meetings (Zoom on Saturday mornings with coffee, a Fourth of July parade, or Sunday barbecues or soup suppers post-pandemic)
- Partner with the nearest PTA to share information about upcoming activities for the school that might need volunteers for or welcome attendance at events like concerts or games
- Support and promote Little Libraries and/or book swaps
- Consider sponsoring a family in Palo Alto or another community that is struggling during difficult times, or adopting a local business that needs support, or bulk ordering food from local farmers
- Provide an ongoing resource to City staff for feedback on proposed programs and other issues of general interest to residents

What the city could provide

- Recommended phone numbers, emails, and sites about how to solve problems within the city
- Localized community information events for park planning, notification about road work, or utilities outages
- A map for the city that shows blocks where leaders exist and where they are needed

- A monthly (virtual) meeting to share best practices among team leaders and invite city staff to share updates on parks and programs as well as opportunities to volunteer, etc.
- A monthly newsletter with highlights from team leaders
- Gloves and garbage bags and an extra pickup for park maintenance
- Sample welcome letters that neighborhood leaders can modify to meet their needs
- A venue to share templates for various communication and data keeping documents for neighborhood leaders to maximize efficiency and ease in implementing the program

Additional ideas and details

- The size of the block could vary up to 30 households, depending on what makes sense for the geography of the area or the design of the apartment or condo building
- A high schooler or college student living at home could be a great neighborhood team leader and anyone over age 16 is welcome to volunteer
- The city would not have access to any of the personal information that a team leader collects (e.g., names or ages of people in each house or apartment)
- This program would not be a channel for specific complaints. Those concerns should still go through the Palo Alto 311 app or other channels.

Existing programs

Our current neighborhood programs provide a communication process during crises and encourage reduced household use of greenhouse gases, so are not designed to fulfill the needs we have to share information and provide mutual assistance in an ongoing manner. The primary focus of this program is to help foster closer community connections and provide a channel for two-way, non-emergency information between the city and residents.

About 600 registered Emergency Service Volunteers (ESV) are part of the ESV program. ESV became an official program in 2010, consolidating the Block Preparedness Program from 2003, the Neighborhood Watch Program from the 1970s, the CERT program from 1999, and others. Its primary function is to provide information during an emergency that disrupts communication lines to our public safety professionals.

CoolBlock has 65-70 blocks participating. It began in 2012 as an experiment, then transitioned to an official city pilot program in 2016. Its primary function is to encourage households to reduce energy usage that contributes to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change.

While both of these city programs include a component of information gathering and sharing, creating a community of neighbors and an open channel of communication with the city is a secondary objective. However, both of these programs can help us think about how to best structure and organize the new program.

The existing neighborhood associations are not organized at a block level, nor affiliated with the city. Their strengths in broad communication and neighborhood events could be channels for the program to help identify block leaders and we hope and expect the neighborhood associations to partner with the city on this new program.

Resource Impacts

Referral of this matter to the Policy & Services Committee would have no significant resource impact. Depending on final scope, developing an entirely new program at this time could be extremely challenging in light of anticipated budget constraints. In order to advance the goals of this proposal, staff would recommend approaching this as a modification to the planned approach for existing outreach efforts. To minimize staff resource impacts, the Council should consider issues such as the following:

- Consider the program as a pilot through December 2021 designed for a predetermined number of participants
- Design the effort as a virtual (zoom) platform, to minimize in-person meeting logistics and capacity limitations
- Consider the pilot's focus areas, such as:
 - Supporting community meetings and conversations being planned this year, such as town halls, neighborhood community meetings, issue specific community engagement, community resilience trainings, etc.
 - Enhancing current City public communications and community engagement, where possible, by seeking input on established Council priorities such as sustainability and climate action, economic and community recovery, Race and Equity work, budget and fiscal sustainability, etc.
 - Maximizing engagement and communications at the neighborhood level through pilot ambassadors by:
 - Engage/utilize existing community networks, community groups and community non-profits such as neighborhood associations, Cool Block neighborhood blocks, Emergency Service Volunteers, Magical Bridge Playground, etc.
 - Leveraging other community networks that exist informally like book clubs, walking groups, etc.
- Set mutual expectations between the City and individuals participating as ambassadors of the program, such as:
 - Attending a City training, as well as regularly participating in webinars, neighborhood meetings, and online surveys to share input and inform their networks

- Receive invitations and act as a focus group, such as through a City online survey or informal Citizen forum where staff can gain input quickly, etc.
 - Share details of participating and other City information regularly with a neighborhood group leveraging existing and new community networks such as book clubs, block parties, neighborhood associations, walking/running groups, Cool Block neighborhood group, Emergency Service Volunteers, etc.
- Consider designating a Council Ad Hoc committee to help guide the pilot to help support program efforts and reduce staff resources needed to maintain the pilot

Next steps

Refer this concept for a program that allows neighbors to directly connect with each other and create a communication and potentially volunteer network for the city to the Policy and Services Committee. Since some of this is already happening organically in the community, the program should provide a way to enroll existing small groups of neighbors who have ambassadors/leaders and connect with existing ESVs and CoolBlock leaders who might want to expand their work. The program might include a steering committee of block leaders to help shape the program as it develops over time in response to community needs. Referring this to Policy and Services would provide the opportunity for existing programs and neighborhood associations to offer suggestions and for staff to assist in development.