



City of Palo Alto

Policy and Services Committee Staff Report

(ID # 12268)

Report Type: Action Items

Meeting Date: 5/11/2021

Summary Title: Update on Community Engagement Including Town Halls

Title: Update on Community Engagement Activities, Including Town Halls

From: City Manager

Lead Department: City Manager

Recommendation

Accept staff's update on the City's community engagement planning, including an update on town halls.

Background

Recently, the City Council asked that staff provide an update on Town Halls to the Policy and Services Committee. Previously, City staff presented an update on Town Hall planning at the Policy and Services Committee on May 8, 2018 as part of the City's community engagement efforts ([CMR #9174](#)). This was in response to a 2015 Council referral to Policy and Services Committee seeking to build on existing engagement platforms and add more face-to-face contact with neighborhood organizations. For the purpose of this report, the term "Town Halls" is used to describe meetings at which residents are invited to interact with City officials for the purpose of information sharing and dialogue, either on specific topics or for specific neighborhoods.

Discussion

The City of Palo Alto maintains an extraordinary level of community engagement on specific topics as well as ongoing communication on community programs and events. This update provides a summary of the City's 2021-22 community engagement plans including use of Town Halls to engage our community and neighborhoods. It also provides a summary of other plans underway on issue specific community engagement planned to offer a holistic view of the City's efforts underway. While balancing staffing and resource limitations, the City is implementing and planning several community engagement efforts now and in the coming fiscal year.

It should be noted that the pandemic-driven use of virtual meetings has significantly increased the City's ability to host community meetings as well as the ability for residents, businesses, and community stakeholders to participate. Without the pre-pandemic obstacles of travel, facility scheduling and logistics, and materials reproduction and distribution, the City has been able to

host a high number and variety of virtual meetings, and community feedback on the resulting opportunities for engagement has generally been very positive. As society emerges from the pandemic, the City's ability to sustain a desired volume and quality of engagement will depend on our ability to continue to offer effective means of engagement while meeting expectations for both in-person and virtual formats.

A summary of the City's anticipated engagement elements is noted below. All meetings and events are open to the public and are or will be added to the City's website calendar and shared via City communications channels, as they are finalized.

Town Hall Planning: The City is planning two town hall meetings through December 2021. The first Town Hall will be focused on the City's budget and scheduled for May 6, 2021. A second Town Hall is planned for this fall. The second Town Hall, while still in the planning stages could be set around a specific topic or a few topics to reduce the level of staffing resources needed to answer community questions. Based on past practice over the last two years, the City has used Town Halls for issue-specific engagement such as rail grade separations, and this may once again be a timely topic for Town Hall discussion. Alternatively, topics could include 2022 ballot measure concepts or other significant citywide issues.

Chat with the Mayor: Last year during the pandemic, the City initiated an online virtual Q and A session with the Mayor and City Manager. The format was informal and provided an opportunity for the public to email the City questions and then those questions were answered as part of YouTube episodes. This informal chat both informed and engaged the community during a period of rapidly changing public health conditions. In a similar format, the City is working to schedule a Chat with the Mayor engagement opportunity that provides a general question and answer session (no staff representation) as another way to inform the community and provide two-way dialogue on significant issues facing the community. These will be scheduled twice a year, once in the fall and once in the spring. For the coming fiscal year, the City is planning a session in September and then tentatively set for March 2022. For September's planning, staff is proposing a virtual format.

Neighborhood Town Hall Meetings: Envisioned as hosted by Councilmembers, a series of six community meetings in specific neighborhood areas are being developed in a virtual format. Two Councilmembers would be pre-designated to represent the Council and host each of these meetings. These are being planned monthly starting in August 2021 through early 2022. The neighborhood-specific meetings will be smaller group settings and an open format to gain input and answer community questions. The City is planning to have these be held virtually at least through the rest of 2021.

City's Boards, Commissions and Committees (BCCs): The City of Palo Alto has several Boards, Commissions and Committees focused on issues facing the community including general topics such as public art, planning and transportation, historic review, storm water management, human relations, parks and recreation and utilities to name a few. The BCCs advise the City

Council and host meetings, public hearings and establish Ad Hoc committees to engage the community on topics through the implementation of annual workplans. Through the pandemic, while committee meetings are virtual, these meetings have seen increased participation and engagement from community members. This serves as an additional form of community engagement.

National Community Survey: The City has a long-standing goal of engaging the community through the National Community Survey which benchmarks the City against other community surveys, engaging the community through a random sample of community members and new this year, a hybrid approach which also allows for online survey responses. Results of this community engagement are planned to be presented to the City Council through a study session set for May 17, 2021.

Issue-Specific Community Engagement: The City, on an annual basis, holds several meetings and generates online surveys to gain input from the community on specific community issues. Last year, the City conducted virtual meetings and online surveys on topics such as rail grade separations, sustainability, electrification, budget sustainability, Council priorities, transportation-related project planning, capital project planning like Charleston-Arastradero, Race and Equity, and more. A summary of current issue-specific community engagement planned for the coming several months include:

- **Summit on Women and Girls (linked to CEDAW):** To be held on June 12, 2021
- **Uplift Local:** Monthly community meetings
- **Uplift Local Business outreach:** Monthly business-focused meetings
- **Uplift Initiative *ArtLift*:** Through funding art projects and experiences in commercial corridors and neighborhoods, *ArtLift* will foster safe and creative ways to remain engaged in the arts, reconnect with each other, and recover together as a cohesive community. *ArtLift* is being presented in support of [Uplift Local](#) efforts already underway with the purpose of connecting the community together. For all *ArtLift* community engagement, go [here](#).
- **Race and Equity Events**
 - **Library and Community Services events**
 - Teens can explore *The Black Index* exhibition on Sunday, May 16 at 2 p.m. through a [workshop designed especially for teens aged 14 and up](#).
 - On Saturday, May 22, 2021 at 11:30 a.m., the Palo Alto City Library and Stanford's [The Bill Lane Center for the American West](#) are hosting a conversation between Rev. Kaloma Smith and author Julie Lythcott-Haims as they discuss antiracism in a community context. [What Does an Antiracist Community Look Like?](#) will examine what an antiracist community looks like and how can we work together to achieve an antiracist community.
 - The Library invites all community members to join the [Book to Action](#) program series. Throughout the month of May, the Library will be hosting a series of [virtual events](#) inspired by the book selection, [How to Be An Antiracist](#) by Ibram X. Kendi

and the themes of racial equity and antiracism. Events for the month include two book discussions, an Anti-Racism 101 Workshop hosted by [Showing Up for Racial Justice](#) (SURJ), a week of themed storytimes and more. The series also includes opportunities for participants to volunteer their time in a service project, through training on leading a community conversation on race hosted by the [Human Relations Commission](#), or by participating in an [Action Hours](#) event sponsored by SURJ.

▪ **Asian American & Pacific Islander Heritage Month Community Event Series**

- May is Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month. This year our Library and Community Services Department have come together to deliver a series of events for our entire community to recognize and celebrate the culture and contributions of our AAPI community. In addition, several community events are being scheduled and finalized. The Library is hosting a series author events focused on celebrating AAPI heritage. A few of these engagement opportunities include: [Virtual Author Event with Samantha Mui](#) on Thursday, May 13 at 7 p.m. Samantha Mui will introduce her cookbook, [Melting Pot: Stories and Recipes from a Chinese American Daydreamer](#), and talk about the process of crafting recipes into a book. Registration is required. [Virtual Author Event with Jeanette Arakawa](#) on Thursday, May 27 at 7 p.m. Jeanette Arakawa will discuss her autobiographical novel, [The Little Exile](#), based on her own experience as an internee in the 1940s at the Rohwer War Relocation Center in Arkansas. Registration is required. This event is sponsored and co-hosted by [The Bill Lane Center for the American West](#). Free copies of the book will be available in May at the Mitchell Park and Rinconada Libraries, while supplies last.
- **Budget:** An online Survey will be released on May 5 and, as mentioned above, a Town Hall is being hosted on May 6, plus several public hearings at the Finance Committee and City Council meetings. For all budget resources, go to www.cityofpaloalto.org/budget
- **Community and Economic Recovery**
 - Community Resiliency Workshop(s)
 - Wellness Wednesdays/Workshops: Held every third Wednesday of the month virtually. For event details and more, go to www.cityofpaloalto.org/bewell
 - Fiber to the Home: Update to be provided to the City Council on May 24, 2021
 - For all community and economic recovery resources, go to www.cityofpaloalto.org/communityrecovery
- **North Ventura Community Area Plan (NVCAP) Working Group:** Alternatives have been reviewed with the community through the NVCAP Working Group and will be presented for Council consideration tentatively this June.
- **Sustainability Climate Action Plan Engagement:** Recent Council action took place on this engagement effort. For all sustainability related programs and resources, go to

www.cityofpaloalto.org/sustainability or check out a recent blog post at www.medium.com/paloaltoconnect

- **Housing Element Process:** May 10 Joint City Council/Planning and Transportation Committee meeting, May 15 Community Workshop. For resources on this effort, go to www.cityofpaloalto.org/heupdate
- **Parking Action Plan Development:** The *Parking Action Plan* is intended to increase parking policy awareness of current parking efforts underway and inform about changes being considered. The plan will also advance a data-driven approach to parking policy changes and incorporate customer and stakeholder experiences of parking and transportation issues into the development of the plan. For more information on this effort, including an online survey, visit: [Palo Alto Parking Action Plan](#).
- **South Palo Alto Bike Ways Outreach Meetings:** Join the City for a series of upcoming events to share input and learn more about potential bikeway enhancements under consideration. Community engagement opportunities include: [Introductory Webinar](#) – Thursday, May 13 at 6:30 p.m. [Virtual Route Tour 1](#) – Saturday, May 22 at 11:00 a.m. [Virtual Route Tour 2](#) – Thursday, May 27 at 6:30 p.m. [Community Engagement Summary](#) – Tuesday, June 22 at 6:30 p.m. For all resources on this effort, go to www.cityofpaloalto.org/bikeways
- **Rail Grade Separation:** For all resources on this effort, go to connectingpaloalto.org

The summary above is not exhaustive, however, it provides context of the breadth of the City work underway to engage the community and neighborhoods on many areas of community interest.

Resource Impact

The activities described above require significant staff support, including communications staff, CMO and department staff in their areas of expertise.

Stakeholder Engagement

The City is committed to engage and inform the Palo Alto community. As noted, all events noted above are open to the public for all to attend.

The City is increasing use of the City website calendar as one way to inform and engage the community about upcoming meetings and events. The City's new website provides improved functionality, and organizational use to build awareness and integrate community events reinforce the anticipated increased reliance on the City website calendar and notifications for meetings and events for public information and coordination. The City also uses Nextdoor and Facebook calendars, when possible. The City shares information through digital platforms including existing communications channels like blog posts, websites, and social media channels including Nextdoor, Nixle and more. The City also uses its survey platform through OpenGov, called Open Town Hall to offer online surveys and polls as another engagement opportunity throughout the year.

Informally, the City also looks to neighborhood, educational, and community organizations with existing strong community connections such as Palo Alto Neighborhoods (PAN), Stanford University, Cool Block, Emergency Service Volunteers and many more to engage and inform. These existing groups share engagement opportunities with their community networks, acting as ambassadors for increase public dialogue and engagement.

Environmental Review

N/A