

Community Engagement Study Session Report May 17, 2007

(Draft)

Background

All Policy Board members and alternates were invited to attend and participate in a review of the City's Community Engagement Report and provide their comments and suggestions for inclusion in a draft response from the Policy Board to the City Council. The Policy Board had requested that this session be conducted at its March 26 meeting. The review was scheduled and all Policy Board members and alternates were invited to attend and participate. The study session was conducted on April 10.

Findings

The conclusions reached at this study session, after reviewing the Community Engagement Report, the results of the resident survey and the individual and group comments from the public meetings sponsored by NRP and the City, were as follows:

1. The primary conclusion, from the individual and group comments, as well as the survey results, is that place matters. Neighborhoods are important to residents as a place for connection and as an opportunity for making an impact on their environment. Neighborhoods have a scale that maximizes opportunity for involvement without sacrificing accountability or the potential for significant accomplishment.
2. Neighborhood organizations are effective mechanisms for involving, engaging and empowering residents. They have proven their capacity and capability over the past 17 years. Residents respect these organizations and give them credibility. The results from the January 2007 survey questions on the methods use to participate in decision-making processes are almost identical to the results from the City's random sample survey of residents (published in March 2006) for a similar question.
3. Neighborhood organizations need adequate funding to continue their efforts to support and improve neighborhoods.
4. The decision-making processes of the City are complex, time consuming, and often difficult to comprehend and navigate.
5. Although some processes and staff of the City work well with and for neighborhood residents, many do not. Public input is needed in decision-making processes when options are being developed and discussed, and not just, as the report concludes, when a government decision is being made.

6. Some City employees do not see community engagement as part of their job because it usually has no direct connection to their professional or positional responsibilities. The attitude of some elected officials, department heads, and department staff is one of tolerance of resident involvement, rather than acceptance, enthusiasm, encouragement or support.
7. The community engagement report cover letter from the City Coordinator identifies this report as the “background for two upcoming financial and policy decisions.” The first issue is “the allocation of future City funding (post-2009) for citizen participation contracts and other ongoing community engagement activities” and the second is the “purpose and operation of the Neighborhood Revitalization Program following its final year of authorized annual funding in 2009”. The report itself addresses neither of these issues.
8. Although the report mentions neighborhoods or neighborhood organizations, it makes no effort to assess the results achieved through any of the existing community engagement mechanisms. The flow diagram on page 5 does not include neighborhoods and residents as components in any City decision-making process, and not a single neighborhood organization representative, volunteer or staff member was among the “additional stakeholders” interviewed for the report (page 13). It is not surprising, therefore, that the community does not see itself represented in the City’s Community Engagement Report.
9. Residents and neighborhood organizations had no part in the development of the Community Engagement Report and, thus, have no ownership of its conclusions or recommendations. Residents and neighborhood organizations were not invited to participate orgiven the opportunity to participate later in the process. In addition, conclusions drawn from reports of task forces, work groups and meetings that involved residents and neighborhood groups were taken out of context from discussions that did not have a critique of community engagement as either their purpose or intent.
10. Residents want a good working relationship with their Council members and responsiveness from their elected officials.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the participants in the study session offer the following recommendations:

1. **Neighborhoods should be the building blocks for the City’s community engagement system.** The role of residents and neighborhood organizations in the present community engagement system of the City needs to be recognized and acknowledged. Using the existing and well established infrastructure capitalizes on the investment already made by the City and other jurisdictions, the local credibility

of the neighborhood organizations that serve neighborhoods, and the energy and commitment that they generate.

2. **Neighborhood organizations should be a primary mechanisms for reaching out to residents, providing them with information, getting them involved, and creating and maintaining their commitment to other residents, their neighborhood and the City.**
3. **Neighborhood organizations should be compensated for their community engagement activities.** An adequate level of funding should be provided to every neighborhood organization. This funding should cover operating costs such as staff, newsletters, meeting facilitation, resident outreach, etc. Project/program support should also be provided to allow neighborhoods to be partners on projects and to influence outcomes of programs, services, projects, and activities proposed for their neighborhood or identified as a neighborhood priority.
4. Creating organizations that cover large geographic areas (i.e. “**district councils**”) **will adversely impact the numbers of residents who participate in community activities and their levels of commitment and involvement.** Although larger organizations may be a secondary level of activity, they should not be the primary building block for a community engagement system.
5. **The decision-making processes of the City should be simplified and clearly explained** so that citizen participation, involvement and engagement can be improved.
6. **The City’s processes for involving residents need to be more consistent and considerate of residents’ schedules and conflicts.** Public hearings downtown in the middle of the day will not draw participation by working residents, and elected officials should not be surprised by residents’ failure to “get involved.”
7. **Community engagement and involvement should be part of every City employee’s responsibility and part of every employee’s performance evaluation.** Employees should be held accountable for the level of engagement they accomplish for processes and decisions that need resident involvement.
8. **The involvement, engagement and empowerment of residents should be welcomed and sought.** Doing the minimum required by law is not enough and minimizes the potential for residents to make significant contributions to their own community. The City should use an asset-based model of community engagement.
9. **The process for developing the Community Engagement System needs to be more inclusive and welcoming of citizen involvement** as it moves into its next stages than it was during the first phase of community engagement discussions.

10. Strong and viable neighborhood organizations support and encourage resident confidence in the City and its governance.