

AGENDA ITEM INFORMATION REPORT



Meeting Type: City Council Meeting

Meeting Date: 2/12/2024

Department: Legislative

Submitted By: Rob Schommer

AGENDA ITEM DESCRIPTION:

Resolution

Resolution 2024-R-07 TO REFORM CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND INCREASE EFFICACY THROUGH ESTABLISHING A PUBLIC PARTICIPATION POLICY

FISCAL IMPACT:

Cost: N/A **Source of Funds:** Choose an item.

Funds Currently Budgeted: Choose an item.

Notes/Implications: N/A

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND:

Background

As we can all agree, governance in today's times has changed and adapted with the onset of a variety of factors. One of those factors most influential has been increased access to information which has resulted in more interest and desired engagement by the citizens we serve. With the information superhighway adding lanes at a rapid pace, more discussions and ideas are being prompted. The majority of those ideas, discussions, and solutions are being generated not by our governmental processes, but rather by citizenship as public work.

Any organization or profession that wants to maintain the highest efficiency and effectiveness will continually evaluate its policies and processes to measure them against the most modern practices. A local government is no exception, and it seems we are at a time that certain policies and practices are in need of new definition in order to properly conduct our roles in governance.

Many forms of government have held onto traditional and frankly obsolete processes for citizen input. It was thought and believed that these methods met the definition of democracy; however, they are not citizen-centered. It has been common to watch democracy disappear 5 minutes at a time at a variety of public meetings and proceedings all over this country.

Problem

Most public meetings (including Bellbrook) follow the same traditional practices described above. It is necessary and prudent to have structure and processes in order to stay efficient and get the business of the City conducted. However, the time leading up to those official actions and decisions is where we can modernize our practices for true Public Participation. We shouldn't confuse "input" with

Participation, as they differ greatly. Input is what we sit back and receive, commonly at the point to discuss a potential decision. Participation is involvement in forming the decision from the beginning.

This proposal is not to point out fault in our processes, it is merely to improve upon them. The majority of public meetings require a limitation to the amount of deliberation and discussion; otherwise, items of business needing attended to may not be conducted. Turnout at many meetings is low, and typically includes the same attendees meeting after meeting. However, if there is a controversial topic, the turnout may be high, and the comments and deliberations can last long enough to change the date. Considering either option, the attending members of the public are either absent or angry: either way, this type of public input/participation is not as effective as it could be.

A wide range of opportunities and options exist through the recent and emerging technologies and ideas to create or enhance participatory formats. Legal framework keeps the traditional structure and requirements of some public meetings; however we need to be innovative to prevent processes and old practices from discouraging public officials and city employees from reaching out to citizens. The goal is greater transparency and a citizen-centered democracy. Combining the traditional and legally framed meetings with some innovative engagement efforts for true Public Participation, the traditional meetings can work by creating resolve and efficacy to public debate and discussion on issues.

Proposal

The goal is to begin a transition into true public participation through two main objectives: 1) Defining a Public Participation Policy, and 2) creating a practice of citizen-centered engagement.

Included in this briefing is a proposed/draft Resolution that formalizes a Public Participation Process and concept. In essence, the goal of the Resolution is to show a commitment from the governing body to the process, giving direction to all City operations under the concept, and finally, taking the innovative step to making public participation law!

The next piece, and perhaps the most important, is a concept and practice for citizen-centered engagement. It is proposed this as an entire program following our concept of "Engage Bellbrook". In the title, the goal is engagement, making sure to keep open sighted and minded and to be guided by the ideas and discussions generated through citizen-centered engagement.

Engage Bellbrook has a core of Me-We-Us thinking, transitioning the participants to focus on how to better the community by seeing how their ideas and input (me) affect the community as a whole (us).

The program starts with redefining our methods of citizen engagement. As detailed earlier, our current public meetings result in low attendance and nearly non-existent participation. The problem is, they are not citizen-centered. The transition involves taking the engagement TO our citizens, within their neighborhoods and places they meet, and create discussions to gather information and participation.

In brief, the program would consist of the following main components:

- Council Member Meetings:
 - When Council members attend events or host a meeting, they contribute if possible to take note of discussions that create ideas and participation for future



- decisions. During informal meetings and events, Council Members are there to moderate, not lead or control the conversation... *Citizen-Centered*
- Upon discussion of topics, a core Me-We-Us Thinking concept should be employed, and discussions moderated by questions such as:
 - What values/traditions are important to You?
 - What are the values/traditions of the community?
 - What are the threats to those values?
 - What can WE do in this neighborhood/organization/community to strengthen those values?
 - Notes, ideas, quotes, etc. should be taken and mapped into categories to create the ideas.
 - Council members should then publicly discuss and present the gathered ideas and discussions from attended meetings and events to identify commonalities and/or ideas or issues that are specific or in conflict.
 - Transition of Ideas to Actions
 - A regular review of the idea(s) discussed is conducted in order to determine if the idea should transition into an actionable agenda item. The meeting can provide a constructive discussion that no longer debates the idea but defines actions to implement it.

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Again, this in brief describes the core components wherein the Engage Bellbrook enhances engagement to become Citizen-Centered Engagement. Many other defining objectives are being prepared, and additional discussion and participation in the development is needed.

As we continue to transition our methods of governance, we must include enhanced citizen engagement. Administering the business of the City has allowed us to see areas where we need to look at opportunities for improvement, and in keeping with the overwhelming sense that everyone seeks more public participation, there is an opportunity to formalize and help develop a strong method of accomplishing it.