

# Capitola City Council

## Agenda Report

**Meeting:** January 22, 2026

**From:** City Manager Department

**Subject:** Introduction to Discover Capitola, the City's Civic Engagement Program



Recommended Action: Receive report.

Background: The City of Capitola conducts a recurring civic engagement program designed to educate the public on the internal operations of local government. The primary objective is to illustrate how the City Council and professional staff collaborate to serve the Capitola community. Historically, the program consists of four evening workshops held during the late winter or early spring of even-numbered (election) years. While the program is tailored to Capitola, enrollment is open to all interested stakeholders and regional partners. The program is built upon a collaborative model, utilizing direct interaction between participants, City Officials, and partner agencies.

The goal of each session is to foster informed community involvement and strengthen the lines of communication between the City and the community. Participants learn how decisions are made, how City funds are allocated, and how City departments operate together. In addition to internal presentations, the program features guest speakers from the City's partner agencies to provide a broader view of regional governance. Past participants have included representatives from the Soquel Union Elementary School District, Soquel Creek Water District, Central Fire District, and the Santa Cruz County Public Library System.

Civic engagement initiatives, often referred to as "Citizens' Academies," are a standard best practice in municipal government. Similar programs in the region include: the Town of Los Gatos, Leadership Los Gatos; the City of Scotts Valley, Citizens' Academy; the City of Half Moon Bay, NET Community Academy (Network–Engage–Transform); the City of Watsonville, Watsonville Academy; and the City of Santa Cruz, (department-specific) Citizens' Police Academy.

Administering this program is a resource-intensive endeavor, requiring significant staff hours to coordinate sessions, develop presentation materials, and facilitate the two-hour workshops. Given current staff capacity and community demand, the City has found a biennial (every two years) schedule to be the most sustainable model.

The program is intentionally scheduled during election years to serve as a foundational resource for residents considering public service. By providing an in-depth look at City operations before the filing period, the Academy helps potential candidates make informed decisions about running for office.

Discussion: In anticipation of the 2026 session, staff initiated a redesign of Capitola's civic engagement program to create a dynamic, engaging, and community-focused experience. Now branded as "Discover Capitola," the new program aims to encourage greater public interest and communication between the City and constituents. If successful, the 2026 session will serve as the new pilot model for future election-year programming.

Discover Capitola's curriculum was developed through research of other successful civic engagement programs from neighboring jurisdictions and input from past participants and City staff. The program will consist of four workshops scheduled outside of traditional business hours to maximize accessibility for working participants. The program will offer participants an overview of the Capitola community, including a transparent view into the "how" and "why" behind City services.

The four sessions are designed to promote public participation, help residents better understand how the City works, and frame the City's role within the larger community.

### **February 11: Capitola 101**

- Introduction from Mayor, "State of the City" presentation by City staff, highlights of current and upcoming City projects from Public Works and Community & Economic Development Departments.

### **February 24: Public Safety**

- Presentations from Capitola Police Chief and Central Fire Chief, tour of Capitola Police Department.

### **March 3: Local Business**

- Presentation from City staff and the Capitola Business Improvement Area and Capitola & Soquel Chamber of Commerce.

### **March 19: Community Identity**

- Presentation from the Historical Museum on the history of Capitola, discussion of youth and adult programming from the Recreation and Community Services Department, and a presentation from the Santa Cruz Public Library System.

Each session is structured to facilitate interactive dialogue between presenters and participants, peer networking opportunities, and direct engagement with City leadership. During each session, staff will be seeking feedback from participants to ensure that Discover Capitola remains participant-centric and that the curriculum remains adaptable. Discover Capitola formally concludes at the City Council meeting on Thursday, **March 26**. During the meeting, the Council will formally recognize participants for completing the program.

The new program has been promoted through a press release, strategically placed print flyers throughout Capitola, social media outreach, inclusion in the *Capitola Waves* newsletter, and targeted email outreach to community stakeholders and previous City Council applicants. Those interested in participating must complete a brief application (link listed as Attachment 2) by January 28. As of January 16, the City has received 17 applications.

Fiscal Impact: None, staff resources to manage the program were included in the FY 25/26 Budget. While a few local civic academies charge a fee for participants, the Capitola program is free. Several civic engagement programs held at local agencies are budgeted at \$10,000 or more and include meals and transportation for participants.

#### Attachments:

1. Promotional Flyer
2. Link to Application: <https://portal.laserfiche.com/p0099/forms/3RFSe>

Alignment with 2025-2029 Strategic Plan Priority: Accountable Government; Healthy Families, Communities, and Environment.

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