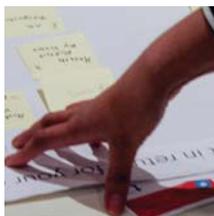


**Public Comments**  
on the Preliminary Outline of the  
Civic Engagement Handbook



**City's Response**  
to Public Comments on the  
Preliminary Outline of the Civic  
Engagement Handbook





# Public Comments

**Below are the comments received on the City's online comment board in response to the posting of the Preliminary Outline of the Civic Engagement Handbook. Feedback received informed the complete draft, posted for community review in August through September 2013. The comments have been grouped by category for response, provided below.**

***Janet King: June 29, 2013:***

June 29, 2013

First, I sincerely commend the city government for undertaking this civic engagement improvement project. Citizen participation and satisfaction with its outcome are primary indicators of a community's health. The symptoms of discord that have been all too evident in recent years within our city threaten to undermine our ability to do collectively what we must do to create a better future for the city we all value- beyond its definition as a place to live- but as our legacy.

My experiences in civic involvement within the city (though a 40 year resident) began only in recent years. These experiences inform my assessment of the civic

engagement improvement process and the product so far produced. The four meetings I attended left me, and I suspect I'm not in any way alone in this, with a sense of blur. As with my frequent exposure during my career, post-it note, flip chart, and read out sessions- even with the addition of quality web content- do not leave one a cohesive sense of accomplishment. Now, with the draft civic engagement handbook outline in hand, we have our first real product for evaluation.

My reactions to each page, with copious annotations, both editorial and content specific, are enclosed. I believe they evidence my seriousness as does my attendance at each meeting and respectful exchanges with Carrie Beach throughout -Kudos to Carrie I convey here all too briefly.

My review of the draft outline led me to the following recommendations:

1. The process be halted temporarily before proceeding as suggested below. Why? The draft outline fails, I believe, to provide an adequate foundation for further development toward a handbook. The remedy will require the infusion of substantive expert citizen analysis and input to rectify

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deficiencies and to strengthen the outline's substance in all aspects but particularly the framework (flow process chart) on page 5- and outcome statements and measures.

2. A new civic engagement team be formed. I recommend that the team described in the preamble to the draft outline (page 3) be expanded beyond the ONE citizen representative to include a select group of those most expert in our city's civic engagement to date. It is time for an extraordinarily rich resource to be tapped (see specific suggestions in the note found at this end of this letter). No other resource than those who have invested of their time, intellect, and knowledge of our city, and who have expressed the strongest criticism of the city civic engagement process, can produce the most desirable and credible outcome- a handbook seen as valid, balanced, informed and addressing the realities we have lived through. A pledge by all team members to sincerely collaborate and cooperate will be essential- overcoming what may be an undercurrent of distrust and skepticism, if not cynicism, as the process progresses.

3. A cohesive civic engagement outline be drafted and presented to Council for approval and use within a test environment. The product of the newly augmented team's collaboration, this civic engagement draft outline, would be presented to City Council in October if it has reached a satisfactory stage for approval- retaining its status as a draft. With their approval, this draft would be authorized for application, within a test environment, to the 4 projects cited at the June 24 meeting as those next to be addressed by the city (Public Art, Eisenhower West Transportation Small Area Plan, Storage Water Plan, Bicycle Master Plan- if my notes serve me).
4. The test of the draft outline/framework be used to create the civic engagement handbook.

The experience gained in applying the draft outline to the 4 test projects will inform the team (city staff and citizen experts described in 2 above) as they revise the outline/framework and move forward to expand it into a full handbook.

It cannot be overstated. The credibility of the civic engagement principles, outline, and, ultimately, the handbook will be seen in every significant undertaking

of our city- beyond the 4 test project- to their successors- to the budget- and so very significantly to the revision of the city's Strategic Plan.

Rushing to meet the currently set out schedule for this approval process will fuel skepticism, undermine our ability to productively utilize one of our city's most valuable human capital resources, those citizen already seriously engaged, and, in my estimation, thereby deprive the city of that strong foundation of a healthy community, pride in the collaboration of civil servants and engaged citizens.

Again, I commend the city on this serious undertaking. The influence of the work begun, if pursued to completion with the deliberate structure I have suggested, has, I believe, a significantly heightened likelihood of profoundly and positively influencing the building of a future for Alexandria - about which current, and, very importantly, successive generations of our citizens will be justly proud and grateful.

Sincerely,  
Janet E. King

Notes on:

Team Expansion Considerations:

Citizen expanded participation: As the number of citizens attending the civic engagement meetings decreased (the proportion of city staff, facilitators- constant or growing), there remained those who consistently showed up -many steeped in civic engagement. These are also the faces which are also familiar at city hall and whose voices ripple through the city's press. From these, the candidates must be drawn starting with one of our city's Living Legends who also serves as a co-chair of the Federation of Civic Associations. The list's composition (and size- recognizing the limits of productive discussion), would be defined by these citizens themselves. While we look to the principles of civic engagement as our "thou shall's", we owe it to ourselves to draw upon the absolutely essential perspective and insights into the "thou shall not's"

City Staff expanded participation: My suggestion regarding staff participant expansion is predicated upon the following. While I have re-sequenced the Principles in hopes of producing a better flow and logic, I moved one for which I have a personal affinity (professionally as well) that of Evaluation to the last position, not

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because it is less important, but because it is relevant to all other principals and to overall success. As the City Manager has embraced performance management, it is clear that measurement is seen in our city as a critical tool -borrowing on the adage “What you don’t measure, you don’t manage”. The addition of a member of the performance management staff- to the team -as an adjunct resource -would markedly enhance this endeavor as one looks at “outcomes” -and their measurement.

Document format for future public comment- and final production.

In the course of preparing to comment on the draft outline, I printed it. This is the only way I can seriously evaluate content - in printed form -as is clear from my annotated copy. In so doing, I used a substantial supply of color ink. The pictures are extraneous as I believe they will be to the final product, the handbook. We know that 160 individual -the combined count of citizens, staff and other city officials attended the first meeting -with a lesser number of citizens the following meetings. Artful, as they are, photographs from various angles- are costly and, from my perspective, clutter. A few, a very few, might be used. Mine is not the only voice on this one. Please help me conserve paper and ink in the

future for this and other city documents. Thank you. Enclosures to this letter:

1. List of Principles -with re-sequencing suggested to improve flow & logic
2. Annotated copy of the June 20 civic engagement draft handbook outline.

**Dave Cavanaugh: July 24, 2013**

Thanks for the opportunity to comment on the June 2013 Preliminary Draft of “What’s Next Alexandria Civic Engagement Handbook.

I originally welcomed the opportunity to participate in a series of meetings. The “What’s Next Alexandria” initiative was billed as a conversation on civic engagement, how Alexandrians can best participate in public decisions that shape the City and reach agreement on principles that will guide civic engagement. This was a blatant attempt by City officials to quell the divisive debates surrounding the Waterfront Plan and the Beauregard Small Area Plan.

I was hoping for more given the length of time, City support and funding for the initiative. I was hoping the series of meetings would outline a process that

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would fundamentally improve public outreach, civic involvement, and collaboration. Instead, after nearly a year, the Preliminary Draft Handbook contains general guidelines and principles that are nice but do little to improve the current process. The Handbook advocates principles of behavior, City staff monitoring of the civic engagement process and reporting or recommending improvements, recruiting community members to play supportive roles and providing facilitation training, all of this pales in contrast to what could have been.

The City currently engages the community at times not in a constructive manner. Consequently, citizens feel decisions have already been made and commenting is futile. Citizens are not actively engaged in identifying issues, considering and understanding options, working with staff to resolve issues. Instead hard and fast timetables are set by City staff with limited or no consultation with the community; a variety of meetings (uncoordinated) are scheduled; often with short notices, in rapid succession, with no agendas, and limited public input. Meetings with the citizens are often dominated by staff presentation and they evolve into meetings informing the community of progress being made by staff and actions taken by various commissions.

I suggest the City not waste any more time or money on the Handbook. Staff was given an impossible task given the very limited scope of the public initiative started in September 2012. The Handbook is disappointing and not a major achievement.

Time and money would be better spent taking the information gathered at the meetings, recognize major dissatisfaction with current process. I suggest “What’s Next” include a recommendation creating a taskforce to evaluate the current process, consider alternatives for improvement and make recommendations on reasonable steps to reduce costs, confusion, delays and improve participation and the quality of citizen involvement. After several years of contentious debates on land use and planning issues that divided the community, a more serious effort is needed to improve public participation making Alexandria a more attractive and livable community.

Harnessing public involvement and support on issues important to the community is a difficult task. It is not easy. But it should not be so easily set aside with a handbook espousing platitudes that have little impact on improving civic involvement and participation.

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**Don Buch: July 29, 2013**

I agree with Dave Cavanaugh – this is a disappointing product given all the time and effort that has been devoted to it. The Beauregard Plan was supposedly one major catalyst for “What’s Next” but so far the City appears to have missed the message it offered. Whatever its flaws, it came about because the community was unhappy with consultants from out-of-state showing up once a month and telling us what they (and the City administration) were going to do and how much we were going to like it. The initial lack of citizen involvement precipitated what became a very different process.

Despite that history it appears the City did not learn from it. The composition of the What’s Next team “spanned multiple departments” (there’s a lengthy list) and “a resident” - a resident! And the inevitable consultants. Yet again this fuels the perception that the City believes they know best with the implication that 10 or so from City Hall and one resident is about the right balance – to determine and address residents’ concerns!

For now the focus was/is apparently to center around “planning”. It would be interesting to see the What’s Next attendance figures from meeting to meeting, broken down by the various constituencies (elected officials, City Administration officials, Planning staff, co-opted City staff, consultants, general public, etc.). One might note that members of City boards and commissions are expected to attend at least 75% of their meetings or risk being removed. There is a clear perception that some groups did not “walk their talk”.

To some people the “Handbook” reads very much like a broad, generic project management checklist that could equally apply to most any city of size in this country. There appears to be little, if anything, that is specific to Alexandria. One senses there are a myriad of very similar documents and guidebooks in libraries and cities across the country which inevitably begs the question – what has this cost us?

Aspirational checklists may be nice but these are not breakthrough concepts; the problem is that we don’t implement them. For sake of example: despite What’s Next having been underway for 11 months, little appears to have changed in the SUP approval process. The community still sees the staff report – which may

exceed 100 pages and contain major decisions the public was not previously aware of – roughly a week before it is to be voted upon. Take away the weekend and there are 5 days for civic associations to meet, residents to meet with the Planning Department, Planning Commissioners, elected representatives, property owners, etc. Then members of the public can have 3 minutes apiece to speak and shortly if not immediately thereafter the SUP is voted upon. Seldom does a public comment get a response, much less have an impact on the vote which generally appears to have been pre-determined well in advance of the meeting. I would suggest that many residents do not view that as adequate or timely “civic engagement”.

We need to start walking our talk.

**Patrice Cunniff Linehan: July 30, 2013**

Although I understand the frustration of the other two commenters – who are seeking more ACTION or IMPLEMENTATION of the civic engagement framework – the community conversations were critically important in making a culture shift that is captured in the Handbook:

“Engagement involves conversations, deliberation, and active feedback. It means creating new relationships with neighbors and actively listening to different points of view. ... That kind of engagement is more effective than citizens communicating ideas one-by-one to City staff and considerably more effective than City staff working alone.” (p. 3)

Sometimes we give input individually, without realizing there are other citizens providing completely different solutions to the same problem. By understanding the various perspectives, we are better able to find win/win solutions.

Through my involvement in the process, I have been impressed by the work that City staff and citizens have done together. For me, What’s Next Alexandria? has especially demonstrated City Responsiveness, Transparency and Inclusiveness

RESPONSIVENESS of City staff to community input. For example, during the first community dialogue, participants reacted negatively to having City staff facilitate the conversations at tables. There was overwhelming support for citizen-led dialogue, with less time dedicated to formal presentations by elected officials and expert consultants.

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AS A RESULT, City staff incorporated citizen feedback and sent a public request for volunteer facilitators from the community. They also reached out to groups (e.g., Parent Leadership Training Institute of Alexandria) to recruit volunteer facilitators who are bilingual or who could reach out to under-represented groups who were missing from the first dialogue. In addition to taking time to meet and train volunteer facilitators, the City staff and elected officials lowered their profile a bit, joining tables to listen more and allowing extra time for interaction among participants.

TRANSPARENCY was improved and modeled throughout the process. The description on page 6 of the Handbook gives an overview but the notes, pictures of participant notes during table activities, polls and opportunities to comment (such as this one), are all additional evidence of the efforts made to provide transparency to the public ... and offer multiple ways to provide input in the process for people who could/could not join the meetings in person.

INCLUSIVENESS was a theme that came up throughout the series of dialogues. Reaching out to under-represented groups and involving everyone in meaningful ways is often a challenge. When we recognized that young people were missing from the

conversations, special effort was made to recruit student leaders from Alexandria City Public Schools and other civic groups (Optimist club? I think). When a point was made that everyone doesn't have access to email, posters were translated and I personally saw City staff putting them up in predominantly Spanish-speaking neighborhoods, etc. [Also see note about recruiting facilitators who can speak other languages in addition to English above in the responsiveness example].

Although there are some items that we'll have to work together to clarify as we implement the civic engagement framework – e.g., How will we know when, “Trust in the citizen engagement process increases” or that “outreach occurs well before the project begins”? – the Community Dialogues and resulting Handbook are a good start.

SUSTAINED COLLABORATION will be up to all of us. I encourage everyone to read pages 12 and 13 and consider ways to support the next steps, especially as the process is tried out and refined through upcoming projects

- Public Art Master Plan
- Eisenhower West Transportation Study and Small Area Plan
- Stormwater Management Plan

-Bicycle Master Plan

I urge everyone who live and works in Alexandria residents to get involved in the projects that interest them. I'm looking forward to implementing the Handbook recommendations and seeing improvements in civic engagement and collective action.

**Connie Graham: July 30, 2013**

Concur that the plan seems to be more about the process of engagement and measurement of engagement. This is analogous to the series of wine and cheese meetings that the developers had about Potomac Yard, and then the developers did what they wanted to anyway. Did they engage with the public? Yes, in every sense of the word, but the outcome was as if they had never met with the public. The International Association for Public Participation (IAPE) Spectrum of Public Participation is at [http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/\\_\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/43183/Engagement\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/___data/assets/pdf_file/0019/43183/Engagement_Guide.pdf), It show five levels of engagement: Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, and Empower.

Under "Inform", the promise to the public is "we will keep you informed." For "Consult," the promise to the public is "We will keep you informed, listen to and

acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision." For "Involve" the promise to the public is "We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision." For "collaborate," the promise to the public is "We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible." The most responsive option on the spectrum of engagement is "empower" and the promise to the public is "We will implement what you decide." My best sense of past and current engagement practices in Alexandria is that they operate at "Inform," while they say they will "consult." There is no guarantee that apparent public opinion (as evidenced by many speakers and filling the City Hall Chambers) is a reflection of the wishes and needs of constituents. I remember one packed City Hall meeting about the location of the Carpenter's Shelter where the majority of supporters were non-resident "ringer" do-gooders that used a •Argumentum ad Consequentiam "logic about supporting the shelter's existence, when the real issue was the location of the shelter, which was opposed by the residents due to concerns about drugs and the location near a park.

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**Poul Hertel: July 30, 2013**

I appreciate and understand the efforts that lay behind the draft. However, I encourage the work group to looking into making two changes. The handbook would benefit from simplification and succinctness. A crisper and shorter handbook will make for an easier read and make it accessible to a wider audience.

The second suggestion is more fundamental and starts with why did the City Council embark on this project? The handbook focuses so intensely on expected behavior and “what to expect”, it reads more as a normative rather than positive process (Descriptive, factual statements about the world are referred to as positive statements). A departure from the suggestions in the White Paper titled “Connected Communities”.

“While there may be many goals and reasons for engaging citizens in governance, most of these can be categorized as being either normative--based on the idea that building citizenship and community is important for its own sake--, or instrumental--aimed at the approval or implementation of a particular policy or project (King). Or, as Catlaw and Rawlings express it, citizen engagement can be considered to

be the “right” thing to do as a part of the democratic ideal or the “smart thing” to do to gain the information and involvement needed for effective, legitimate government. “Connected Communities”, page 6 of the white paper.

Although emphasizing, the benefits of citizen involvement, the White Paper does so only in the context of them being treated as an equal partner.

“On the other hand, from an instrumental or “smart” perspective, we should work to increase citizen involvement because local governments cannot solve community problems alone. In other words, involvement is a means to an end. Effective governance at the local level increasingly requires active and ongoing citizen participation in planning, policymaking, implementation, and service delivery. The complexity of the problems facing local government demands citizen involvement and acceptance, if not cooperation. Citizens often have information that officials need in order to design a sound program.” Page 7 of the White Paper.

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The draft City Draft Handbook is relative silent on how the City Staff is expected to inculcate a behavior and attitude paradigm that would further such a mindset. Something that is necessary for the handbook to be viewed as a credible policy tool.

Finally, I encourage the City to adopt a policy of sharing staff correspondence on presented papers by citizens. If Citizens have made the effort, they deserve to be notified of the existence and content of such in house correspondence. This would be very helpful if the goal is to encourage sharing of ideas with confidence.

Sincerely  
Poul Hertel



# Response to Public Comments

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## **Response to Public Comments Received on the Preliminary Outline of the Draft Civic Engagement Handbook**

From June 25-July 30, 2013, members of the community were invited to provide comments on the *Preliminary Outline of the Draft Civic Engagement Handbook* to inform development of this complete Draft Handbook. Five individuals submitted comments, which are provided verbatim in the section above.

*Thank you to those who have taken the time to continue their participation online. The city's focus is to move forward with new ways of conducting public engagement that are transparent, collaborative and productive. We cannot undo processes from past projects and know that trust for how this engagement takes place will be earned over time. This will be most successful with continued broad participation and a concerted effort to grow that participation. We want everyone to understand that this will be an ongoing process that will invite evaluation and refinement.*

*City staff and community residents all have a stake in the game and it is our hope that staff and residents embrace their roles in making this work. It will only be as successful as that level of ownership is exhibited.*

*Below are responses to your comments, grouped by topic.*

### ***Simplify/make more succinct***

Staff refined organization of the document and developed an annotated table of contents to enable readers to more easily search for topic areas. In addition, once the handbook has been adopted by City Council, staff will develop a succinct 'how to' guide that will be more accessible to a wider audience.

### ***Principles***

In response to the specific suggestions to re-sequence the principles and improve the action statements, staff reordered the principles from an alphabetical list to a more process-oriented flow and rewrote the action statements to be in an active voice. The outcome statements were not revised because this comment was received from only one person, and revising the statements would result in substantive meaning change.

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***Concerns that the document is too generic, does not provide staff with the tools to implement change, will have little impact on civic engagement.***

The document posted in June/July was a preliminary outline, intended to provide the community with an early review of the major elements planned for the final handbook. As the handbook is intended to be a collaborative effort between the City and community, the City invited feedback to ensure that all elements of the work the community completed in the past year were addressed.

This final draft is a more comprehensive version and should speak to many questions posed by the community. All of the content in the draft handbook is based on work and feedback gathered during the dialogues and online engagement opportunities. It includes a structure for implementation, tools for staff, and a framework for evaluation, including revision to the Handbook in the future, if needed.

If individuals believe this issue persists in the complete draft, they are invited to provide specific suggestions for improvements on the public comment board.

The intent of the handbook is to provide a guide for all

participants (members of the community, city staff, elected/appointed officials) as to how civic engagement processes should be conducted.

***Concern about the way the City currently engages the community:***

“Citizens feel decisions have already been made and commenting is futile. Citizens are not actively engaged in identifying issues, considering and understanding options, working with staff to resolve issues. Instead hard and fast timetables are set by City staff with limited or no consultation with the community; a variety of meetings (uncoordinated) are scheduled; often with short notices, in rapid succession, with no agendas, and limited public input. Meetings with the citizens are often dominated by staff presentation and they evolve into meetings informing the community of progress being made by staff and actions taken by various commissions.” (from online comment)

All of the above concerns were raised by the community at the outset of the What’s Next Alexandria process and served as central themes for all participants to address when formulating the principles and framework. Now that the process is complete and a draft handbook has been developed, the City can begin to lay the foundation

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for integrating the community's work into City processes.

***Concern that the handbook will not be implemented***

This is a valid concern, but not one that can be resolved in the pages of the handbook. City Council and the City Manager are committed to implementation, and staff is prepared to integrate the community's work into the FY14 work plan. Evaluation and accountability are written into the document and built into the process to help ensure that projects follow the principles and framework set forth in the handbook. The handbook is the foundation, but the work is just beginning. Implementation will be the result of collaboration and commitment on the part of all participants.

***Focus is on process of engagement rather than outcome of engagement***

The desired outcome of successful civic engagement is decision-making that stands the test of time because it is based on a collaborative process between citizens and their government and supported by those who participated. This is set forth in the introduction to the handbook.

At the outset of the What's Next Alexandria process, staff solicited feedback from the community to see how we could better support this desired outcome – what issues were preventing collaborative processes? Many participants voiced concern that in the past, public processes have not been consistent from project to project; many others expressed concern about aspects of the process, such as concern about predetermined outcomes or the point at which the City involves the community, lack of transparency, incivility, too many meetings, etc. For that reason, a framework and principles for civic engagement were first established for the community and City to jointly follow as a baseline for all future processes. Established guidelines that everyone can refer to and understand provide consistency and will facilitate our jointly desired outcome. Therefore, focusing on the process of engagement was an important first step to work on together.

***What's Next Alexandria Interdepartmental Team***

Some commenters expressed concern that the What's Next Alexandria team included City Hall employees, consultants and only one resident. Reference to the What's Next team in the preliminary outline refers to the internal city staff group, which

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includes representatives from multiple departments and an Alexandria resident who is a civic engagement practitioner and provided subject matter expertise. The City hired a firm to offer fresh perspective on current engagement process and practices, and to provide technical expertise that was not available in-house, such as:

- developing meaningful agendas and group activities that encourage communication between residents and provide useful information to staff;
- developing content that avoids jargon, simple presentation of information;
- training staff to improve the facilitation of difficult meetings; and
- reaching out to and communicating with hard to reach populations.

Although there was an internal team to organize the City's participation in the effort and administer the steps in the process, the What's Next Alexandria effort was a collaborative one between the community and City – working and learning together to guide civic engagement and planning in Alexandria. City staff took direction from the community throughout the process to help determine the best avenues for residents to voice their concerns and have them addressed in the future.

***Recommendation to “create a taskforce to evaluate the current process, consider alternatives for improvement and make recommendations on reasonable steps to reduce costs, confusion, delays and improve participation and the quality of citizen involvement”.***

The What's Next Alexandria initiative was designed so that the community as a whole could address the topic of civic engagement. The City does not intend to create a new taskforce at this time. However, it is possible that community and staff evaluation of the civic engagement outcomes over this or future years may indicate the need for a community led taskforce focused on evaluation of outcomes and revision as needed of the Handbook.

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***Little appears to have changed in the SUP approval process***

Special Use Permits are a regulatory tool, part of the zoning ordinance, that provide an increased level of public scrutiny of land uses that could have greater-than-normal neighborhood impacts. The Special Use Permit review process includes outreach to the affected community and, in many cases, two public hearings. The current process is an attempt to balance the need for informed participation by the community with the need to be responsive to the timeframes of persons wishing to operate businesses in the City. Nevertheless, recommendations for improvements to the Special Use Permit process are welcome.

***The City should adopt a policy of sharing staff correspondences on presented papers by citizens.***

With few exceptions, all staff correspondence is public. This Handbook makes clear that staff should publicly respond to input received and explain the extent to which the input will be used and why.