

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: October 2, 2013

TO: MEMBERS OF THE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

FROM: RICHARD BAIER, P.E., LEED AP, DIRECTOR T&ES

SUBJECT: AGENDA ITEM #4 - UPDATE AND NEXT STEPS IN THE WHAT'S NEXT ALEXANDRIA CIVIC ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

ISSUE: Update and next steps in the *What's Next Alexandria* civic engagement initiative.

RECOMMENDATION: Receive the update.

DISCUSSION: *What's Next Alexandria* is a City initiative to develop guidelines for improving and expanding civic engagement in Alexandria. Through a series of community conversations and online participation starting in September 2012 through June 2013, members of the community collaborated with City staff and City officials to talk about how Alexandrians can best participate in the public decision-making process that shapes their City.

Opportunities for engagement included four community dialogues where participants worked together in small groups, four opportunities for online engagement; and three opportunities for real time online video engagement during the dialogues. Community collaboration resulted in three key elements: Principles for civic engagement, a standard Framework for the engagement process, and guidance on communications and outreach strategies. Together, these important pieces make up Alexandria's *Civic Engagement Handbook*, which will serve as a guide for future public decision-making processes in the city. The draft *Handbook* is now posted online and in city locations for public review and comment through early October, and then will be scheduled for public hearing and Council consideration in November. For a complete timeline, see page 3.

A hallmark of the *What's Next Alexandria* process over the past year was modeling the civic engagement principles that emerged from the community's early input in the first community poll and as they developed over time, and responding to community suggestions and concerns. At times, this meant making changes that ultimately enhanced the process and the end product. The overarching effort was to establish standard practices to build trust and increase transparency, and expand the opportunities for participation. This included asking the community for feedback before issues were framed and decisions made, using small groups to discuss/raise issues with report outs,

rather than a town hall format where few people get to speak; reducing the amount of City time at the microphone/giving presentations; posting verbatim feedback and summaries on website, providing significant advance notice of meetings, offering online opportunities to participate and review, using members of the community as facilitators, simplifying language, and offering Spanish interpretation and childcare at meetings.

Implementation and Assessment

The Civic Engagement Handbook will serve as the foundation that sets forth the policies and procedures for consistent implementation of the *What's Next Alexandria* civic engagement work, an effort that spans City government. An effective organizational structure is necessary to ensure that application of the principles and framework are fundamentally consistent citywide, and the level of effort is realistic and achievable. The City will utilize a hybrid structure, with some elements centralized and others decentralized to ensure both consistency and cost-effectiveness/efficiency.

The City Manager's Office will provide oversight to ensure that expectations are clear, resources are adequate to meet expectations, and staff is held accountable for results. A key element of this role will be management of resources to provide facilitation training to staff throughout the City involved in civic engagement work. Facilitation training for staff and members of the community will help embed this new approach – and in some cases, culture shift – in everyday work in a consistent way.

The individual departments will integrate the new standards and framework into their existing operations. All of the planning efforts included on the City's Interdepartmental Work Program will follow the principles and guidelines established in the Handbook. Having the departments lead the implementation effort in this way, rather than through a centralized administrative function, allows the civic engagement approach to meet the needs of the specific project, and encourages ownership of implementation, speeding the process for internalizing the new civic engagement approach. Because the projects are of different scales, from a Small Area Plan process to a more focused technical study, each project's civic engagement framework will be distinct, but the common threads will be the principles and the agreed upon phases of the process overall.

An interdepartmental working group will monitor civic engagement implementation across departments and provide guidance on refining the organizational structure as needed. This group will develop a set of guiding criteria to serve as a threshold for understanding when a City project requires a civic engagement plan or when the Handbook is simply a reference document for general engagement on smaller projects. Evaluation and performance accountability will be managed by the City Manager's Office following recommendations from the interdepartmental group.

Collaboration between community members and city government leads to better results than either working in a vacuum. More importantly, public decisions that are developed collaboratively better stand the test of time. The goal of the Handbook and citywide implementation, from City staff, to City Council, to members of the community, boards and commissions, is to facilitate this improved collaboration.

Alexandria's Civic Engagement Handbook Schedule

Sept. 2012-June 2013	Community develops core elements of Handbook through the <i>What's Next Alexandria</i> community process
June 25 – July 30	Public review/comment on preliminary draft outline
Sept. 6 – Oct.11	Public review/comment on complete draft Draft posted online and hard copies in city locations
Sept. – Oct.	Board and Commission briefings/public review continues Sept. 3 - Planning Commission Oct.2 - Transportation Commission Oct. 17 - Parks and Rec Commission Oct. 21 – Environmental Policy Commission Traffic and Parking Board (date to be confirmed) School Board (date to be confirmed)
Oct. 31-Nov. 16	Public review of final revised draft
Nov. 16	City Council Public Hearing
Nov. 26	City Council Vote