

CITY OF VENTURA
CITY MEMORANDUM

Date: June 6, 2008

To: Mayor and City Council
From: Rick Cole, City Manager
Subject: "Civic Engagement Model" White Paper

Background

In the final chapter titled, "Our Involved Community," the 2005 General Plan sets the goal of working together "as a community to achieve the Ventura Vision through civic engagement, partnerships and volunteer service." The City Council recognized that "achieving that vision requires the active and ongoing participation of an engaged and active community." The text recognizes that "thousands of Ventura citizens are involved in their schools, place of worship and give their time to civic, cultural and charitable organizations" and cites "other well-established avenues for community leadership such as "City Commissions, Community Councils, the Chamber of Commerce."

But the General Plan goes on to cite national concerns about declining participation and volunteerism, lower voter turn-out 1995-2003 and complaints about the effectiveness of the public process locally.

To promote civic engagement, the General Plan touts the Ventura Vision model where "thousands participated in a year-long partnership encompassing City government, non-profit organizations, community groups, business, schools and individual residents to chart the community's future." It also endorses the Ventura Vision call for "broad community collaboration, more widely publicizing city government services, planning processes and policies; better involvement of typically under-represented groups such as youth, seniors and ethnic minorities in community planning and developing public parks, plazas, neighborhood greenways and other spaces that promote civic interaction and events." The plan goes on to set three overall policies for the city to pursue and a list of specific objectives for achieving them.

Making civic engagement a cornerstone of public policy and achieving the Ventura Vision is a laudable goal. Ventura can be proud of both its commitment to civic engagement and many examples of its successful pursuit. Few cities in California have worked as hard or as consistently to promote this ethic.

But with this raised level of expectations has come confusion and disappointments. One Councilmember lamented last year: "Just because we don't do what you demand, doesn't mean we aren't listening."

What does it really mean to engage the public?

Authentic civic engagement is not one-way marketing to citizens by their government. Nor is it one-way demands on government by its citizens. Authentic civic engagement is a two-way partnership where citizens work with and through government to improve their community.

There are no standard or precise definitions of how this should work. In Ventura, however, the three key General Plan policies provide greater focus and clarity to what civic engagement means here and how we can improve it:

- ✓ Policy 10A: Work collaboratively to increase citizen participation in public affairs
- ✓ Policy 10B: Raise awareness of City operations and be clear about city objectives
- ✓ Policy 10C: Work at the neighborhood level to promote civic engagement

These provide a framework for better delineating what matters most in promoting civic engagement in Ventura. By discussing and better defining our goals, we can focus our efforts on measurable progress and build a culture among City team members that embraces civic engagement.

Policy 10A:

Research has found that public agencies that achieve excellence in civic engagement focus on gaining and using “public knowledge” – learning from and about the people we serve (The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation- Standards of Excellence in Civic Engagement, 2005) However, learning is more than simply soliciting input, adding up the responses, and using that data to make a governmental decision. It challenges citizens and government to work together to share knowledge – and to share responsibility. This encourages collaborative solutions to community problems and participation by residents and community based organizations in implementing those solutions.

Municipal management practices are deeply rooted in the paradigm of professional expertise. Under the Council/Manager form adopted by Ventura voters in 1934, the textbook model is that the public selects the City Council, the City Council sets public policy and the professional staff faithfully and competently execute it. But, in fact, here as elsewhere the model is both more complicated and more dynamic.

What has evolved is actually more like a triangle where the public, the City Council and the staff all have a role in shaping policy and in its implementation. Ventura is unusual, if not unique, in having involved the public in shaping a comprehensive long-term vision and organized its General Plan, strategic visions, performance goals and budget around achieving that vision.

Operating outside the textbook lines, however, requires a far more open attitude toward “public knowledge.” Instead of seeing ourselves as unvalued experts trying to carry out day-to-day operations, staff needs to recognize we often shape policies in our recommendations to the City Council, our administrative choices and our direct responsiveness to citizen concerns, particularly through interaction with City Commissions and community interest groups.

Staff routinely seeks input directly from Commissions as well as community interest groups. This is both prudent and convenient – and Council usually expects staff to maintain ongoing relationships with specific groups or at minimum to consult with them regarding policy development or issues that are seen as directly affecting them (for example, the Chamber regarding business and economic development concerns; arts, social services and environmental groups on those themes; and Community Councils not only on issues that directly affect a specific geographic area, but often on issues of citywide general concern.)

It is difficult and confusing, however, to draw the line on the role of such “liaison” or advisory roles, particularly since these groups often directly lobby and seek influence over staff recommendations to the Council and the implementation of public policies. Despite the clear lines in the City Charter (Council sets policy and directs the City Manager and the City Manager is responsible for directing city staff) multiple voices and interests clamor for attention and influence over outcomes. For example, while it is eminently reasonable for staff to attend a meeting of a Community Council and engage in mutual information sharing, it becomes more problematic when the Community Council seeks to direct that staff to address their specific concerns. Without and the balancing of those concerns with competing demands on staff time and city resources and the transparency of Council decision-making, we fuel the perception that “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.” This, in turn, engenders even more forceful advocacy under the perception that concerns or interests will be disadvantaged unless groups demand their views be heeded. This undermines the civil discourse that is vital to collaboration and successful sharing of “public knowledge.”

Obviously, we need to have both greater clarity and accountability to counteract this growing trend. It will be helpful to differentiate between “collaboration” and “delegation of responsibility.”

Trust in our government will be enhanced if we assured citizens and community groups that decisions and policies that we know will generate community interest and controversy will include an opportunity for community dialogue on the front end. Setting up public conversations in a way that allows residents to engage one another -- so that they can share common values and wrestle with tough issues where values may be in conflict -- will forge more positive working relationships between residents, public officials and City staff members. While stressing our commitment to involving citizens in important policy or planning decisions, we must also continually underscore that city government has responsibilities that go beyond satisfying the loudest, most numerous or most active “stakeholders,” whether they be developers, neighboring residents or issue advocates.

This is helped enormously if issues are drawn broadly and serious efforts are made to involve the broader public in collaborative processes. Again, for example, in sponsoring the “Community Dialogue on Homelessness” to address the evacuation of the Ventura river bed, outreach efforts were not confined to “stakeholders” like government agencies, social service organizations, faith and issue advocacy groups, downtown businesspeople and the affected homeless. We explicitly sought to participation by interest citizens by calling our kick-off forum a “community dialogue.” Effective outreach and an open door environment can reduce the “zero-sum” tendency of interest groups to advocate solely for their interests.

The presence and ideas of diverse community voices often encourages interest or advocacy groups to modify their approach from asserting their rights to instead appealing to broader community goals. There is both real value and important responsibility to ensure that representation draws on a deeper and broader pool than simply traditionally active citizens. While requiring more effort, recruiting new voices from less well represented sectors of the community pays valuable dividends in enriching community dialogue, advancing “public knowledge” and broadening community consensus around shared values and acceptable outcomes.

This is particularly true where the mentality of interest group brokering can shortchange the future. For example, a developer and surrounding neighbors might very well come to a compromise that reconciles their narrow objectives, but does not adequately represent either the interests of future residents of that development, nor the larger community goals outlined in our General Plan. This should not discourage collaboration between developers and neighbors above and beyond the City’s formal processes – rather the City should seek to play a role of involving wider community participation in a way that facilitates an expanded community dialogue. This is particularly effective in setting broader planning policies rather than individual development projects.

In the end, we all have a responsibility to clearly define what “civic engagement” is and what it is not. In this context, it means including potentially affected parties in dialogue that informs the formulation of public policy. But it is not giving affected/interested parties undue influence over formulation of public policy.

Policy 10B: Raise awareness of City operations and be clear about city objectives

If there ever was a time when we could rely on schools, the media and civic organizations to ensure a well-informed citizenry, that time is long past. We live in a paradoxical time when there has never been so much information – and so little shared knowledge. Most local government operations are invisible to citizens -- and few are well-informed about the scope and cost of city government services. Nor are most citizens well-informed about how local government works or their role in it beyond voting (or complaining.) When citizens are concerned about a specific issue, they often insist government be directly responsive to their desires, without understanding how their concern affects and is affected by other issues and considerations.

A better-informed citizenry would strengthen democracy, reduce polarizing conflict and help bridge divisions in the community. It would also better delineate the responsibilities of citizens, as well as their rights. Citizens would have a better understanding of the choices facing the city and be better equipped to participate in those choices.

Government alone, however, is ill-equipped to remedy the gap in citizen awareness of City operation and clarity about city objectives. Not only do we presently lack the tools and resources to adequately do this job, when information comes strictly from government, it can seem (or be) one-sided and self-serving. Americans in general and Ventura, Californians in particular, have a healthy skepticism of government “marketing.” As essential as citizen awareness of city operations and policies are to a functioning representative democracy, government itself is only part of the answer.

In recent years, the role of “civil society” or “the third sector” has gained enormous weight amongst scholars and proponents of free societies. It is easy to see where the absence or weakness of civic groups and institutions can cripple the growth of democracy (Eastern Europe and Iraq being newsworthy examples.) But we often take for granted that these institutions are alive and well at home. In fact, our society has changed enormously, as documented in Robert Putnam’s influential book, *Bowling Alone*. Putnam cites the precipitous decline in broad-based civic groups, including one telling statistic that Americans attendance at meetings of local community organizations declined by 60% from the mid-Seventies to the mid-Nineties.

In his follow-up to that much-cited and debated work, Putnam focused on a host of promising positive efforts across the nation. His prime example of local government initiative is the City of Portland, which he says, “developed a culture of responding to and learning from, rather than rejecting, many grassroots initiatives and government responses, with less of the acrimony, paralysis and stasis” experienced in other communities.

While this alternate model is appealing, it should be noted that it takes a commitment of substantial, time, money and patience to work. Moreover, Putnam’s optimistic chapter ends on a cautionary note, citing an apparent rise in “anti-tax and anti-government” sentiments that are undermining “the habits of participation and cooperation.” Again, we live with paradox: people want their government to be responsive to them, but they grow increasingly hostile and impatient with the overall results of government when it spends their tax dollars and thwarts their overall desires by catering to other people’s concerns. Moreover, the vast majority of citizens reserve the right to “engage” only when the matter seems to directly affect them.

To overcome, or at least balance, these adverse tendencies, civic engagement is most successful when it “tells” rather than “sells.” By emphasizing the facts about city operations and posing the choices and trade-offs involved in shaping and implementing public policy, government can nurture, but not substitute for, a healthy and balanced civic discourse that relies on a vibrant fabric of volunteerism, shared values and community organizations with agendas that embrace overall community well-being and future vision, not just advocacy on behalf of the narrow and/or short-term interests of the group’s members.

Policy 10C: Work at the neighborhood level to promote civic engagement

Many comparable communities have responded to the widespread social changes of our era (and the primacy of issues of growth in California) by giving much more emphasis to “neighborhood democracy.” Where once citywide civic groups were the norm, the center of civic gravity has shifted to the neighborhood scale. This pattern does not seem confined to cities with ward electoral districts.

This seemed to be the trend in Ventura with the success of the Westside Community Council, which inspired a half dozen other “community councils.” Two things stand out distinctly here, however, from the trend in many other communities. First, our model of a “community” has generally been larger than a “neighborhood” – a prime example being the Eastside Community Council, which lays claim to representing nearly half the population of the City. In that sense, Ventura (population 102,000) bears a stronger resemblance to the scale of “Neighborhood Councils” in Los Angeles, population 3,600,000.) Second, little citywide consistency has developed either around how the community councils have evolved or how the city interacts with them.

This creates ambiguity between expectations and reality. Most of the Community Councils see themselves as “representing” the citizens in their geographic area. But they vary widely in how they are organized, how active they are and how “representative” they can claim to be. Coming up with a consistent citywide approach to collaborating with these groups collides with these disparities. That’s why General Plan Action 10.11 starts by calling for establishing “a clear policy toward the scope, role, boundaries and jurisdiction of neighborhood Community Councils citywide.”

The initiative for sorting this out can come either from the Community Councils themselves or from the city or shared by both. Riverside’s “Office of Neighborhoods,” for example, was successful at forging a citywide structure, where Pasadena’s “Neighborhood Connections” program knit one together from what had emerged from the grass roots and Santa Ana built more of a collaborative hybrid. For a number of reasons, the Santa Ana model is probably a better fit for Ventura.

Our General Plan also cautions against putting too much emphasis, however, on strictly neighborhood organizations for civic engagement, spelling out in Action 10.14 the goal of establishing relationships between “the City, neighborhood Community Councils and other community partners, including the Ventura Unified School District and business, civic, cultural and religious groups.” That policy would indicate the importance and value of involving those other community partners in forging a stronger neighborhood level model for civic engagement.

Additional key factors

Beyond the three salient policies in the General Plan, there are at least three other important aspects of civic engagement that seem crucial to consider: shared values, volunteerism and the “culture” inside government. Brief thoughts on each:

Shared values

In a society and a city that value diversity and pluralism, it is often uncomfortable, but vital to talk about values. While honoring such values as dissent, individualism and freedom (which, of course, are values), we should not neglect other values like citizenship, mutual respect and civility. No one, least of all government, can impose values. But without reinforcing the values necessary for collaboration and shared success, civic engagement can be hijacked by forceful advocates to impose their agendas on government and their fellow citizens.

Volunteerism

Government and public policy are only part of the answer to solving community problems and achieving Ventura’s Vision. Fundamentally, it is about people working together to maintain and build on Ventura’s strengths. Using national data as a benchmark, our annual survey indicates a higher level of volunteerism (48% of Ventura residents volunteer for a community cause vs. 29% nationally and 26% across California.) Demography may be a partial explanation due to the older median age of Ventura residents (37.5 years of age vs. 36.4 nationally and 33.3 in California.) The median age of members of many traditional institutions (service clubs, citywide organizations and faith communities) are aging even more quickly than the community as a whole (one church member wryly observed that his prominent congregation was made up of “old people – and their parents.”)

This suggests the importance of encouraging and supporting a new generation of volunteerism, particularly among young families, who often have one or more parents commuting outside Ventura to work. Civics education and “service learning” are two promising investments in lifelong volunteerism. City government should actively partner with community institutions to ensure the continued health and success of community service.

A Culture Supporting Civic Engagement

The Harwood study cited above identified four essential ethics for a culture among elected officials and staff for successful civic engagement:

- ✓ Belief in the value of collecting public knowledge
- ✓ Using public knowledge internally over time
- ✓ Communicating back to our residents how public knowledge has influenced our City and how team members are using that public knowledge

- ✓ Cultivating the culture, norms and habits that will make civic engagement a central part of how we do business

This is not just a challenge of consistent commitment – it is also one of capacity. While in the long run, civic engagement is understood to produce better and more assured outcomes, it takes substantial investment developing skills and tools and substantial time, patience and money to deploy them. Under constant pressure to keep up routine obligations as well as to be national leaders in innovative practices and tackling new challenges, Ventura stretches our limited resources in ways that often shortchange civic engagement.

The controversy over a proposed sand management plan illustrates this dilemma. At the same time the Public Works Department was preparing its annual budget proposal, launching the high-profile Mobility Plan, finalizing a Wastewater discharge permit, providing leadership on the Countywide Stormwater management permit, bringing forward the annual capital program, overseeing the largest paving project in the City's history and re-organizing its structure to save money and increase effectiveness – it was tasked with leading an interdepartmental effort for a comprehensive beach management strategy. This was complicated by the need to respond to immediate problems of sand build-up topping private retaining walls and public stairways and drains. With widespread disagreement on goals (groom the beach? restore natural habitat? keep costs to a minimum?), how does a stretched staff find adequate time and resources to convene stakeholders, research options, develop recommendations and vet these with active stakeholders, the media and the larger community?

Any model for successful civic engagement will need to confront not only the need to “buy into” that model – but the prioritization and resources needed to make it work.

Summary

Ventura's civic engagement efforts should focus on the policies in our General Plan:

- ✓ Work collaboratively to increase citizen participation in public affairs
- ✓ Raise awareness of City operations and be clear about city objectives
- ✓ Work at the neighborhood level to promote civic engagement

We should also concentrate on promoting shared values, volunteerism and a City culture that supports civic engagement.

A suggested practical framework for this approach is attached as a way of illustrating how such an approach can be pursued in the year ahead.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MODEL 2008-09 WORK PLAN

THE KEY STRATEGIC THEMES FOR THE YEAR WILL BE:

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY: WHAT KIND OF CITY DOES VENTURA WANT TO BE?

GET YOUR GREEN ON: BECOMING A NATIONAL MODEL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Policy 10B: Raise awareness of City operations and be clear about city objectives

Internal: Work with the Council/Manager/CFO/ELT to frame the fiscal priorities and trade-offs for financial sustainability. Partner with the School District on community outreach to connect with a wide cross-section of our community so they understand the current fiscal picture and trade-offs that can/must be made.

Liaise with City's Green Team to evaluate current status of City's own environmental practices and determine level of community awareness for the program. Set goals with Green Team for outcomes of outreach efforts; use outreach to encourage City staff and the community to integrate green practices in everyday life.

External methods will carry the Green message by focusing on the City's website as a main source of information, and primary tool for outreach, including but not limited to Green Ventura web pages, the City Manager's blog and the bi-weekly E-Newsletter.

Other outreach methods will include:

- **Op/Eds:** Submit contributions from City representatives (Councilmembers and staff); Ask the Director column
- **Speakers Bureau:** Arrange for City representatives to address local civic, political and business organizations, faith communities, homeowners associations, service clubs, etc. and reach out in unconventional forums like house meetings
- **Events:** Cross-promote the City message at events where we would already have a presence, such as Artwalks, street fairs, Taking it to the Streets; 4th Grade Curriculum etc.
- **Tours/Open houses:** Demonstrate the City's commitment to lean and green practices by inviting the community to visit sites and locations where words are being put into action
- **Media outreach:** pitch story ideas and interview opportunities for City representatives
- **Advertising:** paid radio, PSAs, newspaper with tips and information about environmental sustainability
- **CAPS:** city-generated cable programming educating the public on fiscal and environmental sustainability

Policy 10A: Work collaboratively to increase citizen participation in public affairs

- **City-initiated meetings:** In partnership with the Ventura Unified School District, Community Councils and other civic partners, sponsor forums for discussing City and community issues in venues such as schools, churches and civic buildings; as well as arrange for neighborhood forums in residents' homes
- **Seek local leadership:** Ask the community for suggestions on areas of focus, develop Community Green Team
- **Promote feedback mechanisms:** Collect tips and opinions via My Ventura Access, event-based survey dissemination, online survey dissemination/general availability, opinion leaders group, telephone contact option
- **Validate feedback:** reply to acknowledge all feedback; follow up proactively to notify stakeholders if/when their suggestions are implemented