

Jan 12 2008

**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR THE COMMON GOOD:
Strengthening Community by Building Civic and Social Capital**

A Proposal to the City Council To Consider as One of Its 2008 Priorities

Action: That the Council adopt as one of its 2008 priorities Civic Engagement for the Common Good: building civic and social capital toward the goal of making the common good first among equals in our community values.

Why? Palo Alto is rightfully proud of its accomplishments, the scope and quality of its nonprofit sector, the contributions of the business community, and much else regarding relationships with and among the PAUSD, Stanford, neighborhoods, and surrounding communities. We honor and recognize those elected officials and other citizens whose commitment and effort have created and sustain these qualities.

When citizens and city work together in the best way, they build key forms of capital. We focus on two: 1) Civic capital is built when citizens develop skills in civic leadership and city processes so that they see how the work they do fits into a larger context and promotes the common good; 2) Social capital is built by enlarging staff and citizens' knowledge of the community, connecting the civic work they do in personally meaningful ways, and enabling them to know each other as people as well as individuals occupying roles.

At the heart of this work is the firm belief that we can improve upon and strengthen the mutual relationships among elected officials, city staff members, and the myriad of groups, interests, and individuals that make up Palo Alto. If we stand still, we will lag well behind the leading edge of innovative cities and organizations that are experimenting with a variety of new and better ways for citizens to participate in decision-making and help resolve public problems. There are a number of current efforts in our area where citizens are learning about issues and engaging with the diversity of their communities—in cities such as San Jose, Redwood City, and San Francisco and in organizations such as the Sierra Club and ABAG.

In relation to that leading edge and even in more prosaic matters, our community's performance does not match its potential. Here is some of the evidence supporting that assertion:

1. **Service to the City.** It has become increasingly difficult to get people to apply to serve on city commissions, boards, and task forces. Two commissions recently had between them five vacancies, with application deadlines in early January. They received six, or 1.2 applications per vacancy. Good experiences of citizens and staff working together are rare and they should be common. The citizens on the recent Green Ribbon Task Force were impressed by the quality of the staff with whom they worked; the staff, likewise impressed, asked, "Why can't it always be like this?" Getting the best work out of staff-citizen collaborations should be one of Palo Alto's signatures, not a happy exception. The supply of citizens with experience,

perspective, and understanding of the complex work of the city and of working through issues on which, at least initially, opinions are deeply divided is much smaller than a community like ours needs and should expect.

2. **Effective Participation.** Citizens' skills in how to participate effectively in community projects and issues are strikingly uneven. A core group ("the familiar suspects") understands the process on how to get involved in community dialogs and debates; a much larger group does not. At the November 26 City Council discussion of the Stanford proposal, for example, an individual said there had been no public meetings for input. In fact, there had been a dozen or more such meetings. Such remarks indicate that the skills for participating effectively in civic issues and initiatives are seriously underdeveloped relative to the range and depth of talent among our citizens and the scope and complexity of our challenges.
3. **Diversity.** Citizens of color represent more than a quarter of the population of the city and more than 40 percent of the PAUSD's student body. We have a comparably robust age distribution. These diversities, however, are not well represented in citizen participation in citywide activities. It is a truism that not taking advantage of ethnic diversity, not involving our youth meaningfully in civic priorities, not taking account of the barriers to participation for those with active families, and failing to utilize older citizens squanders a vital resource in our community conversation and civic initiatives. These old issues need new solutions.
4. **Recruiting and Retaining Talent.** Local government agencies nearly everywhere are facing talent shortages. Palo Alto, which anticipates substantial staff retirements over the next 3-5 years, will be challenged to reproduce a level of professional and managerial talent equal to the tasks of our complex city and the expanding demands on our staff. Besides the shrinking pool of such talent generally, we have the reputation as a tough city to do business in, a city of sluggish processes, prone to criticism, averse to risk, and often ungenerous in acknowledging of the role of staff in producing high levels of resident satisfaction. This puts us at a competitive disadvantage in attracting the best talent from a limited pool when we need it the most. Dealing successfully with a talent crisis requires civic attitudes where appreciation is the twin of accountability; where citizens and staff relate to one another as collaborators—both working to create and sustain a vibrant and distinctive community.
5. **Matching.** Matching volunteer interests, skill, and judgment with city needs is now based on guesswork and networks. Neither is sufficient in developing and tapping into the pool of human and civic capital available and able to enhance community well-being. The community needs to explore ways to connect Palo Alto's remarkable human capital to the needs the city has for citizen input and that citizens have for staff input.
6. **Perspective and Trust.** Many individuals come before the Council, contribute to blogs, or write letters to the editor suggesting that they speak for others as well as themselves. That claim is often exaggerated. Moreover, the hope for objectivity and accuracy in such testimony is often not the experience. The level of trust between many citizens and government is low, reflecting often a lack of understanding of government roles and constraints and limited relationships with each other as individuals who care about their work and the community. The Council and fellow citizens are thus left little better informed or wiser about community viewpoints, poorer

regarding reasoned and accurate testimony, and mistrustful of one another. Raising the community's sights about the level of understanding, trust, and breadth of perspective that we might expect of one another would come closer to Palo Alto's ambitions than much of current practice.

7. **Using Up Assets.** We are drawing down rather than building up Palo Alto's civic assets and social capital. Much of the attention before and during the recent election turned around the parlous condition of our infrastructure. That is more than a statement about difficult budgets. Over the last several decades there have been exceptionally good economic times; moreover, the financial capacity of our community sits high up in the distribution of communities' wealth. Yet several of our neighbors have in this period built civic assets that we might well envy. Among them are Mountain View's City Hall, Performing Arts Center, and library; Fremont's library and public safety building; Menlo Park's central playing fields; and Avenidas' Rose Kleiner Senior Day Care Center located in Mountain View and serving a several-city region.
8. **Old and New Challenges.** Economic development, environmental, educational, demographic, housing, Stanford expansion, and other collaborative challenges are large and growing. Though our schools are the envy of many, we seldom engage our young people meaningfully in the affairs of their city. As a community whose 55 and older population percentage will double to 50 percent by 2030, we have a rapidly growing resource whose potential contribution to community building is nearly incalculable. The baby-boomer generation is being recognized around the country in the form of graduate programs for those preparing to be civically useful in their later years, to "third career" programs that recognize and develop the resource such people represent, and to meeting the "graduates" of such programs half-way with opportunities to put those skills to effective community-building use. If not deployed in Palo Alto, this talent will predictably go "offshore" to challenging activities located elsewhere.

What's Involved? Launching this initiative would require leadership and coordination in order to accomplish two things: engaging a broad cross-section of the community in the generation of ideas; and winnowing the possibilities into a disciplined strategy. In this proposal, we want neither to over-determine such a pool of ideas or the shape of a strategy, nor to we want to leave too much unsaid so that the substance is difficult to see. We, therefore, offer here some candidates for civic engagement within a community building strategy:

A Citizens' Academy. Creating a citizens' academy would go a long way toward developing our civic and social capital. Such a program builds knowledge by introducing groups of citizens through periodic sessions to the workings of the city and schools, the staff that lead, manage, and do the work of their departments, the functions of the departments, and their achievements and challenges. It also builds skills of engagement by including hands-on learning, planning and executing projects with city-wide benefits, and in other ways building an increasingly engaged community. This program could be adapted from the admirable Citizens Police Academy in Palo Alto and Redwood City's Partnership Academy for Community Teamwork. This type of program and its associated problem-solving would build a foundation of knowledge and a network of relationships, two

important components of strong communities.

A Leadership Program. A leadership program would encompass, among other things, civic skills and the elements of community well-being including the role of government, nonprofits, business, neighborhood and community-wide organizations, public decision making, and individual citizen engagement. Citizens who currently hold or aspire to leadership roles in the community would learn valuable leadership skills and explore ways to create civically oriented initiatives, advocate interests in a common good context, and travel along other avenues to participating in shaping and strengthening the social and civic fabric of the city and school district. Of special interest could be the engagement of youth and of “third careerists” who are seeking to tailor their other career skills to public service.

A Social and Civic Capital Benchmark Study/Survey. A social and civic capital benchmark study/survey tailored to our community would provide a means to consider comprehensively the qualities of a healthy community and a baseline against which to measure progress. The task force would identify a set of critical elements that reflect these sorts of assets, devise ways to measure them, and recommend ways to survey them periodically. Following each survey, discussions of the results in the community among city and school district elected leaders and staff, neighborhood associations, city-wide organizations, and other interested groups would energize continuing community building efforts. [Considerable work has been done on community benchmarking studies under the auspices of the Saguaro Seminar, an organization founded by Harvard’s Robert Putnam, author of the landmark study of social capital, *Bowling Alone*, as well as in the local research report, *Building Community Social Connections and Civic Involvement in Silicon Valley*, partially funded by the Silicon Valley Community Foundation. Survey questions and other indices could be included in the admirable work of the City Auditor and reported annually in her Service Efforts and Accomplishments report.]

PAGE Principles. Thirteen “guiding principles for Palo Alto” were developed in a series of PAGE-sponsored town meetings in 2004. As individuals and groups consider, in whatever public, nonprofit, or voluntary organization they belong to, using these principles, elements of civic and social capital will be a by-product. The list is attached as Appendix A.

Shifting Cultural Norms and Expectations Incorporating deliberate ways of attending to civic and social capital and the common good can change the community conversation about priorities and the means of achieving them. One example might be in the way City commissions, boards, and task forces are charged: to treat service as a way of building civic and social capital for the City, with the collateral goal of improving the community overall. Membership would be framed as an opportunity not only to assist in a particular task but also to make integral other objectives such as relating the task to the common good, taking alternative points of view seriously, bringing critical intelligence to bear in order to teach rather than dominate others, and in other ways behaving as a model of how public service ought to work when we bring our better angels to the task. Such a shift could then come to characterize a city open to new ideas and imbued with a spirit of collective efficacy that moves citizens to initiate and drive community improvements and

not merely feel entitled to them.

These and other ideas are likely to be interrelated. While they can stand alone, there will be a synergy and a more consistent and coherent application of them if several initiatives are undertaken and they cross-reference each other.

Who's Involved? This proposal was initiated by PAGE and comes to the Council from the early members of a growing coalition of diverse groups who share the goal of building the Palo Alto community into a potent source of civic energy, synergy, and commitment. As of now, these organizations are co-sponsoring this initiative:

Avenidas
Kiwanis
PAGE (Palo Altans for Government Effectiveness)
Palo Alto Chamber of Commerce
Palo Alto Council of PTAs
Stanford University Division of Continuing Studies
Youth Community Service

Several of these agencies already have plans to make civic engagement, community building, and related priorities integral to their work. As a Council priority, Civic Engagement for the Common Good would insure that the whole of these and the city's efforts would be greater than the sum of the several parts.

What's the Payoff? What might the Council (and all of us) hope to accomplish? The answer to that pivotal question will depend on the elements of the strategy that will follow the Council's adoption of this as a goal. But we can speak generally and with some examples of practical metrics. A fuller set of ideas on this subject appears in Appendix B.

Palo Alto has a lot on its plate. A city stronger in social and civic capital increasingly devoted to the overall community's well-being would make the achievement of other priorities more likely. This would happen because of better working relationships between citizens and citizens and citizens and staff, where each increasingly counts on and appreciates the contributions of others. Of equal importance would be more constructive engagement in making the common good a factor in the way we do our social, political, and civic business. And these other factors would play a role:

- If a Citizens' Academy is created, its growing group of graduates can be counted along with the civic roles they fill.
- Depending on the priority-implementing strategies, we can look for
 - ✓ Increases in respect for valid evidence and a rising standard for accuracy in public issues;
 - ✓ More collaborative than adversarial conflict management;
 - ✓ Testimony by citizens and staff about what has improved in their working together;

- ✓ More diversity among participants in community projects;
 - ✓ More people knowing more of the names of their fellow citizens;
 - ✓ Higher voter turnout;
 - ✓ Less anonymity in the Weekly's blogs and more constructive postings.
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- ❑ Community horsepower to get things done around the social needs of the community would expand.
 - ❑ Sectors would be better able to combine efforts to create something greater than what they might seek just for themselves.
 - ❑ The mortar for community cohesion—respect for others' opinions and an appreciation of our interdependence—would become more likely.
 - ❑ Building the capacity of people within the community to be leaders, to move beyond turf protection, and to work together would become a practical community asset.
 - ❑ Having processes and approaches that enable coming back together after disagreements would express a commitment to the future and not just the present.

Conclusion: For these and other reasons, we respectfully request that the City Council at its January 12, 2008 retreat set as one of its 2008 goals Civic Engagement for the Common Good: building civic and social capital toward the goal of making the common good first among equals in our community values. Setting that priority, charging the city staff in collaboration with the community to come up with a strategy for enacting it throughout 2008 would, we believe, help to restore to city life a degree of creative engagement that can be instrumental in implementing other Council goals and building a commitment to civic life that has the common good at its center.

January 7, 2008

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR PALO ALTO

Developed by more than 100 community members at PAGE-sponsored town meetings in 2004.

FOCUS ON COMMON GOOD

BE SURE ALL STAKEHOLDERS ARE REPRESENTED

DEFINE THE PROBLEM

GET COMPLETE FACTS AND CLARIFY ASSUMPTIONS

BE OPEN AND LISTEN TO OTHER POINTS OF VIEW

FOCUS ON THE ISSUE, NOT THE PERSON

BE WILLING TO COMPROMISE

BUILD BRIDGES TOWARD COMMON INTERESTS

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS IN THE PROCESS OF SOLVING THE PROBLEM

DON'T ASSUME THE OBVIOUS SOLUTION IS THE RIGHT SOLUTION

BETTER TO GET IT RIGHT THAN TO BE RIGHT

**SOLUTIONS DON'T HAVE TO BE PERFECT; THEY ARE EVOLUTIONARY
AND FLEXIBLE**

ONCE A SOLUTION IS REACHED, SUPPORT IT AND MOVE ON

PAGE considers these principles a work in progress and invites comments and suggestions for improving them. Use the principles and let us know what happened. Did they make a difference? In what ways? Please contact us at info@paloaltopage.org with your ideas.

Appendix B

Thinking About the Benefits of a City Council Priority for Civic Engagement for the Common Good

A proposal such as this needs to show, as concretely as possible, what its outcomes might be and how they can be assessed. At the same time, the proposal should not rely on quantitative criteria alone. An important part of its significance is qualitative in character, takes longer than a year to mature, and is one or more steps removed from direct measurement (dwelling in spaces labeled “attitude,” “norms,” “expectations,” “context,” “values,” etc.).

Things that could be measured:

- Number of people in a pool from which to draw board, commission, task force, etc. members (assuming that part of the strategy of the priority were to develop such a pool)
- Number of applicants for such board, commission, etc. vacancies.
- Diversity of candidates for appointment to commissions, boards, etc., for doing city business
- Applicant to and graduates of a citizen’s academy and/or leadership program
- Number of people active in a 2008 initiative (e.g., Library bond vote) who hadn’t been active before in city matters
- Counts of attendance at various significant city functions, such as Council meetings, hits on aspects of the Web site devoted to engagement, etc.
- Testimony from people who have engaged in activities that are part of the strategy, e.g., take a before-and-after assessment of people’s experience in citizen’s academy, or the like. (Stories)
- Results of a baseline and follow-up surveys of social capital/civic engagement behavior. This could be part of the City Auditor’s annual SEA (Service Efforts and Accomplishments) report?
- Percent of registered voters who vote (was 44% in last municipal election, 41% in PAUSD)

More speculative but still empirical evidence:

- In a potentially telling narrative vein, assess past episodes of doing city business and ask how they might have been different if “civic engagement for the common good” were in place, e.g., Mandarin Immersion, prior library bond issue.
- How various city departments develop strategic plan elements relating to this priority (and how they go about it, e.g., consulting PAN, businesses, nonprofits, individuals, etc.). Illustration: the Police Department has “community policing” as part of its mission. How might that be shaped if a City Council priority signaled “civic engagement for the common good”? Or departments that are integral to the “Palo Alto process”: how might they respond so that both the process and the term are transformed from a criticism to a matter of civic pride?
- Testimony from people who are in a position to have a reaction to citizens and/or city services, e.g., retail establishments, PAMF, Stanford, churches, schools, etc., to determine what they report regarding evidence of this priority in action.

One of the important aspects of counting is not so much to declare an initiative a success or failure but to assess where goals aren't being met, diagnose why, and devise alternate plans to achieve them.

Both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of this priority respond to two ways in which civic priorities are argued into existence:

1. Arguments from problems, i.e., what problems would this priority help solve.
2. Arguments from goals, i.e., what are the virtues of achieving the objectives.

Regarding the first argument, on problems needing solution, what are the challenges that would strongly urge this priority?

1. Civic *dis*-engagement. Why is it difficult to recruit the best people for commissions, boards, etc.? Why in a city so rich in human capital aren't more people involved in community affairs?
2. Lack of minority participation in city government.
3. Low level of understanding on how to participate in city government
4. Low level of understanding of how the city works
5. Building the case for why an outstanding city manager should want to apply for Palo Alto's top job.
6. Approaching contentious issues in new ways so that the common good is a factor in how the issues are framed and debated. Issue examples: economic development; environmental stewardship; housing; sustainability; budget equilibrium; replacing/augmenting civic assets.

Regarding the second, arguments from goals, what are the qualities that citizens would be proud to say exemplify Palo Alto. Examples:

1. What are the movements abroad in the land dealing with local government efficacy, enlarged citizenship, renewal of democratic processes? What are they seeking to produce? Relevance to us? Where is Palo Alto on this curve?
2. Developing ways that encourage, facilitate, and reward citizen participation in problem identification, problem solution, application of imagination to city priorities and actions, engagement in implementing community initiatives. (E.g., develop means for civic participation that favor community-building outcomes, such as charrettes, rather than more divisive or win-lose outcomes, such as hearings.)
3. Ways in which this priority would positively influence the accomplishment of other priorities, i.e., a city that can get things done with a maximum of imagination and a minimum of rancor. Work out scenarios for how civic engagement for the common good would influence other likely priorities such as those noted above in item 6: economic development; environmental stewardship, housing; sustainability; budget equilibrium; replacing/augmenting civic assets, etc.
4. As this priority matures, can we expect to have candidates and campaigns focused on issues *in the context of the common good*? An example: a candidate keen on library improvements would build a case on the ways such a project could be advanced as a multi-faceted community asset—allied with the schools; linked to Avenidas in regard to use by

senior citizens; constructed, staffed, programmed, and managed as a means to community cohesion across lines of difference, etc.

5. Encouraging an age, economic, and ethnic mix so that the city doesn't over time become older, wealthier, whiter, and more conservative (in behavioral rather than political terms).

Thoughts from various discussions on the proposal that *Civic Engagement for the Common Good* be adopted as a 2008 Palo Alto City Council Priority

January 5, 2008