

Tim Sandvik
Assistant City Administrator

The City of Vadnais Heights
800 East County Road E
Vadnais Heights, MN 55127

651.204.6013 Phone
651.204.6113 Fax
tim.sandvik@cityvadnaisheights.com

Memorandum:

TO: Mayor Gunderson and City Council Members

FROM: Tim Sandvik, Assistant City Administrator

DATE: April 20, 2021

SUBJECT: Community Engagement Committee Recommendations to Council

Background

In the spring of 2019, the City Council hosted a Goal Setting session to establish Top Priorities and Objectives for the City Council in 2019-2020. Item 5 was labeled as “Develop communication/engagement strategies for greater community participation”. As the City remains a lean operation in both staff and resources available, staff prepared materials for Council during the 2019 budgeting season for future consideration to help facilitate these efforts. Upon approval of the 2020 budget (September, 2019), the City included increased funding for communications. In early 2020, staff met with Mayor Gunderson to explore how this might be best facilitated (staff time, additional staff, contracted services, etc...). Unfortunately, this conversation halted in March due to the pandemic. Starting the discussion again in June of 2020, Council reestablished the desire of increased and improved communication and engagement with residents. In July, the Council formally approved the formation of the Community Engagement Committee and staff immediately began to solicit ‘Letters of Interest’ from potential participants.

While the solicitation and recruitment of CEC members took some time, for a variety of reasons, membership was formally approved by the City Council in early Fall of 2020. In October 2020, Mr. Sandvik met with all CEC members to discuss the individual priorities of the members, and discuss the roles and responsibilities of the CEC as defined by the City Council. The City Council established that at the core, the City provides a set of programs and services and the City is most effective if communication and engagement is efficient and ultimately successful. Further, the City Council wanted to understand ‘What is working?’ and ‘What is not working?’ by charging the CEC to help define where there might be gaps in current communication and engagement efforts. Through reviewing what current efforts look like, the CEC was charged with bringing recommendations to Council (on no specific timeline) on how to identify and eliminate gaps in communication and ensure the entire community has the opportunity to engage with the City.

After individual discussions in October 2020, the CEC has met:

- November 18, 2020
- December 16, 2020
- January 20, 2021
- February 24, 2021
- March 10, 2021
- March 31, 2021

Immediate Recommendations

It is important to call out that in updating communications and engagement, recommendations are most useful from the direct users. For example, getting feedback on the City's social media efforts is most helpful when coming from social media users. Likewise, getting feedback on printed materials is most helpful from those who prefer that style of communication. CEC members found that understanding the comprehensive efforts of the City regarding communication and engagement allowed for a more comprehensive approach in addressing potential gaps.

Over the past 6-7 months, the CEC has made recommendations to staff that has been easy to immediately implement. Some of these improvements include adjustments to social media strategy, updates to print materials (including the tri-annual City Newsletter, monthly Senior Newsletter, quarterly utility bills, etc...) as well as messaging content. Results have been both quantitative and qualitative.

Recommendations for Strategic Planning, Including Budgetary Considerations

- Utilizing a Cultural Consultant and/or service that specializes in working with diverse communities to help enhance the ability of the City to engage with the broader community. Two types of services are recommended as budget allows:
 - Training for Council and City staff on cultural competence and/or diversity, equity, and inclusion. This would help to ensure all City Council members are taking into account cultural context when designing programs and services and engaging with community members.
 - Bring on Cultural Competency specialists to review current communication efforts and messaging for effectiveness in reaching the whole community.

While not exclusive, CEC members presented the following firms for consideration:

- Cultives & Associates <https://www.cultivesimpact.com>
 - Culture Brokers LLC <https://www.culturebrokers.com>
 - Embody Equity, Rie Algeo Gilsdorf - Facilitator/Founder. www.embodyequity.com
- Invest in data driven community feedback - specifically a statistically significant Community Survey
 - Formalize relationships with different demographics for feedback, potentially including:
 - Solicit high school aged membership for Committees/Commissions as appropriate
 - Promote existing formal relationships, explore new opportunities to encourage inclusion
 - Create better understanding of jurisdictional responsibilities, promote appropriately
 - Increase engagement efforts of existing City Events, Host a 'Community Resource Fair'
 - Utilize existing events, enhance to promote more inclusive efforts
 - Host a Community Resource Fair to highlight resources not provided by, but available within the City

Ultimately, the CEC has created the aforementioned that can be explored in a variety of capacities. Further, all recommendations address what the CEC was originally charged with, but also consider opportunities to grow these efforts as the City moves forward.

Staff will facilitate discussion on the above recommendations and will happily address questions, comments, and concerns. It will be helpful for the CEC going forward to receive candid feedback but any additional direction the Council would like to provide for next steps.