

CityWorks: Developing a Community Consensus on Infrastructure

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The tall, elegant older man fixed his gaze on the city manager. Reading from his comment card, on which was printed “One thing I want to tell city officials about the budget or the city’s budget priorities is . . . ,” he said firmly, “First things first: infrastructure, infrastructure, all capital letters, INFRASTRUCTURE! Then and only then should there be a focus on those many amenities that make Palo Alto the great city that it is.”

During a series of public meetings, a variety of tools were used to begin a community dialogue on the city’s budget priorities. City staff met in private homes with neighbors and held meetings at local schools and city community centers. Sometimes, they met during the week in the evening; other times, they met on Saturday mornings. The format for each of these meetings was the same: education liberally mixed with audience participation. The outcome was a consensus on the importance of committing funding to the city’s deferred infrastructure needs.

The Silent Deficit

Palo Altans enjoy a rich array of municipal services. Over the years, general-fund resources have been directed for the most part toward maintaining and expanding these services, rather than toward keeping up critical infrastructure assets.

In addition to an eight-story civic center with a three-level underground parking garage, Palo Alto’s infrastructure responsibilities include a municipal services center; three community centers and an art center; six libraries; 33 parks, a golf course, and extensive open space totaling almost 4,000 acres; a junior museum and zoo; a community theater and separate children’s theater; 200 miles of streets; 253 miles of sidewalks; 107 miles of storm drains; eight fire stations; and 624 vehicles and other pieces of equipment.

Palo Alto celebrated its centennial in 1989, and much of its infrastructure dates from the early part of the 20th century or from the period immediately following World War II. As of 2000, fresh coats of paint could no longer hide the fact that the city’s facilities had been heavily used by several generations of children and parents, by residents and businesses, and by members of other communities in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Working with the assistance of an engineering consultant, staff had completed a comprehensive inventory of the city’s infrastructure, which formed the basis for council approval of a 10-year, \$100 million program to repair and renovate the city’s buildings and facilities (electric,

plumbing, roofing, and heating systems); streets and sidewalks; parks and open space; and transportation systems (medians, islands, planter strips, and bike and pedestrian facilities).

Only about three-quarters of the funding sources needed to carry out the entire 10-year program could be identified up-front. Staff had proposed a transient-occupancy tax increase to pay for the remainder of the program, but stiff business opposition led the council to postpone a decision.

Staff members also had proposed the adoption of a policy of paying for the renovation of existing infrastructure with existing resources and requiring new projects to have new funding sources identified for them. The council, however, continued to press staff for an understanding on how demands for new or expanded infrastructure projects would be prioritized in the overall infrastructure program. Both the infrastructure renovation program and a way to prioritize new infrastructure needs would have to be tested for community acceptance.

Engaging the Community

In December 2000, the city manager, assistant city manager, and administrative services director began work on a series of “community dialogues,” with the purpose of giving citizens a basic understanding of the city’s general fund—a budget primer—and of the overall infrastructure program. Citizens who were known to be active in the community were invited to host their neighbors for discussions.

A special meeting was scheduled for representatives of service clubs like Kiwanis, Rotary, and Elks clubs. More traditional evening and Saturday-morning meetings were scheduled, but the locations were varied in an attempt to reach out to sectors of the community that do not typically participate in municipal affairs. Eleven meetings were held over several months in early 2001.

Regardless of the venue, the meetings followed a similar format. The manager acted as facilitator for the sessions. At the beginning of each meeting, participants filled out comment cards that were titled “One thing I want to tell city officials about the budget . . . ”

The manager then asked people who were comfortable doing so to share their responses. Warmed up, the audience settled in for a 15-minute presentation on the city’s budget, followed by questions, then another 15 minutes on the city’s infrastructure renovation plans, again followed by questions.

Next, participants were asked to complete a two-page survey, checking off which services (police, fire, recreation, planning and land use, libraries) were most important to them and adding how they rated the importance of infrastructure maintenance and improvements next to these programs.

Discussion on how priorities were to be rated was lively. Many people commented on their frustration at having to rank such dissimilar services as paramedics versus planning and development oversight. The manager emphasized that this is the same frustration the city council feels each time it is faced with approving the city’s budget.

Each meeting lasted two hours, with the manager being scrupulous about keeping to this time frame, respecting the fact that the participants were giving their personal time to attend the meetings.

The public meetings were videotaped, as was one of the meetings held in a private residence (with the permission of the host and guests). A seven-minute video synopsis of the dialogues was presented as the lead-in to the city manager's report back to the council on the outcome of the dialogues. Most of the councilmembers themselves had attended one or more dialogues, either to welcome the participants and make opening remarks at the larger, public meetings or as members of the audience.

The results of the two-page survey were tallied and showed, as expected, that Palo Alto residents valued all the services currently provided. The survey and dialogues also sent the council a strong message that fixing up the locality's current infrastructure was a priority for the community and that respondents felt that this should take precedence over the construction of new infrastructure. "Get back to the basics" was the message the staff heard.

Marketing Infrastructure

Having set the stage, staff now began to market the evolving consensus around fixing up Palo Alto's existing infrastructure. An employee competition led to the adoption of a CityWorks logo (designed by a city police officer). The logo was placed on all Palo Alto signage relating to such infrastructure projects as parking or temporary closure signs, as well as being used in "This project is brought to you by CityWorks" announcements. A logo was affixed to city trucks and vehicles and made into hardhat decals and uniform patches. It also was incorporated into the city's Web site and the community newsletter, *CityPages*.

In conjunction with National Public Works Week in May 2001, to emphasize the CityWorks theme, staff held an open house at the municipal services center, which accommodates the staff and equipment for public works, parks, and utilities operations (Palo Alto owns its own electric, gas, water, wastewater, storm drainage, and refuse utilities), as well as the garage and facilities maintenance operations.

CityWorks Day was advertised as a family event, and the turnout was exceptional. Staff from all city departments that were involved in the initiative prepared exhibits, plus interactive children's games with an infrastructure theme. For example, deteriorated storm-drain pipes were available for kids (or adults) to crawl through; kids had their pictures taken in the cab of a large backhoe used to tear up streets; and a video presentation on the police department's building needs was shown throughout the day outside the room where children and adults were trying out night-vision equipment. Food and beverages, prizes, and live band entertainment added to the enjoyment, as did tee-shirts printed with the CityWorks logo.

A Web site was developed that offered information on all infrastructure projects under way. A telephone number enabled people to find out about street blockages, "no parking" postings, or torn-up sidewalks. These innovations were later refined to become interactive with the city's geographic information system, so that anyone interested in finding out what was going on from

an infrastructure perspective anywhere in town could log on and get the answer to their questions.

Competing New Projects

Although a clear community consensus existed about attending to the rehabilitation of existing infrastructure, lobbying continued in favor of specific new or expanded community facilities, especially libraries. A group of advocates had come forward with a proposal to put a bond measure on the November 2002 ballot to make major improvements to three of the city libraries. A group calling itself Libraries Now carried out a telephone poll that it said evidenced community support for such a bond measure.

In response, the city manager directed staff to prepare a second series of community dialogues to discuss citizens' and users' priorities for new infrastructure. Participants were "warmed up" with a multiple-choice quiz, with such items as "The Palo Alto Library System receives _____ visits per year," and "Cubberley Community Center was built during the: a) Kennedy, b) Eisenhower, c) Truman, or d) Nixon administration." CityWorks logo caps and tee-shirts were awarded as prizes for correct answers.

Three substantive presentations were made, covering: 1) the proposed "solution" to the funding gap in the city's original \$100 million infrastructure program, which involved dedication of general-fund savings; 2) an overview of the top new projects vying for high-priority funding, including the libraries, art center, junior museum and zoo, and new police building; and 3) the results of a telephone poll that Palo Alto itself conducted just prior to the dialogues on resident/user priorities for new infrastructure.

Shrewdly, the manager realized that this last element would be a drawing card since considerable press interest had been generated by the Libraries Now campaign. Before the manager unveiled the telephone-poll results, participants were asked to fill out a much shorter version of it called "What are my priorities?" They were then able to compare their answers with those of the telephone survey respondents.

These dialogues were not as successful as the first series. Proponents of various community groups allied with specific projects dominated the meetings, and little new input was received or information exchanged. Library advocates argued that the council should move ahead on a bond measure for libraries only, despite agitation from other groups to be included in such a measure.

Lessons Learned

What did Palo Alto learn from these outreach efforts?

- A logo and a catchy program name can be enormously helpful in "branding" a program.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate! An "unsexy" issue like infrastructure can become compelling, given the right marketing. This communication can also build long-term political support for needed programs.

- The “traditional” model of community meetings needs to be renovated. The difference in effectiveness between the first and second series of dialogues showed that speaking with citizens in an informal forum but with a carefully crafted agenda can be productive for matters that require the transmittal of substantive information. Traditional community meetings, which are advertised to the general public but are usually attended mainly by the same community activists, are not as effective, when most people have so many other work and family demands on their time.

The CityWorks community outreach program—with its dialogues, CityWorks Day, and use of the Web site—provided a new model for reaching out to citizens who do not normally participate in deliberations on issues that can have a tremendous impact on their lives and those of their children.

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