



SAN RAFAEL CITY COUNCIL AGENDA REPORT

Department: City Manager

Prepared by: Thomas Wong, Analyst

City Manager Approval: _____

TOPIC: RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT

SUBJECT: INFORMATIONAL REPORT ON FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS ABOUT NEIGHBORHOOD & RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT IN SAN RAFAEL

RECOMMENDATION:

By motion, accept the informational progress report.

BACKGROUND:

Periodically, the City reviews its resident engagement practices to ensure that all residents have an opportunity to view and provide feedback on community issues. As referenced by Mayor Kate Colin at the [June 21, 2021](#) City Council meeting, several important factors have changed in the past years that warrant a review of current practices. These changes include, but are not limited to:

- District-based elections
- Increasing prevalence of technology in engagement, accelerated by the pandemic, such as meetings on virtual platforms
- The City's ongoing commitment to racial equity and social justice

Working with Susan Clark of Common Knowledge, Mayor Kate and staff identified several important goals to address these changes:

- Increase the web of people interested in and informed about City activities, aiming to reach beyond the subset of residents with deep expertise in civic process, and include residents of all ages and backgrounds who care about their local community.
- Continue to expand the "pipeline" of people willing and ready to serve on City of San Rafael boards, commissions, and other working and advisory groups (ad hoc and formal appointments).
- Develop multi-directional information flows about conditions and changes in San Rafael neighborhoods and opportunities for community members, by increasing the collaboration between the City and allied organizations to improve local quality of life.

FOR CITY CLERK ONLY

Council Meeting:

Disposition:

ANALYSIS:

Common Knowledge in collaboration with staff, developed a two-phased approach to providing recommendations to improve inclusive resident engagement. The first phase relied heavily on interviews with community members with experience and knowledge about neighborhood and/or grassroots resident engagement. The interviewees included leaders of various neighborhood associations, community-based organizations, City staff, and elected City Officials. In total, 23 individuals were interviewed in the first round with careful consideration taken to ensure feedback came from individuals residing in all four Council districts.

Findings from Phase 1 include widespread agreement from interviewees that current patterns of civic engagement skew toward retired, older, well-educated white residents. Interviewees shared their desire to expand engagement beyond this subset of the population, such as renters, non-English speakers, small business owners, to name a few. Additional feedback, suggestions, and information regarding the impact of district-based communications, roles of neighborhood associations and other community partners, and City communications was received and will be reviewed when making recommendations for future phases and changes to current practices.

Phase 2 will ensure that a variety of diverse views are accounted for, to complement Phase 1's participants. While Phase 2 is still being developed based on feedback and insight gathered in Phase 1. The current recommendation from Common Knowledge is to put together a small working group to further develop understanding of community networks and conduct stakeholder mapping and share suggestions for district level engagement. This working group will help the City identify new and creative ways to connect with our community and increase two-way flow of information.

Further updates on Phase 2 will be presented to the City Council and community when available.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH:

Targeted community outreach is being done for Phases 1 and 2. Updates are provided through neighborhood association groups and community-based organizations. Recommendations and improvements to resident engagement will be used for all community outreach moving forward.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact from the recommended City Council action. Common Knowledge is currently working under a \$25,000 contract signed within the authority of the City Manager. Funds are available in the approved FY21-22 general fund for this contract.

OPTIONS:

The City Council has the following options to consider on this matter:

1. Accept the informational report.
2. Direct staff to return with more information.
3. Take no action.

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

Move to accept the informational report regarding the inclusive resident engagement.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Summary of Phase One Findings

Common Knowledge

9-27-21 Summary of Findings from Phase One Interviews about Neighborhood & Grassroots Resident Engagement in San Rafael

Project Background & Context

Since the onset of the pandemic in spring 2020, the importance of proactive resident engagement and inclusive communications has been made clearer than ever. The additional factors of increased wildfire risk, the drought and economic uncertainty for thousands of residents, have raised the bar for effective multi-directional listening and communications.

The City of San Rafael, other local public agencies, community groups and active residents have adapted how they communicate and operate during this challenging and dynamic time. There has been a lot of collaboration on getting key messages out on topics such as COVID-19 testing, vaccinations, rent freeze, eviction moratorium, fire safety and more. These high stake issues require not only issuing communications but ensuring that information is perceived as reliable. There was an expansion of Wi-Fi coverage in the City of San Rafael as well as new ways of thinking about how human networks extend the reach of digital networks.

How can the City of San Rafael and neighborhood and grassroots leaders build on these recent experiences to keep expanding inclusive resident engagement?

The Assignment

At the June 21, 2021, San Rafael City Council meeting, Mayor Kate Colin shared three factors to take into consideration regarding neighborhood-level resident engagement:

- the new configuration of City Councilmembers elected by district
- the increasing prevalence of technology in engagement, such as meetings on virtual platforms
- the City's ongoing commitment to racial equity and social justice

As a starting point, these purposes were identified for increasing grassroots resident engagement in San Rafael:

- Increase the web of people interested in and informed about City and community issues, aiming to include residents of all ages and backgrounds who care about their local community
- Continue to expand the "pipeline" of people willing and ready to serve on City of San Rafael boards, commissions and other working or advisory groups (including ad hoc as well as formal appointments)
- Develop multi-directional information flows about what is happening in and across San Rafael neighborhoods (often referred to as listening to the "pulse" of the community) and sharing opportunities to work together to improve local quality of life

While part of the assignment is to collaboratively define with the City Council, staff and local leaders what "neighborhood and grassroots resident engagement" is, this was our initial working definition: **communications and capacity building to identify and work on issues of shared community concern.**

This type of engagement complements individual episodes of City outreach for specific City Council decisions. It involves listening to a wide variety of things that residents care about, offering ways to help people be hands-on in their contributions to quality of life, as well as build their knowledge and skills *across* issues to provide constructive input on civic decisions.

Two-Phase Process

- Phase One included interviews with Mayor Kate, all four City Councilmembers, four City staff members, ten leaders of neighborhood-based associations in San Rafael, and five leaders with other local organizations that are active in spreading information about local services and issues. Interviews were not intended to represent all types of residents but to help inform the October 4, 2021, discussion with the Council and community to help shape Phase Two of this project.
- Interviews topics included:
 - Each person’s “journey line” to engagement
 - Their organization’s purpose and its evolution
 - How they engage others
 - Hopes for resident engagement in San Rafael
 - Information sources they use
 - Thoughts about district communications

Highlights of Findings to Date

Areas of Congruence

The interviews with the City Council, staff members, local neighborhood association leaders and other local leaders/connectors indicate an encouraging amount of congruence. The following common themes emerged:

1. There is a shared desire for more inclusive engagement, representative of all San Rafael residents.

There was widespread agreement that current patterns of civic engagement skew to retired, older well-educated white residents. There is a universal desire to expand engagement to be more representative of the entire population of San Rafael. These specific types of residents were identified by most of the interviewees:

- Renters as well as homeowners (renters currently represent 50% of residents)
- People at different life stages (school, young adulthood, young families, early-stage empty nesters, as well as retirees)
- An interest in people from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds
- Spanish-speakers and other residents whose primary language is not English (27% of residents)
- Small business owners
- Trusted “connectors” who share information with those not reached well by official civic communications

The interviews also created a space for candor about gaps between the desire to reach these audiences and how many people did not feel like they had the right connections to do so. Alternately, some of those who were more embedded in diverse communities felt that they were

not being invited early enough in a process to help shape effective communications to reach these additional audiences.

- 2. Everyone interviewed saw themselves as partners in fostering neighborhood and resident engagement.** Neighborhood and grassroots leaders, as well as City councilmembers, see themselves in the business of helping orient people to community issues and ways they can affect change. The interviews included several examples of collaboration such as on neighborhood murals, community gardens, efforts to reduce illegal dumping, improve medians, etc. as well as more traditional “organizing” to lobby council decisions.

All of these committed local leaders are volunteers engaging other volunteers. They described situations and patterns of waxing and waning interest and what they have observed in their successes and frustrations with sustaining resident engagement over time.

- 3. San Rafael can do more to leverage, strengthen and build on existing networks of community relationships.** Many people were oriented to thinking about the community as a network of networks. They talked about how the City can do more to leverage other group’s networks as well as utilize its own lists across departments and past episodes of engagement. There is also a high level of interest in neighbor-to-neighbor and neighborhood-to-neighborhood exchange.

Several participants offered to help with specific elements, such as stakeholder mapping, lateral partnerships with groups that had good reach to diverse residents, social media linkages and development of introductory information.

- 4. There is a keen interest in engagement long before, and parallel to, public hearings.** Interviewees of all backgrounds expressed complementary perspectives on why council meetings and public hearings are too late and too positional to be inclusive or effective informational entry points. Participants expressed the need to engage community members earlier in the process, particularly to include more diverse and representative perspectives. There was also a desire for more dialogue that supports **mutual learning and collaboration** rather than heated debate at the stage of a final recommendation. People talked about how contention can reduce the ability to reach new residents and that positive relationships can make a positive difference for all involved.

- Several spoke about **the need for more intentional inclusion when engaging people newer to formal civic processes.** This includes proactively inviting diverse participation through trusted channels (not just officially announcing opportunities to participate) and other ways of considering the equity needs of diverse residents. Several described ways that official public meetings and the language of public documents create “unintentional gatekeeping.” In addition to translations and plain language, interviewees talked about types of introductory background information that allows all people to participate fully.

- There was widespread agreement that **a variety of channels and formats are necessary to widen and sustain engagement.** These were common observations:

- The need for a mix of online communications that spanned email, social media, and sharable “nuggets” alongside occasions for direct contact and discussion
- The benefits of a mix of formal and informal modes of engagement that allow for two-way exchange

- The essential role of being out in the community, knowing and going where different types of residents are as they go about their lives; several mentioned neighborhood walks and being “on location” as an important way to reach and understand underrepresented perspectives
- The value of hands-on ways for people to participate, in addition to attending official meetings; both elected and neighborhood leaders wanted to better equip people with things they can do themselves
- The importance of social and community-building activities to build relationships and shared knowledge that helps improve civic participation too

Main Differences Across the Interviews

- There were significant differences in people’s sense of urgency about increasing connections with a more representative cross section of community members. Some felt this should be a priority focus for their own group and/or the City while others indicated less certainty about how it might come about.
- Some interviewees were emphatic about the need to address economic disparities in San Rafael as well as racial ones; others did not communicate that as a priority.
- Most interviewees saw the role of elected City decision-makers and City staff as collaborators with other kinds of change-makers across sectors. Some were more tightly focused on the City’s policy-making decision process.
- People articulated different things that develop trust. For some, it is credentials and technical knowledge about civic process. For others, it was about engagement with and knowledge of people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and income levels.
- There was uneven exposure to the experience of being in multi-generational, multi-cultural and/or multi-lingual conversations—or the practice of working side by side to blend “lived experience and local wisdom” with technical knowledge. Voces del Canal was mentioned by multiple interviewees as a model to examine and emulate; see http://www.datacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/VDC_Report_Final_Draft_ENGLISH_WEB.pdf. (Note that Voces del Canal started as a collaboration with Dominican University’s Service-Learning program which continues to be active in supporting the Canal neighborhood.) Appendix A shares a summary about practices that facilitate exchange between different kinds of knowledge in a community.

Feedback about Information Sources about City Activities

- The interviewees that have been highly engaged in civic process mentioned Snapshot, the Marin Independent Journal, meetings with the Mayor or City Councilmembers and/or staff, other organizations they belong to and colleagues. A smaller number of this group mentioned social media outlets.
- The interviewees who work in or with the Canal neighborhood and/or in other grassroots-oriented settings shared a wider variety of communication channels, including Facebook live, neighborhood walks, door to door surveys, short videos posted on social media, word of mouth at venues like the Health Hub, etc.
- All of the highly engaged people read the Snapshot newsletter; they find it “very informative” and “well done.” It was seen as succinct, factual, and easy to skim.
 - Some asked for different formats for passing it on in “bite-sized messages”
 - These could include images and links to share on social media

These neighborhood associations are providing neighbor to neighbor education and coaching about community issues, including valued cross-generational continuity. Two of the City's current elected Councilmembers shared that their engagement journey included activities with a San Rafael neighborhood association. Many of these groups are in a transition point regarding their structure, by-laws or leadership. For example, the Terra Linda group shared that they are reviewing its mission and exploring ways to be a more effective and inclusive forum for community interaction. The Glenwood neighborhood group is forming itself as a 501c3. It accepts renters as members. The Spinnaker Point HOA is reviewing its agreement with its current management company.

Associations vary in how they communicate with members. Some have regular newsletters and a social media presence. The style of communication used by these neighborhood groups aligns with the interests and energies of their volunteer leadership. Some write newsletters for 200-300 recipients, and a few are larger than that. Some groups run surveys. Almost all have annual or semiannual meetings attended by elected officials. Most of the associations also have hands on activities and social events such as picnics which draw a more diverse cross section of the neighborhood. There were several anecdotes about how word of mouth is the most powerful way to recruit new members and committee participants.

There are also several neighborhoods in San Rafael where people who serve as “connectors” have not been identified by councilmembers or the Federation. For example, Councilmember Llorens Gulati described how she works with various groups in the Canal given that there is no formal neighborhood association. Grassroots leaders in the Canal neighborhood shared how they received coaching in various types of local leadership from multiple community-based organizations. A focus of Phase Two of this project is to more thoroughly explore the networks that are providing two-way communications and engagement support to San Rafael residents.

Discussion of Phase 2 and Next Steps

The first step is to listen to feedback from the Council, the interviewees and interested community members at the October 4, 2021, City Council meeting. Current thinking about Phase 2 is to convene a temporary team of 12-15 residents who are well-connected with **all** sectors of the City's demographics and have different levels of exposure to civic process. As this project with Common Knowledge is limited in scope and resources, it will serve to provide *initial* input on:

- Communications strategies and tactics to reach a more representative cross section of San Rafael community members, including but not limited to how to approach district-level communications
- How the City organizes its collaboration with neighborhood-level leaders and connectors, assessing information flows through:
 - a) existing/evolving neighborhood associations
 - b) other neighborhood-level and grassroots organizations that have direct relationships with residents (including but not limited to schools, service nonprofits and clubs, faith groups and recreation leagues
 - c) informal leaders and “connectors”
- How to approach a more comprehensive update of the City of San Rafael's Community Engagement Plan and staffing

In two to three sessions, the group will provide feedback on: a) Phase One findings and specific suggestions from interviewees; b) some past/existing/potential communications; and c) what the team together chooses as priorities for more inclusive resident engagement. The group may follow up on community offers to do stakeholder mapping and possibly field a grassroots survey that tests the reach of existing lists and networks to see where gaps remain. The plan is that representatives from this team will share highlights of their work with the City Council and community in a study session discussion.

Appendix A: A few remarks about Co-Design and Co-Production

Traditional civic engagement structures refer to the IAP2 spectrum about levels of consultation. Alternately, various forms of “co-design” and/or “co-production” are employed in communities aiming to be more innovative in how they address complex issues for long-term social and economic regeneration. This also relates to the premise of the popular Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) practice which assumes that everyone has something to contribute, especially in marginalized communities. Co-production is already happening in many places and on many subjects in San Rafael – such as disaster preparedness, fire safety, food sharing, recreation for children, public art, reducing isolation of seniors, adding outdoor Wi-Fi in the Canal, hyper-local Resilient Neighborhoods groups, etc.

From	To
Making decisions for people with lived experience	Making decisions with people with lived experience
Valuing professional expertise above all	Valuing professional and lived experience equally
Seeing marginalised people as a burden	Seeing marginalised people as resilient, creative and capable
Colonising, heteronormative and ableist systems	Compassionate systems that see and respond to dimensions of difference
Believing that resources are scarce to make change	Seeing an abundance of experience, ideas and energy for change
Focusing on ‘consumer’ councils and committees	Embedding participation in everyday practice
Rushing to solutions	Slowing down to listen, connect and learn

McKercher, K. A. (2020). *Beyond Sticky Notes. Doing Co-design for real: mindsets, methods and movements.*

For more information, see <https://www.beyondstickynotes.com/what-is-codesign>, and <https://www.coproductionsotland.org.uk/what-is-copro>.