



Staff Report

DISCUSSION AND DIRECTION REGARDING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

Honorable Mayor and Council Members:

Summary

City Council requested staff to investigate alternatives for citizen participation at City Council meetings via the telephone and or email from home.

Background

City Council has directed Staff to research the feasibility of alternatives for residents living in the community to participate in local government. Over the past few months, Mayor Lieberman has received comments from Belmont residents who would support options for participating in Council meetings from home due to personal reasons such as family commitments and individuals who prefer not to go out at night.

Discussion

Staff has identified the variety of ways in which the City connects with its residents: telephone, person to person, email, City Website and Cable TV.

A survey was conducted of cities throughout California through a listserv in which no city indicated using live call-in functionality. One city in the South Bay briefly introduced live call-in several years ago but cancelled it soon after due to lack of participation.

The first option in which there would be no fiscal impact to the City is if the Council chose to adopt a protocol which allowed residents to email comments to the City Clerk prior to the Public Comments portion of a Council Meeting, which could then be read on the Air. The hardware structure currently in place could accommodate this.

Should the Council wish to initiate the first option at this time, some issues to be addressed would include how much time to allocate, what would be the cut-off time for accepting such communication, how to address lengthy communications that may exceed the three-minute limit, and how to structure the reading of these comments in conjunction with verbal comments from those present in the audience. Other considerations are the areas in which the public could email their input. Some examples would be, during Public Comment at the beginning and end of the Council meeting and during a Public Hearing.

The second option involves the use of telephone call-ins. Telephone call-ins would allow those individuals viewing from home to participate in City Council meetings. The issues around this option would include items in the first option as well as additional discussions concerning caller anonymity. Some areas of concern were; because of the total anonymity, callers could use this platform as a platform for their own agenda, the threat of inappropriate language and the requirement of a staff person to manage the calls.

Should the Council wish to investigate the second option further, it is recommended to place the item on the next Priority Calendar.

General Plan/Vision Statement

This project supports Belmont's Vision Statement that "We get involved in town matters because we care about living here" and "We connect with each other in all kinds of gathering places.

Fiscal Impact

If the Council chose to provide telephone call-ins from citizens, the approximate cost would be a minimum of \$6000 plus a monthly charge for the call-in telephone line which would keep several calls in a queue until they were placed on the air. There would also be an additional cost for a staff person to be a call taker and place the calls in a queue.

Public Contact

Posting of City Council agenda.

Recommendation

It is recommended the Council discuss and provide direction to implement the no additional cost approach of email correspondence at this time. If there is a desire for further investigation it is recommended that this item be on the upcoming Priority Calendar for additional research.

Alternatives

1. Keep current practices.
2. Refer back to staff for further information.
3. Take no action at this time.

Attachments

- A. No Attachments

Respectfully submitted,

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