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PUB 499W

To: Philmont Village Mayor Clarence Speed, Village Board
From: Christopher Redwing, Philmont Beautification, Inc
Date: May 2nd, 2012
RE: Civic Engagement and Village Comprehensive Plan Priority Roadmap

Executive Summary: The two separate issues of civic engagement and priority roadmaps to which we have been assigned to solve have a number of common threads which will be elaborated further in this memorandum. In light of their similarities, I would like to put forward an idea based on existing and new concepts of engagement and strategic planning in order to implement a comprehensive community tool to solve both the priority needs of local leaders and stress-free engagement from the citizens at large.

A set of priority values should be drawn from the Comprehensive Plan as a primary foundation due to its cooperative and democratic creation from the local community. Those priorities will be re-introduced to the community as a list survey where as many citizens as possible will assign values to each. Once values are assigned and averaged, those priorities can be linked to individual recommendations to create a tiered priority system. The exact nature and practical aspects will be elaborated on further into the memorandum.

This tiered priority system with its corresponding survey can also be used as a method of civic engagement in itself. Local leaders who have been voted into office can gain a more distinct idea of their citizens' priorities and shift their focus accordingly. Although there is the clear understanding that one of the goals stated by the Mayor's Office involves citizens coming directly to Village Board meetings and other local governmental functions, this plan places a higher priority on the overarching need for civic engagement from the community. An increase of overall engagement is expected to necessarily increase turnout to local governmental functions, particularly due to the low numbers currently stated and the vast number of citizens still in play.

1. The Problem and Causes of Civic Disengagement

Civic disengagement as stated by the Mayor's Office falls under a number of categories, which are necessary to state in order to address each by the solution suggested. Meeting Attendance and Communication as a whole were claimed to be at unacceptably low levels. The consequences of this disengagement led to observed and repeated examples of distrust in local leadership and a lack of public-driven direction for local leaders. Through direct discussions with citizens in the Village, we have identified several possible self-identified causes for the behavior. Some citizens responded with combinations of those causes listed below. This was not a scientific study, but provided details about disengaged mindsets which proved useful.

a) Complexity and Time. These individuals have stated that they are too busy to keep up with local matters. Their reasoning ranged from feeling frustrated with what they felt was a needless complexity of government to apologizing for their own schedule and lack of time.

Many expressed a fear that their lack of understanding on local issues would influence their vote or direct participation. In this way, they perceived that their lack of participation would be less potentially harmful than uninformed participation.

b) Distrust and Cynicism. Citizens who displayed these traits focused primarily on the lack of control “the people” had over their government. An overarching theme shared by most citizens who fell into this category focused on individual politicians having their own agendas, personal ties with others dictating what they did while in office, or both. Some of the cynicism was rooted in a sense of powerlessness of local municipalities to function at all in the face of State and Federal laws. Most responded that they voted anyway, but generally on party lines.

c) Disillusionment. These responses occasionally claimed that they had been interested in local government at one point and had the time to do so, but relayed stories or bad personal experiences pushed them away. Some of these respondents were the least engaged of all of the categories. Many of these issues came down to face-to-face conflicts over specific issues in meetings or over community websites and forums. Personality conflicts, aggression, occasionally fear were mentioned as well. They had a prior impression of local government as a constructive place for dialogue and instead heard or experienced the opposite.

d) Apathy. The least engaged overall, some citizens simply stated they did not care about it and there were more important things they wanted to spend their time on. Some claimed outright to a willful ignorance because they simply did not want to bother with it. A common theme was that other people would take care of the civic engagement they were rejecting, specifically those who enjoyed dealing with those issues.

2. The Two-Tier Solution for Civic Engagement

It was decided that any plan for civic engagement had to address as many of those reasons for disengagement as possible in order to potentially gain the largest number of engaged citizens. As a number of those reasons ran up against practical realities such as the barrier of complexity of local issues or technical knowledge, this affected the end solution and forced a two-tier system of engagement based on the amount of time and interest from each citizen.

a) Priority Values (D.E.V.E.L.O.P.). The idea of Priority Values is intended to allow citizens to focus the attentions of local leaders on specific issues. This idea encompasses the first of two tiers. While a busy family of four may have already planned their weekly schedules to be tightly focused around their children and their own mental well-being, they have individual priorities without additional research or time investment required. Being able to assign values to a number of potential priorities allows citizens to not only vote for the individual in office, but direct him/her to the issues to be addressed at the same time.

This indirect but overt request to an elected (or to-be elected) official functions as a measure of implied control. While polling companies already address the idea of priority values, poll results can be easily dismissed or downplayed in political circles. In order to have effective legitimacy, these priority values would be implemented at the voting booth. The idea would be to tie the legitimacy of these priority values directly to the legitimacy of the elected official’s success.

b) Public Suggestions. This is an obvious idea, however with the combination of Priority Values each individual policy suggestion can be more easily ranked in potential importance to the community at large as well. How this would happen in practice will be explained when discussing the Village Comprehensive Plan and how Priority Values can act as a solution for that goal as well. This is a necessary opportunity for citizens who are engaging for the first time or have been engaged for years to submit policy ideas to those who can implement them. This is the second tier, requiring some amount of time and initiative beyond the time in the voting booth.

Each of the expressed reasons for disengagement is addressed in a substantial way by this two-tier approach. Technical knowledge or knowledge about individual bills is not necessary to engage in a meaningful way. In some ways Priority Values should act as a feedback system, intending to base itself primarily from the values and experiences of the citizens regardless of education or time spent on policy issues. In this way, those who have a difficulty with complexity or time can be satisfied. The concern of control by those with distrust and cynicism is partly addressed here as well. While the priority value system has no inherent method of enforcement built in, it is open and legitimized by the very process that elected the public official. This gives citizens an additional tool to use in elections that can be easily publicized and understood by the voting public. Priority Values also can reassure those disillusioned with contentious meetings and feeling cut off from meaningful decisions due to personality conflicts or difficulty speaking in public. By creating a safe but clearly defined area to not only choose the person in charge but to set their priorities, there is the potential to bring them back into being engaged citizens. Finally, apathetic citizens may find themselves brought into the fold as the overall engagement increases through friends or other associates. Making the potential rewards overt through priorities can catch the attention of those who were not previously aware or interested in what local government has the potential to affect.

3. Using Priority Values to Create a Policy Roadmap (Village Comprehensive Plan)

Once a policy suggestion has been created by the public or local leaders, a small amount of subjectivity is required to determine which Priority Values it directly impacts, and how many Priority Values are affected by it. To work through an example, the current D.E.V.E.L.O.P. plan will be used.

For the sake of an example, we have engaged in a Convenience Survey by standing outside of the local Post Office on a Saturday morning to ask citizens to rank the following D.E.V.E.L.O.P. priorities on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 requiring the most attention:

- Distance of commute (whether the Village should focus on creating local alternatives)
- Engaging activities (whether the Village should focus on creating engaging activities)
- Village resources (developing and protecting environmental and historical locations)
- Economic opportunity (encouraging new businesses, assisting in job searches and training)
- Limiting inconveniences (trash collection, snow removal, pothole repairs, maintenance)
- Overall beauty (whether the Village should focus on the overall appearance of the area)
- Prosperity (whether the Village should focus on creating a community and/or shared identity)



At the end of the survey, we have found a baseline average value for each of these priorities. The most subjective aspect comes from the next stage. For a given policy suggestion, a neutral party must determine how many priorities are –directly- affected by the policy. In order to limit the subjectivity, the number of priorities must take into context only the most basic success of implementation without looking down the road. In this case, a Photo Contest with the village as the subject has a baseline number of one priority, Engaging activities. It would also be possible to extrapolate that the marketing of this Photo contest draws in tourism, bringing Economic opportunity. One could also extrapolate that someone takes photos of a historical district which are universally agreed to be incredible, and thus assists Village resources by bringing people to protect it.