



# MEMO

## Item No. 38

**To:** Mayor and Ames City Council

**From:** Steven L. Schainker, City Manager

**Date:** July 24, 2020

**Subject:** Improving Public Engagement

One of the City Council's goals is to "Use the best communication engagement techniques and modern technologies to engage the community by reaching people in geographic areas using multiple channels."

An analysis will be required by either the City staff or an outside entity to determine the most effective techniques. Rather than pursue an outside consultant for this assignment, with the assistance of Councilperson Betcher, contact was made with the faculty at the Iowa State University Department of Community and Regional Planning and the College of Design. It was determined that a class could be designed to take the lead on this analysis as early as this fall semester, and depending on the status of the COVID-19, a second class could be added in the spring semester.

The benefits of working with an ISU class for this task are three-fold. First, it frees up City staff to work on the other goals of the City Council that have been delayed due to the pandemic. Second, it assists ISU in providing students with a real world project on which to work. Third, there are minimal out-of-pocket costs associated with working with the students as opposed to a very costly consulting contract with a private entity.

I have attached for your review the agreed-upon Request For Assistance (RFA) that was jointly developed by University and City representatives. The focus of the work will be on identifying: 1) the various groups of residents in our

community, 2) which engagement techniques have been successful in other cities, and 3) which engagement techniques are most appropriate for each identified group of residents. A special emphasis is being placed on engaging our under-represented community members.

Normally, I would not be bringing this document for your approval since we frequently work with ISU classes in this way. However, because the proposed program of work involves one of the City Council's goals, I want to make sure you support this means of accomplishing your public engagement goal.

**Assuming you concur with this approach, I request that the City Council pass a motion approving the project reflected in the attached RFA, along with the minimal budget request.**

## **IMPROVING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN AMES, IA**

This Request for Assistance (RFA) describes a mutually beneficial relationship between the City of Ames and classes taught by the Iowa State University Department of Community and Regional Planning and the College of Design. The circumstances of the RFA will enable the City to enhance its **Community Engagement** strategies to better solicit the involvement of residents while the students and faculty of the College of Design participate in a living lab experience in the City of Ames that will enhance learning and research opportunities.

### **I. DEFINITIONS:**

The Institute of Local Government provides the following definition for Public Engagement:

**Public Engagement** is a general term that represents a broad range of methods through which members of the public become more informed about and/or influence public decisions.

For the City of Ames, **Public Engagement** is comprised of two types:

**City-Initiated Engagement (CIE)** is engagement initiated by the City to gain resident input on upcoming policy decisions or projects or to disseminate information on these topics to impacted residents.

**Resident-Inspired Engagement (RIE)** is engagement with the City on issues, projects, or policy decisions that residents have brought forward for City consideration. These include neighborhood initiatives, quality of life issues, and elements of place-making, such as, among others, community art, events, and improvements. **RIE** may be enhanced by the City creating opportunities for the exchange of ideas.

For the purposes of this project, **Community Engagement** is synonymous with **Public Engagement** and defined as including both **CIE** and **RIE**.

It is within these definitions that the City of Ames is seeking assistance.

### **II. BACKGROUND:**

The City of Ames has adopted the Council/Manager form of government. Under this governing model, the Mayor/City Council operate as the Legislative Branch, empowered to make rules, regulations, ordinances, and policies that impact the lives of their residents. The City Manager serves as the Executive Branch of local government, responsible to implement the direction given by the Mayor and City Council.

Inherent in this governance model is the concept of representative democracy, in which the Mayor and City Council have been granted, as the result of an election, the authority to make policy decisions for the City. This approach is different from holding a formal public referendum on each important issue to determine what the majority of the residents want and then voting according to the majority opinion.

Short of pursuing a formal public vote on each important issue before they make a final decision, the Ames Mayor and City Council are committed to obtaining input from impacted residents by utilizing various **Public Engagement** techniques. Gathering

substantial public input may be challenging because residents, particularly those from traditionally under-represented groups, may not be willing to engage or may not know how to engage with City representatives.

### **III. CATEGORIES OF ISSUES ON WHICH CIE IS PURSUED:**

Typically, there are four categories of issues on which **City-Initiated Engagement** is pursued.

#### 1) Current Planning

Current planning issues impact a person's property or surrounding neighborhood. These include rezoning requests, zoning variance requests, home occupation requests, parking prohibition requests, and street reconstruction projects.

#### 2) Long-Range Planning

Long-range planning issues include the development of the long-range plans that will impact the total city. Such plans include the Land Use Policy Plan, Long-Range Transportation Plan, and Park Master Plan.

#### 3) City-Wide Policy Changes

City-wide policy changes impact all Ames residents. These include, for example, parking meter fee modifications, sidewalk infill requirements, and property maintenance code regulations.

#### 4) Capital Improvement Projects

Capital improvement projects include major projects that are expensive and will benefit all Ames residents. Such projects might include, for example, a new indoor aquatics facility, new fire station, new community solar farm, and new major intersection involving arterial roads.

### **IV. CITY-INITIATED ENGAGEMENT TECHNIQUES CURRENTLY UTILIZED**

The City has employed the following **CIE** techniques to gain public input:

- a. Direct mailings,
- b. Door hangers,
- c. Pop-up meetings,
- d. Focus groups,
- e. Virtual meetings,
- f. On-site neighborhood meetings,
- g. Public meetings,
- h. Media releases,

- i. Social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, video streaming), and
- j. On-line surveys.

#### **V. THE PROBLEM:**

While all of the techniques highlighted above have been utilized by the City to stimulate citizen interest and generate public input, **Community Engagement** remains problematic. The problem is two-fold:

- 1) More often than not, impacted residents come away from **City-Initiated Engagement** during the decision-making process feeling that the Mayor and City Council have not listened to them and/or have ignored residents' recommendations. This feeling may cause residents to actively disengage *because they believe the Mayor and Council aren't listening or are not willing to listen.*
- 2) Residents from under-represented communities may not be reached by current **City-Initiated Engagement** strategies and/or may believe the Mayor and Council do not care about the communities' concerns or are not willing to learn about those concerns.

#### **VI. THE PROJECT:**

Assistance is being sought from the ISU Community and Regional Planning classes to identify techniques that could be used to assure that impacted residents in the community and residents who are not currently engaged in the decision-making process are given the opportunity to provide input and feel they have been heard, not necessarily agreed with, before the Mayor and City Council make a final policy decision or initiate a project that affects residents.

Integral to the success of this project would be identifying the individual groups (e.g., retirees, racial or ethnic groups, international families, university students, low- and moderate-income residents, etc.) that exist within the larger community and recommending which of the techniques for **City-Initiated Engagement** and **Resident-Inspired Engagement** would be most appropriate for that group and which engagement techniques are most appropriate for which categories of issues.

#### **VII. PHASED APPROACH TO THE PROJECT:**

The project would be accomplished in two phases over the fall semester in 2020 and the spring semester in 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic makes these plans, especially Phase 2, necessarily tentative.

#### **Phase 1**

During the fall semester of 2020, the students in the **CRP 532: Community planning studio** will

- a. Explore planning for the community.

1. Catalogue various **City-Initiated Engagement** and **Resident-Inspired Engagement** strategies that have been successfully implemented in other communities throughout the country and more broadly in the world.
2. Catalogue and map the groups of residents in Ames who need to be engaged. A particular focus is dedicated to the residents that are usually under-represented.
  - i. Explore the notion of rational ignorance or why the residents don't participate: interviews, **Community Engagement**, and other strategies.
  - ii. Study the groups of residents in Ames, their characteristics, and needs.
  - iii. Identify challenges to communication
3. Catalogue the techniques and identify strengths and weaknesses of **Community Engagement** as currently implemented in Ames and broadly in Iowa
  - i. Interview the Ames city council, mayor, city manager and selected representatives from other cities in Iowa.
4. Catalogue of participatory techniques for **City-Initiated Engagement** and **Resident-Inspired Engagement** appropriate for groups of residents in Ames.
  - ii. Describe examples of the techniques.
  - iii. Map techniques to the different groups of residents and their needs.

### **Phase 2 (Tentative)**

Given the uncertainty of Spring semester because of the pandemic, Phase 2 plans are tentative and will be discussed further as Fall semester progresses.

The studio tentatively will focus on studying the engagement techniques presented in Phase 1, deepen the knowledge of these techniques, and test them for the purpose of their implementation in the City of Ames.

1. Students will work further on collecting material about engagement techniques and expand the catalogue developed in Phase 1.
2. They will test the techniques available online and study their strengths, weaknesses, and possible implementations for the City of Ames.
3. They will develop criteria that could be used to evaluate the success of these techniques if implemented in Ames.
4. They will – if possible due to the COVID restrictions – focus on working with under-represented residents, establish contacts with them and get them involved in place-making activities and in creation of action projects (projects initiated by the residents that may improve their neighborhoods according to the needs, wishes and possibilities of the residents).

## VIII. FINAL PRODUCT:

The project deliverables for each semester will be the following:

### **Fall 2020**

- a. A list of the identified groups and their group traits.
- b. A catalogue of **CIE** and **RIE** strategies that are predicted to be the most successful in solving the Problem reflected in Section V for each of the identified groups in Ames and each of the issue categories listed in Section III, along with the justification for selecting these strategies, that is, their strengths and weaknesses.
- c. Mapping of appropriate strategies onto community groups.

### **Spring 2021**

- a. Deliverables for Spring 2021 will be determined as more information on that semester becomes available.

## IX. Budget:

The tentative budget below outlines likely costs, though these are subject to change. Any changes to the budget must be approved by the City of Ames in consultation with the course instructor.

### **Fall 2020**

The Fall 2020 budget includes the following:

1. Printing of final deliverables: This will be done by the City of Ames.
  - i. No more than 15 copies of the catalogue (10 for the students, 2 for the instructor, 3 for the City of Ames).
2. Food for presentation days: This will be ordered by the instructor and receipts will be submitted for reimbursement by the City of Ames.
  - i. 4 times pizza with soft drinks for students and guests (estimated 4 x \$50 = \$200).
3. Other material costs not to exceed \$750: This cost would cover communication boards in the neighborhoods used to get response from the residents, or other costs approved by the City Manager. Reimbursement would be provided based on receipts submitted by the instructor.

### **Spring 2021**

Costs for Spring 2021 will depend on the amount and type of interaction students are able to engage in with residents. Tentatively, the costs for Spring 2021 will be similar to those for Fall 2020, as follows:

1. Printing of final deliverables: This will be done by the City of Ames.

- ii. 15 copies of the catalogue (10 for the students, 2 for the instructor, 3 for the City of Ames).
- 2. Food for presentation days: This will be ordered by the instructor and receipts will be submitted for reimbursement by the City of Ames.
  - iii. 4 times pizza with soft drinks for students and guests (estimated 4 x \$50 = \$200).
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