

# City of Alexandria, Virginia

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## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** JANUARY 8, 2014

**TO:** THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:** RASHAD M. YOUNG, CITY MANAGER

**DOCKET TITLE:**

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Consideration of Civic Engagement Handbook and Implementation Plan and Setting The Plan for Public Hearing and Adoption on Saturday, January 25, 2014.

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**ISSUE:** Consideration of Alexandria's Civic Engagement Handbook and implementation plan; consideration of a resolution to adopt Alexandria's policy on civic engagement.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That City Council receive the revised Civic Engagement Handbook and Civic Engagement Implementation Plan, hold a public hearing on January 25, 2014, after the public hearing adopt the attached Resolution establishing as city policy the concepts contained in these documents, and direct the City Manager to implement these civic engagement policies.

**BACKGROUND:** In September 2012, at City Council's direction, the City launched *What's Next Alexandria*, an initiative to develop guidelines for improving and expanding civic engagement in Alexandria. Through a series of community conversations and online participation that extended through June 2013, members of the community collaborated with City staff and City officials to develop guidance about how to improve the quality of Alexandria's public participation process so that members of the community can be more actively, constructively, and meaningfully involved in the public decisions that affect their lives.

Community members' engagement opportunities during the *What's Next Alexandria* process included four community dialogues where participants worked together in small groups, four opportunities for online engagement, some of which supplemented dialogue work; and three opportunities for real time online video engagement during the dialogues. Community collaboration resulted in three key elements: Principles for civic engagement, a standard Framework for the engagement process, and guidance on communications and outreach strategies. Together, these important pieces make up Alexandria's Civic Engagement Handbook (Attachment 1), which will serve as a guide for future public decision-making processes in the city.

The draft Handbook was posted online and made available in city locations beginning in early September 2013 for public review and comment, which informed the final draft of the Handbook now before Council. A detailed description of the community engagement process for *What's Next Alexandria* as well as the public comments received in response to the September draft are attached and can also be found on the project webpage at [www.alexandriava.gov/whatsnext](http://www.alexandriava.gov/whatsnext).

The City of Alexandria team involved in *What's Next Alexandria* spanned multiple departments, including the City Attorney's Office, the City Manager's Office, Communications and Public Information, the Department of Community and Human Services, the Health Department, Information Technology Services, Recreation Parks, and Cultural Activities, Planning and Zoning, and Transportation and Environmental Services, as well as ACTion Alexandria, the Alexandria Economic and Development Partnership, and a city resident who works in the civic engagement field.

**DISCUSSION:** The City has historically demonstrated a strong commitment to civic engagement. However, the length and trajectory of recent planning processes led Council to determine that a re-examination of the City's process and fundamental principles, as well as a recommitment to the goal of robust civic engagement, was a timely and important step to take. The intention was to improve the predictability of the public engagement process, standardizing our process and establishing a set of expectations to which we hold ourselves accountable. The *What's Next Alexandria* effort and proposed civic engagement policy resolution recognize that public decisions developed collaboratively are based on better information and more surely stand the test of time – and a process that invites ongoing public engagement in policy, resource and planning discussions is the hallmark of a healthy community.

### **Principles of Civic Engagement**

In September 2012, the City launched an online poll asking the community to provide feedback on their preferences and experience in public participation in decision-making processes and communication with the City. The information gleaned from the poll served as the basis for the development of nine *Principles of Civic Engagement* that participants crafted at subsequent community dialogues. The final principles established by the community to guide the City's civic engagement actions are:

Respect	Easy Participation	Sustained Collaboration
Inclusiveness and Equity	Mutual Accountability	Evaluation
Early Involvement	Transparency	Meaningful Engagement

Each principle is accompanied by actions and outcomes and the expectation that all the work we do will be consistent with the principles.

### **Framework for Civic Engagement**

One of the common community concerns we worked to address through this process was inconsistency in how the City engages the community in different projects and by different departments. What was needed was an improved (and shared) understanding of what to expect in

every process for how, when, and where the community should be engaged, and doing a better job of communicating that information. Therefore, during the second Community Dialogue, participants began developing a “*framework*” for Alexandria’s civic engagement process, elaborating on strategies that would improve consistency from project to project and make it easier to be informed and involved. Staff collaborated with community facilitators to use simple language and ensure that the Framework is easy to understand for those not experienced in civic engagement.

The Framework will be used by City staff at the outset of City projects that require and benefit from public participation. Beginning each project with a common agreement on the four standard phases and the proposed engagement strategies, tools and deliverables of each, builds trust and transparency in public participation. Recognizing that each process will still to some degree be tailored to fit project requirements, there is also great value in sticking to a standard framework and expectations for clarity and transparency. As a tool, the Framework provides a realistic and achievable way of unifying community engagement efforts across departments.

### **Public Comment on the Draft Handbook**

A preliminary draft outline of the Handbook was available online and in city locations for public comment in June and July, and then a full draft was distributed in September for a five week public comment period. The draft is available in English and Spanish, online and printed in hard copies at libraries. Twenty-one comments were submitted on the draft, the majority via the City website comment board and a few as written comments. All of the comments, along with staff response and how they were incorporated into the handbook, are provided in Attachment 2.

In addition to soliciting individual public comment, staff provided briefings to and solicited feedback from the Federation of Civic Associations, Planning Commission, Transportation Commission, Parks and Recreation Commission, Traffic and Parking Board, Environmental Policy Commission, and land use attorneys.

A range of opinions is reflected in the comments received online and in the briefings, many supportive of the City’s focus on civic engagement, some concerned about follow-through, some dismissive of the effort altogether. Some people provided specific suggestions for edits to the handbook, the majority of which were incorporated unless they substantively changed the meaning and were not a common thread among commenters. Some commenters asked for clarification on the applicability of the framework and principles, and we have provided that, both in the Handbook, and also in the implementation plan discussed below.

One commenter suggested that the Handbook not be approved as a final document at this time, and instead be implemented in draft form while the City uses this year as a pilot year. Staff feels that to some degree, this is how the handbook is being approached. Many projects now underway or in planning stages are already incorporating the recommendations of the handbook, though it hasn’t yet been adopted. In addition, language in the handbook specifies that the Handbook itself be reviewed and updated annually as needed, to address any deficiencies uncovered in response to performance indicators and staff/community/interdepartmental evaluation. Any updates to the Handbook will be vetted by the community. The goal is that the

handbook should very much be a living document, updated as appropriate to ensure that the City can best live up to the goal of improving the quality of Alexandria's public participation process so that members of the community can be actively, constructively, and meaningfully involved in the public decisions that affect their lives.

Another suggestion was made to establish a civic engagement advisory group. While an advisory group may ultimately be a wise course for the City, Staff does not think this should be pursued at this time, both because of limited staff resources and the necessity to focus on the civic engagement work itself rather than staffing a group, and also because this first year will be an opportunity to test run the framework and principles in a small area plan process, Eisenhower West. Participants in the process will be asked to assess the City's civic engagement performance over the course of the process, and staff will have the opportunity to document what's working well and what isn't. As mentioned, the interdepartmental working group will conduct annual reviews of civic engagement performance following the first year of implementation, and the possibility of an advisory group can be considered in the course of that evaluation.

### **Applicability**

Although the Handbook has not yet been adopted, staff has already begun working the civic engagement principles and framework into current planning efforts. The Eisenhower West Plan, scheduled to officially launch in March 2014 has a proposed civic engagement process that will be shared with the community for review and approval before work begins. All of the planning efforts that will utilize consultant support have written a requirement to understand and comply with the *What's Next Alexandria* handbook into their scope of work, including the Eisenhower West Plan, Eisenhower West Transportation Study, Public Arts Master Plan, and the Pedestrian Bicycle Master Plan. When the Stormwater Management Master Plan begins, it too will apply the City's new civic engagement framework and principles.

As stated previously, there was a desire for some additional clarification in the Handbook with regard to applicability. What types of projects trigger use of the framework or a given level of "civic engagement" treatment? Staff has developed a matrix illustrating the threshold applicability criteria for the variety of policies, plans and projects typically requiring public participation in the city as a guide. Generally speaking, the type of project dictates the level of civic engagement that will be required, although the nature of a specific project may require a higher or different type of civic engagement than would otherwise be called for in the applicability criteria. Additional clarifying language and the applicability matrix have been added to the handbook, as well as to the implementation plan.

### **Implementation Plan**

Improving civic engagement will require the commitment of both staff and elected and appointed officials throughout city government. Further, the dedication of resources, both human and fiscal, will be required for implementation. Effective implementation must ensure consistency in the application of civic engagement principles and similarity of civic engagement practices across the various departments/agencies of the City government.

The attached implementation plan (Attachment 3) proposes a realistic framework for success, including recommendations for organizational structure, resource requirements, applicability, training, communications, and performance assessment. A summary follows below.

## **Organizational Structure and Resources**

In order to deliver the Civic Engagement effort as outlined and achieve desired results, staff believes there is a need for organization wide coordination and support. The City Manager's Office (CMO) will provide oversight to ensure that expectations are clear, resources are adequate to meet expectations, and staff is held accountable for results. A designated staff person within the City Manager's Office will assume primary responsibility for overall coordination of civic engagement implementation. CMO staff will be supported by the Office of Communications and Public Information (OCPI). Departments most likely to require direct assistance to provide the level of civic engagement envisioned include Transportation & Environmental Services, Planning & Zoning, Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities, and Project Implementation. These departments are expected to be the most active in applying civic engagement practices. It is expected that at full implementation, additional staff resources will be required. The specific resource requirement has yet to be determined.

### **Roles and Responsibilities:**

#### City Manager's Office

- Set expectations: Establish citywide policies and procedures
- Allocate resources for training
- Civic Engagement Coordination
  - Manage training program
  - Ensure consistent application of the principles and framework
  - Provide technical support and expertise to departmental project staff
  - Coordinate and track projects on *What's Next Alexandria* website
  - Manage performance accountability
  - Manage internal communication and provide support for external communications and outreach

#### Departments/Project Management Staff

- Attend training
- Apply the principles
- Use the civic engagement framework
- Manage civic engagement processes

#### Civic Engagement Interdepartmental Working Group

- Monitor civic engagement implementation across departments
- Provide guidance on refining the organizational structure as needed
- Provide guidance on refining applicability criteria
- Review performance accountability data

## **Training**

Facilitation training for staff and members of the community will help embed the City's new approach to civic engagement in a consistent way. Training sessions are expected to begin in summer 2014 and be offered on a quarterly basis throughout the year. Civic engagement training will consist of two parts: content and skill building. The content element will train staff and other stakeholders in Alexandria's new civic engagement "way" – what the principles are and how to ensure they are being followed, what the framework is and how to apply it, and how to implement a meaningful and constructive civic engagement process. The skill-building piece will focus on conducting productive meetings, facilitating small group discussions, managing difficult situations, and learning about non-meeting engagement options.

Training will be required of City staff engaged in public participation work. City Council members and Board and Commission members involved in work that has a large civic engagement component will also be provided training. The City will also offer training to community members, community and civic organizations and nonprofit agencies.

The City will partner with the Alexandria Collaborators and other nonprofit community groups such as Alexandria Council of Human Service Organizations and Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) for guidance on curriculum development, and assistance with outreach and delivering community training sessions citywide. The City will contract with outside professionals to assist with curriculum development and early training sessions that will be oriented initially toward training staff in those departments that conduct the majority of civic engagement processes.

## **Communications Plan**

The Office of Communications and Public Information, will take the lead on implementing the initial communications plan. Key communication events/items that the plan covers:

- *Adoption of Handbook and the City's Civic Engagement Policy Statement*
- *Training Plan*
- *Project Catalog*
- *Initial Projects*
- *Branding*

## **Performance Measures and Evaluation**

In partnership with and oversight by the Office of Performance Accountability, the City shall pursue a program of data collection via participant surveys on a series of civic engagement performance measures. A full list of performance measures is included in the Implementation plan, but examples include: Number of participants at each meeting, Percentage of Alexandria's demographic population represented at meetings, Rate of return of meetings' participants, Percentage of City staff trained in civic engagement principles and practices, and Percentage of Boards and Commissions' members trained in civic engagement principles and practices.

In addition to collecting the performance data points outlined above through participant evaluations during a given process, staff project managers will conduct assessment of civic

engagement performance at the end of each project, producing a brief summary and evaluation of each project's civic engagement process and outcome. The interdepartmental working group will review the project evaluations completed by departments and develop a proposed plan for future annual review of civic engagement performance.

## **Applicability**

The community should reasonably expect that staff is applying the principles of civic engagement in all interactions between City government and community with particular attention focused on major land use plans, significant public policy initiatives, and substantive program efforts. Generally speaking, the type of project/public decision to be made will dictate the level of civic engagement required. Even among these categories remains a significant degree of subjectivity. Additional clarifying language has been added to the handbook, as well as a more detailed matrix to the appendix and to this implementation plan. The matrix illustrates the threshold applicability criteria for the variety of policies, plans and projects typically requiring public participation in the city.

All of the planning efforts that will utilize consultant support have written a requirement to understand and comply with the *What's Next Alexandria* handbook into their scope of work, including the Eisenhower West Plan, Eisenhower West Transportation Study, Public Arts Master Plan, and the Pedestrian Bicycle Master Plan. When the Stormwater Management Master Plan begins, it too will apply the City's new civic engagement framework and principles.

All projects that meet the threshold criteria for full civic engagement will complete and post a process framework template which provides information about the civic engagement plan for the project, a general timeline, goals for the project, and lead department. Each of these projects will be added to the project catalog on the What's Next Alexandria webpage, using an online form adding information on project web address, project manager name and contact information, and members/departments involved in the Interdepartmental team.

## **What Will Success Look Like?**

The Handbook and the proposed Civic Engagement Policy (Attachment 4) establish the foundation, commitment and accountability for pursuing, achieving, and measuring the following positive outcomes for civic engagement:

- Improved understanding of the value of working together to solve common problems.
- The public is fully informed and has a better understanding of how to participate.
- More people are participating, better representing the City's demographic diversity.
- Members of the community take an active role in organizing their community to participate in civic engagement processes and in the broader goals of the City.
- Members of the community endorse decisions and actions by the City because decisions clearly reflect public participation in a transparent process.
- There is consistency across City departments and Boards and Commissions in the application of civic engagement principles and process.
- Confidence in the equity of the public decision making process is improved.
- The community and City government have mutual trust in one another.

By achieving these outcomes, Alexandria will thrive as demonstrated in the quality of the daily life of its citizens and their participation in shaping the city's future.

**FISCAL IMPACT:** It is expected that full implementation will require the commitment of additional staff resources; however, the specific resource requirement has yet to be determined. Initial funding will be requested as part of the FY 2015 budget process.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Civic Engagement Handbook (Revised Draft December 2013)
2. Public comment on (and City responses to) Civic Engagement Handbook (Draft September 2013)
3. Civic Engagement Implementation Plan
4. Draft Resolution establishing City of Alexandria Civic Engagement Policy

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