What's Next Alexandria?
June 24, 2013 -- Table 1 Dialogue

Activity 1:

Participants seated at Table 1 were asked to fill out their worksheets to indicate which groups, organizations or networks they would be willing to connect with in the City. We collected the forms with each individual's commitment. However, they also mentioned the following in conversation with the other members of Table 1:

- Library (posting notices)
- Community centers (posting notices)
- Social groups at churches
- Agenda Alexandria
- Holmes Run Citizens' Association
- Condo Owners' Association (also in Holmes Run area)
- Park Place Board of Directors
- Social media and Dynamic [Technology Solutions?] organization
- Soccer League and other City sports activities

Each person was asked to note the specific church group, library or other network of people s/he would be willing to connect with the City, so organizers might have this information (bulleted above) already.

The person who encouraged networking with church groups specifically mentioned that the pastor or other church leader would be too busy to stay connected but that the "social group leaders" would be interested. She said she might be willing to connect with her church "if you can't find anyone else".

Activity 2:

Each person at the table was asked to complete Activity 2 on their worksheet to identify his or her preference for receiving information, communication methods, and likelihood of reaching out to networks as a community ambassador. The individual worksheets were turned in during the June 24th meeting.

Activity 3: Online Forum Communication

When **_Online Forums_** were raised as a communication method, the following points were raised as part of the Table 1 dialogue:

Who uses online forums? Is there a demographic bias? Is anyone excluded?

Online Forums are fine – and can be useful for people who are highly motivated to learn about a particular issue - but groups are moving away from Online Forums because they are finding that people want more personalization. Instead of asking people to go to an online forum, groups are setting up

advanced algorithms that pick up key words in a person's online postings or searches to recommend sites of interest. So, the algorithms push information to the user instead of requiring the user to seek out information through online forums.

The groups monitor social media sites, such as Twitter or Facebook, for postings that mention "Alexandria," and then volunteer teams or staff members follow up in more personal ways.

The City should use *Quick Response* (QR) codes like the one at the bottom of the "What's Next Alexandria?" packet of materials at our table. These codes can be used to drive people to development webpages or applicable online forums.

- QR Codes should be incorporated into the training for the "What's Next Alexandria?" framework.
- There should be a standard operating procedure for the City to use QR codes for each new development activity or initiative.
- Tourists would also love QR Codes on attractions such as Old Town buildings and other tourist sites.

Geo Fencing is another potential way to alert City residents about something of interest to them. People can register for updates when they are in an area of interest and they will receive text messages on their phones. This is another example of ways to push out information to residents who want to receive updates and it is relatively easy for the City of Alexandria to set up once the right protocols are in place.

The Table 1 participants recognized that some of the technology-based communication solutions are geared toward a younger demographic, but also noted that many people (of all ages) have personal phones these days and they are increasingly using phones to send and receive information.

Polling Software was suggested as a way for the City staff to get direction from the citizens. The comment related to the belief that the City should be citizen-driven and the staff should be responsive to the priorities set by citizens. There are many options available for free polling software, such as Survey Monkey.

Rather than one or several centralized forums, should the City tune in to existing community blogs that discuss issues on a smaller-than-citywide scale?

A couple of people at the table recommended civic associations as key points for communication. However, others mentioned that they were more regularly engaged through work or sports groups, such as the Alexandria Soccer Association. They also noted that some people have commented through the "What's Next Alexandria" dialogues that they do not have access to a civic association where they live. One person said that he gets his information about the City of Alexandria from the Washington Post newspaper and sometimes through smaller local print media. One person agreed that the Washington Post was a place to learn a lot about the City (and others nodded) but he thought it was too expensive to regularly inform citizens through the local papers.

There was some general consensus that we have to consider the time and effort that goes into maintaining any of the suggested communication methods, including Online Forums. We don't want to overwhelm staff and have to be conscious of the cost. Each interaction with a citizen, or complaint about a pothole, costs the taxpayers money.

When the expense to taxpayers was raised at Table 1, participants had many ideas to streamline City services, enhance the efficiency of existing reporting systems and prioritize the issues of importance within the City. Some of the Table 1 comments and recommendations follow:

- Every time a citizen makes a request, it costs $1,000 or $5,000 – e.g., to repair a pothole or fix a street light that is out. It is difficult to reach the appropriate staff person and that person is generally just a conduit to the contractor hired to fix the problem. There needs to be a more direct approach.
- The Call – Click – Connect system is supposed to help with that but nobody at the table could remember the number so the group recommended an easier process –
    o Use the number 211 or just HELP instead of 746-HELP (Everyone appreciated one table member tracking down the correct number! … but still thought it needed to be changed to something easier to remember)
    o Include all City services, such as the Alexandria City Public Schools, if not consolidated already
- There is a need for ONE Alexandria App that people can access on their phone
- Create wards with community ambassadors that have direct access to City staff
- Use old fashion petitions to prioritize issues
- Make prioritization decisions based on the City's Strategic Plan
- One problem with asking everyone to prioritize the issues that the City should act upon is that many different demographic groups favor different priorities (e.g., one person cares about a pothole because s/he travels the same route from home to work each day while another person prioritizes more bike paths, wider sidewalks and more trees to encourage alternative modes of transportation)
- Create one transparent place online that citizens can access to follow the progress of a report or complain through to completion. For example, the report of a light that needs to be fixed is put into the transparent reporting system and the citizen can follow the status to see when the light is expected to be repaired.

Which blogs on the web might be appropriate as places for civic engagement communication?

See above …

What are the benefits of an online forum that social media or project website don't have?

It could be useful to send updates to Human Resources Directors at City of Alexandria businesses so they can bring information to the workers

Table 1 participants generally felt that Online Forums could be helpful but they would require other methods of communication to drive people to them. Some recommendations for reaching out to citizens to push them to information of interest included:

- Put flyers in the "Meals on Wheels" food delivery that is hosted by local churches and other service-oriented groups. This is a way to get information to people who are hard to reach but who might be affected by development/redevelopment.
- Use gamification strategies, such as adding two questions to a website to gather input from citizens – e.g., Which is more important … (1)_____ (2) _____? Then, summarize the results for transparency to the public.

What kind of content is appropriate for an online forum – events, data, project information, everything?

The downside of online forums is that they are not "event based" so people are less likely to visit them unless they have a deep or specific interest in the issue. One way to drive interest to online forums might be to convene a Webinar first. If the Webinar about a topic brings people together, and includes a "*Question and Answer*" (Q and A) section then a recording of the information, and subsequent Q and A with participants, can be archived in an online forum for additional input and action. In this way, the City can build on a series of communication activities that build on one another.

What is the appropriate frequency for civic engagement-related forum posts?

The Table 1 participants did not think the City should put too much staff time into monitoring and posting information to Online Forums. Instead, the idea was suggested that the Online Forum can be a place to archive the ongoing civic-engagement work and allow for asynchronous participation between in-person or online "events".

Other comments about the frequency included:

- Follow the timing and schedule outlined in the "What's Next Alexandria" framework
- I've heard more about this process than other development initiatives in the City so implementation of the framework could prevent some of the misperceptions that resulted from previous issues, such as the Waterfront development.

Who would be able to create posts – Should the City be in charge of posts, and the community be able to respond and discuss, or should anyone be allowed to create conversation topics? What are the pros and cons of each of these scenarios?

Most online forums have some type of "guidelines for participation" or "rules of engagement". The online forum would probably have to rely on participants policing one another to create a positive culture of civic-engagement online.

One or two people at Table 1 went beyond the idea of allowing citizens to respond or discuss topics, and suggested the idea of rewarding citizens for participating. For example, the City could pay them or

release them from paying some City expense if they agree to lead specific initiatives that help the City achieve a larger goal. One idea was to pay people a stipend for stewarding action initiatives that are developed around a particular issue. So, the citizens are paid a stipend to cut through bureaucracy or spearhead an issue that is being undertaken by a City Advisory Board or Commission for example.

There was some general discussion among all "What's Next Alexandria?" participants about whether people should be able to make "anonymous" posts to online forums or blogs. One participant said that all commenters should have to register their full names when posting. At the end of the evening, table facilitators were debriefing and someone asked what the others thought about implementing a registration requirement. Some facilitators noted that allowing people to post anonymously might help include typically under-represented groups, who might shy away from going against the status quo or vocal residents who are perceived to have more leverage in the system. New ideas are sometimes offered by people who prefer to remain anonymous and we cannot guarantee that people post under their true name. While posting under a false name would require more effort, it is possible to do.

Are existing community blogs appropriate as a method for two-way communication?

Table 1 participants generated many additional ideas for creating two-way communication between City staff and citizens. They also expressed interest in

- Promoting communication between well-informed and less-informed citizens
- Showing how development projects might impact specific groups (personalization based on knowledge of a particular group) so that groups participate earlier in the process

Activity 3: Email Communication

How does email compare to traditional mail?

There are some things that are better received via email and other things that are better communicated through traditional mail. When the City sends information through traditional mail, other items of interest could be consolidated into the mailing. Some of the people at Table 1 heard about the "What's Next Alexandria" Dialogue via email from groups they are connected to or people they know.

Is there a danger to sending out too many emails, forcing people to unsubscribe?

Yes. Personalization is important (see above).

Is there a system that would enable citizens to only get the emails that pertain to them or their groups or networks?

There are ways that people can filter the number of email messages and/or frequency they receive messages – e.g., setting up "daily digest" messages on a "yahoo or google group" or registering for specific information from the City, such as Alexandria E-news for Emergencies. The idea of community ambassadors was recommended for tapping into existing City leaders who are willing to volunteer their

time. There are many people here [at the "What's Next Alexandria?" dialogue] who are willing to serve as volunteer ambassadors.

Another participant suggested paying citizens – or allowing them to make deductions from their property tax bill – to fulfill specific tasks or lead two-way communication activities.

Is email an effective 2-way form of communication between the community and the City?

The problem with email is that the citizens don't know if it is effective. There is a perception that the people who testify at City Hall carry more weight than those who send input via email. One person said that he still uses email communication, but he doesn't really know if his suggestions are considered. It is important to summarize the email communication somehow, either by tallying up the pros and cons as data points or listing responses to frequently asked questions or noting frequently suggested policy or actions somehow. Maybe the summaries could be archived somehow (e.g., online forum or website) to build on the recommendation that the various communication methods be linked to one another and build a coherent picture of the recommendations received and the decisions made as the City moves through the phases of development.

If not, what could be done to enable citizens to use email to better connect with City staff and officials?

See above