

How to close the gap between the City and the community

Commentary — As the council takes up important issues regarding the future development of our community, it is critical that it adopts more effective and meaningful strategies to engage with citizens. The need for improved engagement was clearly evident at a city council work session on Jan. 21 (focused on affordable housing, including development of 3 North St.).

That meeting was one example of how the lack of effective engagement leads the council down a path far from citizens' expressed desires. The Healdsburg 2040 group, as the guardian of the SDAT report, noticed the following problems:

Lack of Notice

While there was legally sufficient public notice, the city missed two critical opportunities to alert the community to a work session that was to tackle issues of critical importance to many in our town (including: affordable housing options, land use and the Foley's \$7 million pledge). First, the Friday City Manager's Update, which was sent via email and posted on the city's website the preceding Friday, made no mention of the upcoming, unusual session. Second, there was no mention of the meeting in the Healdsburg Tribune on the preceding Thursday. It is a failure of transparency and honest communication not to more widely publicize a council discussion covering such important issues.

Lack of Meaningful Public Comment

Public comment suffered from two ailments: 1. No input at critical decision-making junctures; and 2. Not enough time permitted when public comment is allowed.

Although the mayor allowed limited public comment after the presentation of the staff report — which was a good thing — it is not a substitute for a substantive dialogue between the Council and Community attendees.

It would be more impactful if additional comments were permitted after the council deliberates. This would allow much more meaningful citizen input, and potentially, better decisions congruent with residents' interests.

Those attending were astounded at the direction the meeting took when council members weighed in. Because there was no time for further public comment, citizens had no opportunity to voice their dismay, or to get the council back on track. We genuinely believe that the council would benefit from increased public input, and it would lead to better council decision-making.

When the council did allow public comment, the opportunity to speak was far too constrained. Despite the overflow crowd, and the breadth of items to address, public comment was arbitrarily limited to 25 minutes in total and each individual speaker was only allotted two minutes to speak. That meant that only 12 people could address the council. This arbitrary restraint is frustrating and seems to widen the gap between the council and the community.

Adoption of a Public Engagement Platform

The city should adopt technologies to promote public engagement. For example, the city could have used a digital platform to assess community-wide sentiment about the donation of \$7 million to execute the previously approved design for 3 North St. That digital assessment would have been more accurate and nuanced than the unscientific "raising of hands" poll taken during the meeting (although the majority public sentiment was overwhelmingly in favor of accepting the donation).

Two public engagement platforms (Metroquest and Bang the Table) were recommended to the city manager and several council members in spring 2019. To date, neither tool has been implemented. The lack of such a platform is to our detriment, particularly because citizens face high barriers when they want to be heard on important issues with long-term and far-reaching impacts.

Healdsburg is fortunate to have people interested in shaping the future of the city in a constructive and positive way. Therefore, it is crucial that the city council invites a genuine dialogue at the meeting on Monday, March 2, 6 p.m. Our

representatives should listen with an open mind to the citizens, particularly in light of a divisive effort to derail the community center and farmers market with misleading flyers, ads and letters — a project which has community-wide support, and may finally be implemented due to a generous gift.

Healdsburg 2040, is a group of interested citizens is advising the city on the implementation of the SDAT report.

Healdsburg 2040, is a group of interested citizens is advising the City on the implementation of the SDAT report. The SDAT report and recommendations, received by the community in November 2018, made a number of recommendations to promote and improve such engagement, which are not yet implemented.

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