

The City of Frederick

Mayor's Strategic Opportunities Advisory Team Steering Committee

Civic Engagement Work Group

The Civic Engagement Work Group (CEWG) is chaired by Mr. Theodore M. Luck, and includes Eran Bosaz, Katie Nash, Maria-Teresa Shuck, Marien Hornyak, Dwight Palmer, and Kim C. Dine.

Mission Statement:

The Civic Engagement Work Group shall deliver recommendations to the Mayor that will identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges, to maximize civic engagement in an effort to empower and ensure inclusion of all members of our diverse community resulting in improvement of and access to city services.

The Civic Engagement Work Group (CEWG) is chaired by Mr. Theodore M. Luck, and includes Eran Bosaz, Katie Nash, Maria-Teresa Shuck, Marien Hornyak, Dwight Palmer, and Kim C. Dine, and has been meeting regularly since formed.

Background:

The purpose of the CEWG is literally to provide recommendations to the Mayor as to how best to improve civic involvement by our residents in order to improve the sense of ownership our residents have in our City.

The term “engagement” derives from the word “engage,” which means to occupy, attract, or involve, participate in, take part, join in, and play a role in, all of which are the goals of the City of Frederick and the CEWG-to have all of our residents involved, empowered, joined in, and participating in improving, steering, and shaping the future of the City and how its services meet the changing demands of a growing City.

The main premise is to maximize involvement of all city residents and ensure inclusion, diversity, and full representation so that all residents feel their voice is important and heard. Likewise, this effort ensures that all residents are informed and involved. In this way, residents can not only make better and more informed decisions about the future of the City and how City services are provided but can better enable the City and its residents to respond to and manage natural and man-made disasters and acts of crime. Education and involvement of all residents better allows the City to manage such events. Our goal is to have each City resident identify as a stakeholder, so that when that term is used, it is inclusive rather than exclusive. Each and every City resident regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, economic status, and sexual preference is a stakeholder in the City of Frederick.

The Team discussed and analyzed numerous ways to positively impact the manner in which the City government connect with, communicates with, and impacts the residents of Frederick. We concluded that despite excellent efforts, only a small percentage of our seventy plus thousand residents regularly communicate with or are connected to the City government in ways which promote engagement. We determined that the main goal of this group is provide recommendations to significantly increase engagement at all levels. To that end, we are providing a companion document which explains in more detail the premise, context, and rationale behind each recommendation offered.

It should be noted that the recommendations provided are not listed in priority order but the team is certainly able to meet with the Mayor and staff and provide further input regarding prioritization.

There exists an array of vehicles to assist in this endeavor, including but not limited to:

- Use of the Neighborhood Advisory Councils (NAC)
- Having Aldermanic liaisons with each NAC
- Using mailers to engage, notify, and inform City residents
- Using water bills and other bills to include mail notices
- The City of Frederick website
- Public Service Announcements
- Town Hall meetings
- Presence at social clubs and civic groups
- Mayor and Board meetings
- Using the Board of Trade and other more formal groups
- Involving all Houses of Worship in the City of Frederick
- Restructuring of the City Organizational Chart to ensure maximum organizational management and cohesiveness regarding outreach, public information, data use and collection, and tracking of outreach efforts, priorities, and initiatives to ensure goals are met

Recommendations:

1. Make a goal that each of the roughly thirty thousand city residences are connected to the Internet by working with cable companies, grants, and civic groups to ensure that each hold is electronically connected to the City. This is an achievable goal with less than thirty thousand households. This system should then be maximized for bill paying, emergency notifications, and other such efforts.
 - a. Assess community access gaps
 - b. Identify or establish community spaces to provide access to computers and similar technology for those without access

The Committee discussed, at length, challenges residents face when considering engagement within our community. One matter we were concerned with paying special attention to the connectivity our various populations have to information promulgated by the City of Frederick. We felt that importantly, information that is shared online can be valuable information but we must acknowledge that there are those in our community who lack access to the internet and/or devices. We noted that we needed additional clarity on who these residents were (see 1-a). The Committee saw value to the City of Frederick in implementing this recommendation and we tied it back to items such as water bills and NAC announcements (March 26th Meeting Minutes).

During the March 26th meeting, for example, the Committee welcomed Patti Mullins, Communications Office for the City, and Sally Diamond, Audio Visual Specialist for the City, to share research conducted by an intern with regard to civic engagement tools / website for the City. Three vendors were researched and all three have some promising qualities, however according to the staff present, the City's IT department is capable of building a product comparable to all of them. A list of the current tools to reach out to citizenry include the ISpires App (albeit a one-way tool), Channel 99, social media; Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Next Door.

Additionally, the Committee was provided a list of City boards and commissions to better understand the availability of engagement opportunities (February 20th staff email). The Committee reviewed the document and concluded that existing NACs offered opportunities for engagement.

2. Study / analyze how City services are provided across the City to assess accessibility and fair and equitable utilization of resources.
 - a. Use NAC data
 - b. Use other relevant data in an effort to identify community needs

The Committee expressed that one cause for a lack of engagement is a lack of empowerment and, often, a lack of compelling reasons why valuable time should be devoted to community engagement. We discussed the obvious tie of public projects to community advocacy and cited the Butterfly Ridge example. We noted that families in the western-end of our City came to public meetings and were active in advocating for the construction of a new school. We supposed that if residents understood where dollars are spent in the City and how those dollars benefit them, they may be more inclined to follow the budget process. We discussed the need for residents to understand that "city dollars are tied to civic engagement" (March 26th Meeting Minutes). This discussion is reflected in the February 12th and March 26th minutes.

Additionally, the Committee felt that it was important for the City to have knowledge of where dollars are being spent. We felt that creating the budget is an important public

policy decision and that we were especially concerned that those dollars be reflected in all corners of the City of Frederick among various population groups within the City. We discussed the outcomes of providing NACs additional information about the money spent within their NACs. Finally, the Committee emphasized the importance of data and wanted to reflect that additional data, if presented in a user-friendly format, could be beneficial to attracting additional residents to become engaged within their City.

3. Use the City of Frederick website to maximize education about the Neighborhood Advisory Councils and to enhance involvement and ownership.
 - a. Consider single web manager
 - b. Ensure that each department's website link delivers the same user-friendly look and feel

We explored the City's website and used our own experiences to reflect on the use of this tool for engagement. We met with the City's Public Information Officer and spent time discussing methods for improving the look and feel of the www.cityoffrederick.com. Ultimately we agreed that this engagement tool could benefit from some improvements in process for content development as well as standardization. The Committee was also concerned about meeting notices and how those notices are distributed to residents. From the February 26th meeting minutes, we weighed "ways to send out NAC meeting notices discussed (utility bills, FCPS)". In this discussion, the use of the website was revisited and considered an area for possible improvement.

4. Ensure that all City agencies are appropriately represented at NAC meetings.
 - a. Representatives from the various City agencies should frequently attend NAC meetings to update citizens and hear concerns
 - b. Develop a process to ensure community concerns reach the appropriate City offices
5. To better utilize the effectiveness of the NAC, hire a dedicated full time NAC Coordinator whose only duties are to manage the NAC system, track issues and keep an up to date NAC report, liaison with City officials including the Mayor and Aldermen, and City agency heads to ensure the highest level of responsiveness by City agencies to issues and concerns identified. This NAC report would be submitted bi-monthly to the Mayor and would also be available on the City of Frederick website.
The NAC Coordinator would not simply manage existing NAC meetings, but would be responsible for:

- a. Identify the number of households in each NAC
- b. Engage those households/businesses via email or mail to attain one hundred percent contact
- c. Track contacts within each NAC so that the City is aware of the level of NAC connection by NAC
- d. Work with realtors to maximize NAC communication each time a new resident moves into Frederick
- e. Work with each House of Worship within each NAC so that all congregations are educated and involved in the NAC process
- f. Work to attain one hundred percent involvement and connection of each household/business within each NAC
- g. Prepare and update the NAC meeting minutes and place on City website, email to Mayor, Board, and all City Directors
- h. Monitor the efficacy of the NAC process not by the number of meeting participants but by the percentage of households/businesses within each NAC that are reachable and register by email
- i. Enhance the NAC report by clearly delineating by NAC which issues are open and in process, which have been addressed, and which agency or agencies are involved or responsible for addressing and tracking each issue resolved
- j. Schedule monthly NAC meetings
- k. Hold annual NAC Leadership meetings with city officials

See explanation above for recommendation #4. During our discussions, it was “suggested that there should be a paid staff member directly under the Mayor that would serve as support for the different NAC coordinators” (March 12th Meeting Minutes).

The Committee spent time identifying items that a full-time Coordinator could have as responsibilities. Some ideas are similar to functions performed now (see item ‘j’), yet these ideas are meant to be bold suggestions to reinvigorate the NACs - we jokingly called this process “NAC Version 2.0”. We did not consider this list exclusive and believed that the community and NAC Coordinator would have additional ideas to spur NAC participation. From the February 26th meeting minutes, the Committee committed to reviewing the “tracking report created at/after each NAC meeting” and noted the “opportunities for procedural improvement.” The group discussed, at length, “how and where do citizens issues end up and/or are resolved” and explored “should there be an open report for NACs?” The members traded their experiences with their respective NACs and offered thoughts for improvement.

These conversations are reflected in several meeting minutes: February 26th, May 7th, and May 21st.

6. Ensure that NAC meetings, when necessary, includes translation/interpretation services for Deaf residents and our residents for whom English is a second language.

The Committee felt that this item was necessary to be intentional about inclusion of all city residents. We acknowledged that there would be cost associated with hiring interpreters yet we held firm that this recommendation be included. From the February 26th meeting minutes, we believed the City should “identify barriers to accessibility, making it a more welcoming environment, avoiding political pitfalls, instead, making it an educational opportunity.” Translation services, we decided, were crucial to these goals.

7. Consider establishing a subgroup, where appropriate, within NAC meeting to improve the level of involvement by our immigrant community. The establishment of a separate ethnocentric NAC is recommended to help improve the comfort level of the participants, to build trust and improve communication between the community and city agencies.

The Committee was concerned that there seemed to be a lack of engagement within our Hispanic residents. We debated various ways to improve outreach and participation and ultimately determined that additional attention may need to be devoted to providing safe and assuring spaces for our immigrant residents. The Committee expressed that the City needs “to think outside the box in order engage African-Americans, Latin-Americans and other minority groups” and “start by identifying leaders in these communities” (March 12th Meeting Minutes).

8. Assess current NAC boundaries to determine if modifications should be made and if additional NAC areas might improve the process in terms of accountability and better identify of neighborhood issues.

The neighborhood Advisory Council boundaries were initially designed to effectively utilize natural boundaries as well as distinct neighborhood boundaries to best identify and create ownership for the issues and concerns unique to that neighborhood. Likewise, they were adjusted in part to comport with police beats as well-again to create ownership by residents and City alike as it relates to improving access to services and communication with government agencies. Over the years there has been some discussion about re-examining those boundaries as some residents felt their specific area might better attach to another NAC for the purposes defined. Therefore, we recommend for consideration some reexamination of these boundaries to ensure the best possible focus, access and attention.

The Committee was concerned that although the NAC structure exists and the appropriate vehicle to improve civic engagement, those boundaries have not been reviewed since their inception (to the best of our knowledge). This review and update falls within our effort to improve accountability and dedicated resources to communities: from the meeting minutes from February 12th, the “City must define their role better during the NAC meetings. Presently, there is a lack of accountability”.

9. Provide periodic training/workshops related to civic engagement, conflict resolution, advocacy and cultural diversity for residents, NAC leaders and staff, and reestablish ‘Frederick 101’ training course.

The Committee praised NAC leaders for volunteering their time to engage City residents. We thought, as part of the recognition of this work, volunteers should be provided appropriate tools. Training opportunities were discussed at several Committee meetings but specifically, March 12th, April 23rd, and May 7th. For example, the Committee suggested “that the City perform an internal review on how staff directs itself towards the citizenry” and “perhaps facilitate a workshop on how to, or the proper way, to hold a dialog with citizens” (March 12th Meeting Minutes).

10. Conduct an inventory of community organizations to determine community interest, common issues and duplicate efforts to assist in improving delivery of city services.

From the minutes from the February 12th meeting, “civic engagement needs for the city; identifying needs, areas lacking, moving and shifting resources, communicating opportunities and capitalizing on past and present accomplishments”.

11. We recommend each NAC have an Aldermanic liaison to better ensure City focus and responsiveness.

The Committee discussed the City’s form of government and the fact that the Board of Aldermen are elected at-large and do not represent specific geographic areas or neighborhoods. Rather than propose a change, the group brainstormed ideas to combat the challenges we felt may be perceptions among city residents.

12. We recommend the Mayor periodically have Board meeting at alternate locations in the City to increase accessibility.

See Recommendation #11 explanation regarding concerns that Aldermen, if elected from one geographic area in the City of Frederick, may continue a perception that all residents are not equally represented. The Committee brainstormed that moving City meetings around the City might broaden participation and provide some assurance that the Mayor and Board of Aldermen represent the entire City and do not show favoritism for their areas of residence. February 12th and May 21st meeting minutes reflect this conversation.

How do we track and measure?

Create a scorecard, published on the City's website, which tracks a number of issues to demonstrate a proactive City effort to monitor progress. Tracking these efforts could be assigned to the Public Information Officer or the individual assigned as the NAC Coordinator, with some of the new duties already defined.

Areas monitored would include, but not limited to:

1. The number of households in the City
2. The number of households in each NAC
3. The breakdown by demographics of each NAC
4. The number of households signed up as a NAC member
5. The number, by NAC of attendees at NAC meetings
6. The number, by NAC, on the email list for that NAC
7. The number of people viewing the website
8. The number of people who pay city bills online
9. The number of individuals participating in each NAC
10. The percentage of business owners participating in a NAC

With the goal of increasing, by ten percent, involvement with each NAC, to include addition of ten percent more residents of that NAC attached by email to the NAC meetings/minutes

11. The number of residents electronically added to the City's database
12. The number of residents added to the City's database by flier, phone call, postcard and other nonelectronic methods

Following a review and discussion of a City-provided Board/Commissions list, the Committee felt that there were opportunities for there to be a greater data-share online so that members of the public could choose their avenues of engagement. The components of a "scorecard" were gathered over a series of meetings including on February 12th, February 26th, March 12th and May 21st.

Summary:

It has been an honor for the Civic Engagement Group to participate in this effort to offer suggestions and recommendations to improve civic engagement, involvement, and two-way communication between our residents and the City of Frederick government. We thank the Mayor for inviting us to participate in this effort and believe we have provided well thought out and valuable input which, if endorsed and adopted, will significantly improve engagement in the City. As noted, we are also providing a companion report which offers more in-depth context, explanation, background, and rationale for these recommendations. We approached this endeavor with open minds and a broad, all encompassing approach. We found that numerous efforts exist to better maximize engagement. Some of these efforts are currently being engaged but are fragmented. Many other recommendations are new. A critical point is that even those recommendations we provided which seem similar to current efforts should not be confused or answered with the response, "we already do that." We are suggesting that despite noble efforts, the current approach is not correctly structured nor is there an overall strategic vision which demands high performance and measures results. Our recommendations address these issues.

We believe that the Neighborhood Advisory Council (NAC) structure and process provides an outstanding framework for increasing civic engagement and involvement but that the current process and related efforts clearly do not maximize its potential. Geographical accountability by NAC is essential to identifying and involving a maximum number of households and residents within each NAC. Providing Aldermanic liaisons to each NAC will improve these efforts as well by enhancing the concept of geographical accountability and responsiveness.

We believe that there has to be an overall management structure within the City government which supports these collective efforts. We understand that other groups engaged in these strategic planning efforts may also be addressing to varying degrees some outreach and communication efforts, specifically the area of Public Information. As such, we leave in depth discussions regarding Public Information to those groups but do wish to strongly advise and suggest that there needs to be a structure and chain of command in place which specifically includes personnel responsible for the relentless effort to improve outreach, communication, engagement, and involvement by more of our residents. Additionally, as we have noted, it is critical that these efforts and the attendant results must be regularly and consistently monitored and measured. Therefore, there needs to be an organization structure which includes and connects the Public Information efforts and Community Outreach efforts, to include social media, the City website, and other efforts we outlined, under one organizational umbrella. We found that current efforts are fragmented and that the current structure does not maximize outreach, engagement, and public information efforts. The goal of the City should be that all of the roughly thirty thousand households are in some way connected to and reached by the City and that engagement is regularly measured.

The purpose is to maximize involvement of all city residents and ensure inclusion, diversity, and full representation so that all residents feel their voice is important and heard. In this way, residents can not only make better and more informed decisions about the future of the City and how City services are provided but can better enable the City and its residents to respond to and manage natural and man-made disasters and acts of crime. Education and involvement of all residents better allows the City to manage such events. Our goal is to have each City resident identify as a stakeholder, so that when that term is used, it is inclusive rather than exclusive. Each and every City resident regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, economic status, and sexual preference is a stakeholder in the City of Frederick.

We trust you will find these recommendations useful and remain at your service should you desire further input or assistance.