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A VIEW FROM HARBOR STREET

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City Enhances Public Engagement Opportunities

By Sam Taylor, Deputy City Manager



The challenge for any community government that truly believes in making sure it's a government of, by, and for the People is to make sure that those people have a say.

Easier said than done.

People are busy. They have lives. They go to work, they spend time with family, and in this amazing part of the country, they probably spend quite a bit of time outdoors. Unless something goes drastically awry, the vast majority of community members rarely give input on civic issues. Council meetings are generally not packed full of people. Those that attend come frequently. Their input is absolutely valued, but how can we make sure more of the voices that make up Morro Bay actually use that voice?

As your public servants, we always strive for ways to ensure people have the ability to give feedback. And with that comes the need to ensure that information about the community is readily available so that citizens feel they're providing informed opinions.

Here are some things we've done or hope to bring to you soon to ensure people know what's going on in the community and can give feedback.

CityVoice: Morro Bay proudly became one of five "beta" cities partnering with Code for America, the 21st Century digital technology non-profit, to bring to the community a telephone survey system called CityVoice. We're using this free system as a way to get community feedback that will help a group of citizen volunteers – the General Plan Advisory Committee – write proposed Vision & Values statements to be adopted by the City Council by the end of the year. Those Vision & Values statements, in turn, will be used as the community's guidepost in an update to the General Plan, the document providing the vision for Morro Bay's future over the next 20 years.

Nearly 100 people have participated. The best part? About 76 percent of participants have never given the City feedback before. We're glad to expand the opportunities for people to have a say.

New Website: We want to make sure that the City website is the community's knowledge repository for all things about their local government. It should be simple to use and easy to find the information you're looking for. We've been working since June with CivicPlus, our website contractor, to build a fully renovated website that hopefully will be far simpler to navigate. But we also want the website to be a sort of community gathering place. People can contact us about events and we will share them directly on the website's new community calendar. The site will also be much easier to use on a smartphone or tablet. We're aiming to launch the first weeks of November. Keep an eye out at www.morro-bay.ca.us.

My Morro Bay: While our current website has "Let Us Know" to share feedback, ask questions or make comments, it's not the most functional system. It often doesn't work on a smart phone, and sometimes requests don't go through. So we're working to bring you My Morro Bay, a smartphone app and new website service request system that will allow you to easily snap a photo around the community of that pothole, or fallen tree limb, and then send it to staff to make the fix. Not only that, community members will get direct updates about their request, including an automated phone call if they ask for one. We hope to have this system go live with the launch of the new website.

Social Media: Finally, we'd encourage folks to participate on our social media feeds on Facebook and Twitter. On January 2, the City's Facebook page had 215 "likes," or people who received status updates. As of October 12, some 1,254 people have liked the page. That's due to the hard work of every City department's staff members, who all help keep it up to date and provide news and information about what your community government is doing. The best part about social media is that it is truly "social." We want to create a place for healthy, respectful community conversation, which means we try to respond to questions and comments as fast as possible. Social media allows us to get the word out quickly when issues occur, too. During a recent water main outage in North Morro Bay, our social posts reached about 4,000 people. Join in at facebook.com/cityofmorrobay or twitter.com/cityofmorrobay.

These are a few ways we're working to make sure you have the information you need about your community government and can give feedback. Have ideas about other opportunities to enhance public engagement? Please share them with City Manager David Buckingham at dbuckingham@morro-bay.ca.us or me at staylor@morro-bay.ca.us.

Note: This editorial first appeared in the October 14, 2015 edition of the Bay News.