

California City
X City Council, RDA, Planning Commission
Staff Report
City Manager
December 11, 2006

Status: _X_ Routine Closed Session

Meeting Date: December 19, 2006

Item: Consideration of Customer Service Survey

Background: During the past year many changes have occurred in the City including election of new City Council members offering a new direction for the City, and, the voting down of a special tax beginning July 2007. Additionally, a City Council visioning meeting is being planned for early January 2007. A Public Finance Forum is being scheduled for January 11, 2007.

Although assumptions may and are routinely made by people regarding public sentiment the most accurate method of gauging public opinion has been proven to be professional scientific surveys. Staff is proposing that the City spend up to \$7,000 for a customer satisfaction survey to scientifically gauge public attitude regarding city services, including financing of those services.

Attached is a proposal submitted by TMG Communications, Inc. The proposal includes the cost of a Customer Satisfaction Survey in the amount of approximately \$6,500. (The first bullet point on page three of their letter describes their proposal).

The recommended survey results would be used as a guide in modifying, as necessary, the City's approach to customer service. The survey results would be made available to the public and organizations for their use in promoting the City.

TMG would need about three weeks to prepare and conduct the survey. Their representative is scheduled to be at the 12/19/06 City Council Meeting to respond to questions.

Critical Timelines: Staff believes time is of the essence and encourages approval at the 12/19/06 City Council meeting to provide for survey results in early January 2007.

Recommendation: Staff recommends approval to expend up to \$7,000 for a customer service survey.

Propose Motion: "Council approve the expenditure of an amount not to exceed \$7,000 to conduct a customer service survey, to be prepared and conducted under the direction of TMG Communications, Inc."

Fiscal Impact: Not to exceed \$7,000.

Environmental Action: N/A

NB 3.

TO: California City Leaders
FROM: George Passantino
RE: California City Special Tax Considerations
DATE: December 4, 2006

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to present some recommendations to California City regarding methods of gauging public attitudes, improving awareness of City priorities, and educating the public on its Special Tax proposal.

As the community tackles this challenge, it is critical to understand the primary causes of the recent defeat of the Special Tax measure. These same conditions may serve as obstacles to the future success of a related revenue measure.

- **Lack of Coordinated Program to Educate the Public on the Special Tax:** I believe the single greatest reason that the previous measure failed to achieve even a simple majority (despite a 2/3 vote requirement) was the lack of a strategic effort to educate the public about the measure and what it would mean to their community's future. I doubt that residents fully understand the role of this tax in funding critical public services. On top of that, the measure presented in November 2006, increased the assessment above recent historical levels and increased the duration of the measure from 3 to 5 years. It is clear that these changes did not sit well with voters and lacked a clear explanation of why the changes were needed. Going forward, community leaders need an articulated and strategic plan of action to effectively educate the public. *With proper education about local priorities and tradeoffs, the public will likely draw the very same conclusions that the City Council did in proposing the measure.*
- **Questions of Public Confidence:** Based upon conversations with community leaders and a survey of recent media coverage, I see a possible lack of public confidence in City government and its operations. Whenever a public lacks confidence in its government, they are unlikely to approve a special tax measure—regardless of how important it is. *As such, direct efforts must be placed into improving public confidence before attitudes will shift on a revenue measure requiring voter approval.*

- **Limited Analysis of Public Attitudes, Priorities, and Messages:** While City leaders should be praised for working to understand voter attitudes through the distribution of a printed survey prior to November 2006, such survey information typically lacks statistical confidence and suffers from “self-selection bias” (that is, voters with certain attitudes are more likely to fill out the survey and, as a result under represents other attitudes). In the case of this survey, I understand that the questionnaires were circulated at community events and reflected high levels of support for the measure. Unfortunately, the people most likely to *avoid* such events are often the most unlikely to support a revenue enhancement measure. ***Going forward, the community should rely on statistically valid survey information to fully understand public attitudes and help improve public awareness about local priorities.***
- **There is Never a Good Time for a Tax Proposal:** As unfortunate as it may seem, November 2006 was a difficult election for local tax measures, none of which passed in Kern County. The sheer volume of bonds, taxes and other fiscal measures on the ballot lead many voters to a “none of the above” attitude. Additionally, if city leaders declare a special election to present voters with a revised revenue measure this spring, they must be prepared to answer questions and concerns associated with the cost of the special election. ***Fortunately, an effective outreach strategy that casts the measure as a critical investment in local quality of life can help overcome such difficulties.***
- **Recent Defeat of Special Tax Proposal May Threaten Future Success:** Given that the defeat of the Special Tax was so recent, voters may be reluctant to consider the measure in the near term because of a feeling that they have already voted this down and should not have to do so again. ***To overcome this, community leaders must “start from scratch,” increase public awareness, and operate strategically on any subsequent measures.***

To overcome these obstacles and help California City achieve its full potential, I recommend a comprehensive, two-pronged approach to educating the public, increasing public confidence in government operations, and generating a richer awareness of local revenue needs.

These recommendations are presented below for consideration:

Municipal Public Education Effort

As mentioned previously, California City may face questions of public confidence – a feeling that City Hall is “out of touch” with the concerns of the public. One cost-effective approach to changing these attitudes is to invest in a comprehensive public education program. Best-practices in government draw heavily upon the principles of transparency, accountability and measuring results. An aggressive public education effort would apply these time-tested principles by reporting past success, communicating future goals, and focusing on open and transparent government. To accomplish this goal, I would suggest a community outreach effort consisting of the following items:

- **Customer Satisfaction Survey (Estimated Cost \$6,500):** In the private sector, there is an old saying that “what gets measured gets done.” And given that public confidence and satisfaction are important measurable goals of local government, these attitudes must be measured. To do this, a scientific survey would be conducted from a random sample of California City voters to understand attitudes about city government and the community’s future, identify and develop clear messages with which to communicate with the public and test public attitudes about different approaches to addressing local revenue challenges. While a less expensive approach would be to conduct a mail survey, these results are far less accurate and will not be representative of the public. Any savings gained through this approach would be lost in terms of the accuracy of the information and the amount of time it would take to have valid results. To further enhance the City’s reputation as being a transparent servant of the public, the results of the survey should be made public via the City Web site.
- **Public Communications Program—5 mail pieces. (Estimated cost of \$2,500 for each mailer, \$ 12,500 total):** Beginning with the January release of the City Budget, an effective municipal public education campaign would clearly communicate key accomplishments of the previous year and priorities for the coming budget year. This first publication, a Citizen’s Pocket Guide, would communicate these matters in lay language to enhance public awareness and confidence in City operations. Later mail pieces could focus on other key issues derived from the customer satisfaction survey, as well as be used to educate the public about future revenue enhancement measures, in a creative yet unbiased fashion.
- **Community Outreach PowerPoint Program:** There is no better method of contact between the public and its government than through direct interaction. To help facilitate this, an aggressive municipal outreach effort would include a tailored PowerPoint presentation that can be delivered at various local activities and organizations (civic organizations, schools, etc.). Developing this PowerPoint presentation and helping identify target audiences would be included in the costs of the consultant fee.
- **Media Relations:** An effective outreach program also works closely with local media to help communicate to broad public audiences. Such a media relations effort would be included in the costs of the consultant fee.
- **Local Sign Effort (Estimated \$2,000):** If the City Council pursues a future ballot measure, the City should develop signs that can be placed at various site locations of improvements/maintenance funded by the measure. This approach makes very concrete the impacts of the measure.

In addition to the direct costs presented above, consultant fees for the above-mentioned program would be \$4,000 for January through June (less than \$700 per month). The total cost of the above mentioned public education proposal would be approximately \$25,000.

Private Campaign Effort

If the City votes to present to voters a new Special Tax or other revenue-generating proposal, it is critical that private parties organize to help communicate the importance of the measure to local voters. Whereas all communications by the City in a municipal public education program will be unbiased and not reflect “advocacy”, private communications can explicitly endorse the measure and encourage voters to “vote yes.”

Given the limited size of the community, the small number of registered voter households, and the likelihood of a constrained campaign budget, an effective private campaign will rely heavily on grassroots engagement, earned media, and targeted communication efforts.

- **Volunteer Base Mobilization:** The most effective type of voter contact also has the lowest price-tag—direct, door-to-door outreach. Unfortunately, it is also the most labor intensive and challenging to organize. Working with a political consultant, local leaders would cultivate, identify, and mobilize volunteers to conduct direct voter contact. The only cost associated with this effort would be the purchase of targeted data files and “walk sheets” to increase efficiency of the outreach efforts. Estimated costs for data and walk sheets would not exceed \$500 but would yield the richest direct voter contact.
- **Aggressive Earned Media Campaign:** Another staple of a grassroots campaign is the effective use of news outlets to generate “earned media”. Whereas one can purchase space in the media (advertisements), one can also “earn” this media by helping generate positive press coverage about newsworthy information. This can be done through a savvy media relations program. Such a media relations effort would be included in the costs of the consultant fee.
- **Direct Mail Program – 5 pieces (Estimated cost of \$2,500 for each mailer; Total cost of \$12,500):** As Election Day draws closer, it is critical that proponents constantly remind supporters of the need to vote for the measure. This can be accomplished by conducting a scheduled direct mail program, consisting of five separate mail pieces timed to deliver over the last six weeks of the campaign. The only costs associated with the mailing would be direct costs (printing, mail, and handling). There would be no additional consultant costs.
- **Signs / Banners (Estimated cost of \$3,000):** In addition to direct mail communication, the development of eye-catching signs and banners for use at local events and placed strategically throughout the community would help build the proposals “brand awareness” in the community and serve as a reminder of the importance to vote on Election Day.
- **Endorsement List:** In addition to the actual merits of a ballot measure, voters are swayed by a richer understanding of who supports the measure. As such, an effective local campaign will seek to cultivate local endorsements from prominent

local officials and leaders including political leaders, public safety officials, business leaders, and other civic activists. The cost of this effort, beyond nominal printing fees (less than \$200), would be included in the cost of the consultant fee.

In addition to the direct costs presented above, consultant fees for the above-mentioned political program would be \$2,000 for January through June (less than \$350 per month). The total cost of the political campaign proposal would be approximately \$18,000.

Hiring a Firm: Key Considerations

For purposes of this outreach effort, I would encourage the City Council of California City to retain TMG Communications for purposes of the Municipal Public Education effort. To ensure a “firewall” between public and political activities, TMG Communications will gladly suggest another local consultant to provide political consulting services consistent with the outline above.

Please review this proposal at your earliest convenience. I welcome your feedback and reactions. The elements of this program can be tailored to fit local needs and constraints. Please direct any questions to me personally at 661-466-3694 or via email at George@TMGonline.com

Thank you again for allowing TMG Communications to speak with you about your community outreach needs and to make some recommendations going forward.

Regardless of whether or not TMG can assist you in this endeavor, I want to personally wish you and the community the very best of luck in all of your future activities.

Respectfully,

George Passantino
Regional Manager
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