



Grand Junction Planning Commission

Workshop Session

Item #1.

Meeting Date: April 9, 2020

Presented By: Tamra Allen, Community Development Director, Isabella Vaz

Department: Community Development

Submitted By: Tamra Allen, Community Development Director

Information

SUBJECT:

Overview and tutorial of www.GJSpeaks.org.

RECOMMENDATION:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

City staff has been actively exploring ideas on how to broaden engagement in many of the City's processes and planning efforts, including the City's public hearing processes. Broadening engagement and providing remote or virtual participation in public hearings is even more essential today due to COVID-19. Staff will introduce a platform called *People Speak* and provide training to the Planning Commission on how to utilize the www.gjspeaks.org site.

BACKGROUND OR DETAILED INFORMATION:

In recent years, there has been an increasing public desire for meaningful participation in decision making, particularly related to zoning and planned developments. In the City Council's 2019 Strategic Plan, a Strategic Directive is "Connectedness through Community Building" of which one of the key directives is to "Increase community engagement in public processes by diversifying methods of public outreach."

City staff has been actively exploring ideas on how to broaden engagement in many of the City's processes and planning efforts, including the City's public hearing processes. Staff, elected and appointed officials have long observed that public hearings have poor attendance that is frequently not aligned with the City's population demographics,

and in some cases, not reflective of the broader community's sentiment on specific issues. In examining the public hearing process, there are obvious reasons why, historically, the public has not been more actively involved: a weeknight in-person meeting with uncertain start and end times is inherently a barrier to participation. For quasi-judicial cases, written comments may be submitted to staff for inclusion in the case file and staff report, but this option does not often satisfy the public's desire to submit comment directly to decision makers.

As staff has been exploring ideas on broaden involvement opportunities, along came the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) that directly poised conflicts between the call to attend a public hearing and the order to stay at home and to social distance. In response to expand meaningful participation as well as provide an alternative to convening in a large public forum, Staff has identified a tool developed by a company called People Speak that staff believes will address both of these needs.

The People Speak platform is designed to mimic the public hearing process by allowing the public to review staff reports and presentations and by allowing constituents to enter comment into the public record prior to the hearing date. People Speak was not initially designed to replace the public hearing, but to simply augment the existing public noticing period by providing a convenient, online, transparent repository for review of the project and public comment. However, with COVID-19, some communities are utilizing the tool as a substitute for traditional in-person hearings.

The City of Lakewood created the people speak platform in partnership with a Colorado-based software development company. They have shared two compelling observations: online participation appears to be more representative of their general population than in-person participation, and data shows that when City of Grand Junction hearings are regularly held (6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.) is the least active time for people to participation in the hearing process. (see attachment). Lakewood started using the tool for the Planning Commission in August 2017 and implemented the tool with their City Council in February 2019; during that time, use of the platform has achieved Lakewood's goals of increasing engagement and awareness. The City of Wheatridge also implemented people speak in late 2019 and have represented that they are pleased with the increase in engagement that the platform has provided.

The purpose of the April 9th workshop will be to introduce the platform and its primary functions and to provide training to the Planning Commission on how to use the platform prior to the Commission's scheduled April 14th hearing. Staff will also be providing a Planning Commissioner handbook that addresses how to use the platform. Staff has selected this platform as it has been generally perceived as intuitive to use.

Prior to the workshop, Staff encourages Planning Commission to explore www.lakewoodspeaks.org and/or www.wheatridgespeaks.org. A good example for a

specific public hearing item can be found using this link:

<https://wheatridgespeaks.org/planning-commission/specific-development-plan-at-3432-clear-creek-drive-kum-go>.

With or without COVID-19, Staff is excited to bring this platform to the Planning Commission as we believe this will create an opportunity for more inclusive public hearings and will continue to reinforce the City's commitment to providing opportunities for meaningful public participation and community involvement.

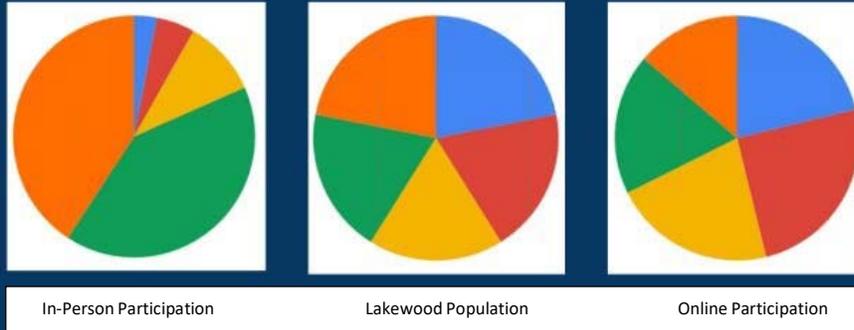
SUGGESTED MOTION:

This item is informational only.

Attachments

1. Memo - GJ Speaks Inclusive Public Hearings - Attachment

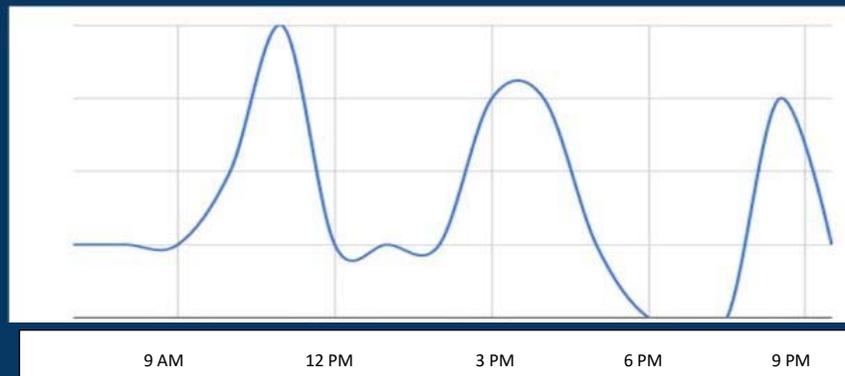
Commenters by Age



Online participation in Lakewood appears to be more representative online than in-person. Left: In-person participation by age, Middle: Lakewood population by age, Right: Online participation by age.

Comments by Time

Limitations of evening hearings



This line graph illustrates the time of day that online comments were submitted through Lakewood Speaks in a six-month period. Peak times are 11AM, 3:30PM, and 8:30PM. Zero comments were submitted between 6 and 7:30 PM.

Source: City of Lakewood