



VISALIA CITY COUNCIL STRATEGIC WORKSHOP

FEBRUARY 5 & 6, 2010

SUMMARY REPORT

The Visalia City Council met on February 5th and 6th to discuss issues of importance to the future vitality of the city. The meeting agenda is appended to this report. The city manager and department heads attended the meeting and interacted with the City Council on each of the agenda items. Staff reports were given to provide background information prior to the Council's discussion of each issue. They are appended to this report. Members of the community in attendance were also encouraged to share their thoughts with the Council throughout both days.

The comments noted after each section title are a compilation of comments from the councilmembers, the staff and community members. They are brief summary statements on each issue. A more complete presentation of the issue can be found in the written staff reports that are appended to this summary.

Priorities for 2010

The last exercise of the two-day meeting had the councilmembers identify the five most important issues they wanted the city staff to focus on for 2010. The following ten items were selected by the councilmembers for consideration. The first five items noted with bold lettering were chosen through Council consensus as the most important.

- 1. Visalia stimulus program to improve the local economy**
- 2. West Visalia Specific Plan revision including a scenic corridor treatment that establishes landscaping setbacks and building parameters.**
- 3. Economic Development / Quality of Life**
- 4. Gang suppression and employment of Measure T police officers**
- 5. Streamlining the planning and permitting process**
6. FEMA maps / Flood control
7. Budget efficiencies

8. Code enforcement / Neighborhood preservation
9. Sports tournaments / Recreation / Tourism
10. Agricultural land mitigation fees

It was suggested that an update be given to the City Council at the end of six months to see what progress had been made on these items. Emphasis was given the first two items and optimism expressed that they could be completed within the next six months.

FRIDAY AGENDA ITEMS

Mayor Bob Link opened the Workshop with welcoming comments. He mentioned the challenging times facing the community and his confidence that the City Council and staff would work through them to keep Visalia the exceptional community it has been over the past decades. He emphasized the need for a Visalia economic stimulus program that can help local businesses and community members. He also called upon the city manager to schedule a joint meeting with the Chamber of Commerce to discuss the topic of “customer friendliness”.

Four agenda items were covered on Friday, February 5th. The Workshop opened with an exercise in which councilmembers, the city manager and department heads had an opportunity to respond to several questions intended to help them become better acquainted. They selected from the following list of questions:

1. Where are you from and what are one or two things you like about it?
2. What advice would you give a person trying to decide on a career to pursue?
3. What is your decision-making process like? What do you need in order to make good decisions for this community?
4. What qualities do you most admire in a person and what do you most dislike?
5. What hobbies, sports, or other leisure time activities do you enjoy most?
6. What do you want to be doing ten years from now?
7. What do people like most about you? ...least about you? ...what image would you like to portray?
8. What one day in your life would you like to live over?

9. In what ways are you like your grandparents? ...different from them?
10. What is one of the most creative things you've ever done? ...one of the most silly things?
11. If you knew you only had six months to live, how would you spend your remaining time?
12. What living person (not related to you) do you most admire?
13. If you could invent or discover one new thing, what would it be?
14. What is the best piece of advice you have ever received?
15. If you could go anywhere on earth for a two-week vacation, where would you go? Why?
16. In what ways do you hope your life as an adult is similar to and different from your parents' lives?
17. When do you feel most lonely? ...happiest?
18. What is one thing about you that you have not shared yet, that others would find interesting?

General Observations

All council members acknowledged that having three new members may change the focus and direction this City Council will take. This was discussed in the context of the following areas:

Role of the Mayor?

Bob commented that his role as Mayor is to bring the councilmembers together in the decision-making process. Reaching consensus while being candid about the issues under consideration requires respect for each other and the ability to openly talk things over. He sees the Council working as a family and wants to change the wording on resolutions of award to being issued by the City Council, not the Mayor.

He told the group he prefers to be called "Bob", not Mayor and summed up by characterizing his role as that of a "quarterback" of the team.

The “power” of the Mayor to approve City Council agenda items was raised for discussion. It was agreed that every councilmember has the right to place items on the agenda and might find it convenient to raise topics under “Items of Interest” at regular Council meetings. They were also invited to contact the Mayor directly if they wished to discuss items for the agenda.

Role of the Councilmember? The role of the councilmember was summed up as:

Represent the entire city without favoritism to any specific segment.

Be open, polite and welcoming to everyone.

Fully listen to public comments at Council meetings before speaking on an issue.

Role of staff? / City attorney?

Give factual information, not what they think the City Council wants to hear.

Bring complete staff work to the City Council even if it takes longer to schedule the item for consideration at a Council meeting.

The city attorney should keep the City Council on the “straight and narrow” and off the front page of the newspapers.

Staff reports should be unbiased and transparent. They should spell things out and be easily understood by the public.

Access to the staff should generally be through the city manager. It is fine to contact staff for information but not to give direction regarding staff activities.

Role of local government: facilitate or provide?

The city plays a dual role as both the facilitator and the provider of services. Local governance is a “three-legged stool”: government, private sector and non-profit organizations. City Council must set the vision and then encourage cooperative interaction among all three maintain a healthy community.

Big picture or micro-picture?

The Council's role is to focus on the big picture for the community.

Predictability?

It was acknowledged that business investors prefer predictability in city politics and policies. This is especially true where projects or programs are under consideration requiring significant private sector investment.

Communication

The City needs to improve its communication strategies with the community. Openness and clarity are important to this City Council. Citizens should have easy access to accurate information so they can be informed and engaged on issues they care about. In order to further this objective, the City should look at additional outreach strategies, especially those that include contemporary mediums.

Several suggestions were made to assist with this.

Look into the advantages and disadvantages of moving City Council meetings to various venues throughout the community. Include this idea in the community survey to determine if Visalia's residents would favor this approach.

Broadcast/simulcast Council meetings via the internet.

Have a City presence at large gatherings in the community like the upcoming Home Show, seasonal craft shows and events at the Sports Complex. A city booth could be set up with information about numerous City services and programs.

Need to reach those in the community who are not technology savvy.

The City's story needs to be told without editing by media publications.

City issues should be vetted by community groups of stakeholders with their views included in the staff report for presentations to the City Council.

Community meetings could be conducted in Spanish and Southeast Asian languages.

Take "baby steps" with minimal cost when trying out these new ideas.

Be mindful of the impact on the councilmembers' time in doing these things.

The earlier meeting schedules are made known the easier it is for busy community members to work them into their schedules.

The "Attachments" mentioned in staff reports aren't always available when the report is circulated. This needs to be improved.

City Council agendas that are distributed on Friday don't allow enough time to be "digested" prior to the meeting the following Monday night. It needs to be available sooner.

Perhaps the Wednesday packet and the Friday packet given to the Council could be combined into a Thursday packet.

Financial

These difficult economic times will require the City Council to re-evaluate its goals and projects. We must live within our means. The City needs to incorporate business practices that are more streamlined and cost effective. Applying "value engineering" principles to the City's work may help contain costs without decreasing the quality of its work.

The City's finance director has presented the City Council several overviews of the City's financial condition at recent meetings. It was decided to defer this item to an upcoming budget presentation to the City Council at a regular Council meeting.

Land Use Planning

This may be the first time in years there is no councilmember whose work or professional training involves land use planning. How that might impact the City Council's land use decision making was discussed in the context of the following issues.

What is the role of the City Council in relation to the Planning Commission?

It was noted that California state law requires cities to establish a planning oversight group and that the City of Visalia has done so by creating a Planning Commission to which the City Council appoints its members. The Planning Commission and City Council work interdependently in processing land use applications. This will be further explored at the joint meeting of the City Council and Planning Commission scheduled for March 29, 2010.

What direction does the City Council want to give with regard to further studying the Business Research Park land uses at Plaza Drive between Highway 198 and Hurley?

This issue will be discussed at the March 29, 2010 joint meeting with the City Council and Planning Commission. Several observations were noted regarding this subject.

The topic needs more airing out. We need to clarify what is provided for in the existing ordinance.

Be more specific about the included uses and the processes incorporated such as Architectural Review.

Amending the zoning ordinance may accomplish what is needed.

A mix of uses on a Master Plan basis is the heart of the problem.

The "Core Area" concept for development in Visalia needs to be revisited. Well over half of Visalia's residents live west of the "Oval area to downtown" core of the city.

It will be helpful if the Planning Commission members would identify what are the "gray areas" of the issue before meeting on March 29th.

To what extent is Agricultural Land Mitigation a viable and necessary strategy for Visalia at this time?

The City does not currently have an ordinance requiring the payment of an Agricultural Land Mitigation fee by those wishing to develop land. Nevertheless, an "endowment" fee was agreed to as a part of the Pre-Annexation Agreement between representatives of the Vargas property and the City.

City Council provided direction to staff that no fees should be considered for any future annexation considerations until the Council takes the matter under consideration and adopts a policy regarding this. The Council also directed that this issue be placed on a future Council Work Session agenda.

The following points were made while this was being discussed:

The “endowment” fee collected as a part of the Vargas property Pre-Annexation Agreement was \$2,000 per acre for a total of about \$308,000. This money is being held by the City. Pat Daniels representing the Vargas property requested that this money be returned to his company if the fee is not going to be made mandatory for all annexations.

Amending the Pre-Annexation Agreement with Vargas representatives to return the fee might have General Plan implications.

The first amendment to the Pre-Annexation Agreement establishes a minimum parcel size that is different than the underlying zoning. Concern was expressed regarding whether or not this same requirement would be made of all other property in the industrial park area that annexes into the City in the future.

Flexibility of parcel size in the industrial park area is an important consideration in order to meet the interests of potential job-producing businesses that might want to locate in the area.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:40 p.m. to resume at 8:30 a.m. the following morning. Mayor Link invited all present to arrive at 8:00 a.m. for a continental breakfast.

SATURDAY AGENDA ITEMS

West Visalia / Highway 198 scenic corridor plan: When will we have one? How should the City use land it currently owns along this corridor?

Staff will gather prior work on this including plans and reports generated in the mid to late 1990’s for consideration by Council in formulating a plan for going forward.

Separate this from the General Plan Update process.

Place on the March 29th agenda for the joint meeting with the Planning Commission.

Propose a revenue structure for the development and maintenance of the scenic corridor setback area.

Streamlining the planning and permitting process: What can be done to make the process work more quickly and predictably?

Formal adoption of “practices” as Council policies would wrap up loose ends and eliminate gray areas that frustrate both staff and applicants. When is a “decision” really a decision if it is based upon a practice rather than a policy? Make a list of these practices that require clarification prior to the joint meeting with the Planning Commission on March 29th.

Which business license issuances and renewals can be done online?

Make it easier to do infill projects. What incentives might be created that reward developers who take on these more difficult projects?

Council supported the actions included in Mike Olmos’ report. See the appended report for details.

FEMA: What continues to be done to assist community members whose residence is included in the 100 yr. flood plain?

City Council recently received a report on this item at a regular meeting subsequent to this agenda being prepared.

Gang Suppression: Which strategies are working and what needs to be added?

City Council recently received a report on this item at a regular meeting subsequent to this agenda being prepared.

Measure T: What can we actually pay for?

Mark Nelson, Fire Chief, presented a report outlining existing response times to requests for service in the City areas served by the various fire stations in town. Response times are within acceptable limits for all areas except the southwestern part of town.

A proposal was submitted for amending Measure T to allow funding for construction of a new station near Tulare and Akers in the southwestern area of town instead of the southeastern area. The southeastern area is well-served out of the Cal Fire station at Walnut and Lovers Ln. where the City leases space for an Engine Company.

The language of Measure T does not address a process by which projects funded from its revenue can be amended. A community process of some type will be needed to address this. Transparency and public outreach are important elements of the process.

How does Visalia maintain its Quality of Life with the lowest revenue categories base among our nearby communities and staffing numbers reduced to the 1990 level? What are the City Council's expectations in areas like the Capital Improvement Program, job creation, traffic circulation, public safety, etc?

Council was presented information outlining changes over the last two decades in Visalia's financial strength. That strength is eroding.

The report also documented a City non-public safety/non-enterprise workforce that is equal to that of 1990 while population has increased 67% from 75,000 to 125,000 over the past 20 years.

Quality of Life cannot remain unchanged when the number of those served increases dramatically but the staff providing the service goes unchanged.

Suggested strategies for lessening the demand on staff for services included increasing the street paving done by private contractors. It was also suggested that staff examine what we do well and what we don't. Outsource what we don't.

What is the role of the City's Economic Development effort in the community?

The City's Economic Development Director is actively involved with the Chamber of Commerce, local realtors, economic development agencies at the state and local level and prospective retail and commercial business developers to grow the City's economic base.

The City needs to be more receptive to adjusting zoning, etc. to put retailers where they want to locate.

The spacing between grocery stores needs to be reexamined in the current General Plan. Adequate spacing needs to be maintained so that all stores can be successful.

Code Enforcement / Neighborhood Preservation: What improvements are we seeing?

This item will be presented at the February 16th City Council meeting.

What is the City's role with regard to the homeless in the community?

Good progress has been made in cooperation with multiple public and non-profit organizations in the community.

A four-plex apartment building near the Oval Park is being purchased for renovation and operation as a shelter for homeless families.

A partnership with the Tulare County Housing Authority will make two tri-plexes in the Washington School area available for the homeless.

City staff is in consultation with staff from the City of Fresno regarding strategies they have found successful in assisting their homeless population.

What is the likelihood that the City can sponsor an annual sporting event that will attract thousands of visitors to Visalia every year (e.g. 64 team baseball tournaments)?

The creation of four new state-of-the-art lighted youth baseball fields at Riverway Sports Park will assist in accomplishing this goal. Both Cal Ripken and Little League have ambitious goals to host a number of regional, state, and national baseball tournaments at the new facility beginning in 2010 and 2011.

The Parks and Recreation Department continues to utilize Plaza Park as a venue to attract out-of-town sports tourists. The Plaza Park Raceway is leased by the Plaza Park Raceway Association that conducts 20 to 25 races per year on average. Each race typically attracts a crowd of 500 - 2,500 fans and racers --- the majority of these people come into Visalia from outside of the community.

Adult softball tournaments continue to occur at Plaza Park 35-36 weekends per year. The largest tournament attracts over 50 teams from the region, while the smaller tournaments are 10-12 teams. Many of these teams come into Visalia from outside of the community.

In the past year, the Visalia Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) has explored how to bring more sporting events into the community. They have developed marketing materials and are working with a variety of sports planning entities, including those involved with high school and community college championships, to find events for the variety of venues in Visalia. This past week, the CVB was successful in securing the 2011 USBC Sr. Women's Bowling Tournament which will bring 400 bowlers to Visalia for three days.

And finally, the City has already secured the Stage 5 leg of the California Amgen Tour, scheduled for May 20, 2010 in Visalia.

It was suggested that the City create its own signature sporting event like a triathlon or an event geared toward seniors similar to what is done in southern Utah.

It was also acknowledged that working capital must be committed to these events and will most likely come from the City and private parties willing to sponsor an event.

Visitor and Shuttle Center: What role will this facility play in economic development? How can it be operationally structured so that the City is not funding the majority of the operating costs of this facility?

A draft design of the Shuttle Center was presented. It will be constructed in the entryway court of the Convention Center

It will be a cooperative operation of City, private sector and non-profit organizations. Non-general fund sources will be used to design, construct and operate the Center. Construction will not begin until adequate funding has been secured.

Three organizations have committed to being housed in the building: Sequoia Riverlands Trust, the Visitors and Convention Bureau and McKellar Farms. It was suggested that staff also contact Bravo Farms to see if they might have an interest in the Center.

The Center will support tourism which has the potential for significant growth if Visalia can become better connected to the National Park Service attractions nearby. A suggested attraction could be the "Majestic Mountain Loop" that would take visitors from Visalia to the Sequoia, Kings and Yosemite National Parks.

Work will continue to complete the design of the Center and secure funding for its construction and operation.

Concern was expressed regarding the City competing with the private sector on office space for lease.

ADJOURNMENT

The Workshop was adjourned at 3:20 p.m.

STRATEGIC WORKSHOP AGENDA

COMMUNICATION

LAND USE PLANNING

**WEST VISALIA
SPECIFIC PLAN**

**HWY. 198 SCENIC
CORRIDOR**

STREAMLINING THE PLANNING AND PERMITTING PROCESS

MEASURE T

QUALITY OF LIFE

ROLE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

CODE ENFORCEMENT

**NEIGHBORHOOD
PRESERVATION**

FEMA

GANG SUPPRESSION

HOMELESS

ANNUAL SPORTING EVENTS

VISITOR AND SHUTTLE CENTER

FINANCIAL

APPENDED STAFF REPORTS