RULES COMMITTEE: 00-00-00
ITEM:

CITY OF SAN JOSE
CAPITAL OF SILICON VALLEY

Memorandum

TO: RULES AND OPEN GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

FROM: Tom Manheim

SUBJECT: SUNSHINE REFORM TASK FORCE TECHNOLOGY RECOMMENDATIONS

DATE: March 19, 2009

Approved

Date 3-19-09

RECOMMENDATION

Accept report and provide direction regarding Sunshine Reform Task Force recommendations to (1) create an online database of Council votes; and (2) post staff reports on department websites.

OUTCOME

The Rules and Open Government Committee (ROGC) review of the Sunshine Reform Task Force (SRTF) recommendations concerning Technology will be complete.

BACKGROUND

At its September 17 and October 15, 2008 meetings, the ROGC reviewed the SRTF recommendations for the use of technology. While a number of recommendations were accepted, the Committee requested additional analysis on two proposals designed to increase public access to Council voting records and staff reports. The specific proposals were:

- 7.1.3(B) The SRTF recommends that the City implement a searchable database of each vote by Councilmembers and Mayor and maintain the records of such votes in a manner accessible to the public via the Web as a permanent archive.

- 7.3.1.010(A) The SRTF recommends that every City Department maintain an index, linked from the Department's home page, of every report with supporting documents made to the City Council or a Council Committee.

The Committee deferred action on these recommendations to permit testing of the new City web site search engine as an alternative.

ANALYSIS

Staff has completed testing of the new search engine as a tool for tracking the voting records of individual Councilmembers and for locating staff reports on the City web site.

Tracking Voting Records. For testing purposes, staff attempted to use the search engine to see a record of votes for the longest tenured member of the Council, Councilmember Campos. The search engine was not particularly helpful in this regard. Results indicated that the search engine is no more effective for identifying a Councilmember's voting record over time than simply searching Council or Council Committee minutes, meeting by meeting, and manually tabulating those votes, issue by issue. However, it is very effective in locating specific votes by subject, eliminating the need to know the date of the vote on a particular issue. In effect, the search engine is highly effective if an individual is attempting to understand how a councilmember has voted on any particular subject, but not effective at all in compiling a record of every vote.

Staff has also surveyed other city websites to determine whether online voting records are provided. Los Angeles appears to be the only large City in California that provides a searchable database of Council voting records via its web site. The City of Los Angeles staff member responsible for that database indicated that it took the full-time work of one City employee for three months to develop the application. If the City of San Jose had the capacity to devote a Senior System Application Programmer fulltime to this job for three months, the cost would be approximately $35,000.

Implementation of this proposal would also require a change in procedures for the conduct of City Council meetings, as well as a change of meeting locations for all City Council Committee meetings. The mechanism for the creation of this database would be through the touch-screen electronic voting system that is only available in the City Council chambers. This system is designed to display votes to the public on the overhead screens and is used in limited circumstances—primarily when the City Council is voting on appointments to Boards and Commissions or when a split vote is anticipated on a controversial item. To compile an online voting database, the City Council would be required to use the electronic voting system for each individual vote. This proposal would also require City Council Committees to meet in the Chambers so that the Councilmember votes in Committee meetings could also be compiled.

Staff has no recommendation about whether this SRTF recommendation should be implemented, except that, due to budgetary constraints, staff does recommend against implementing this requirement at this time due to the limited resources to meet the existing higher priority technology requirements of the organization.

Locating Staff Reports. To test the search engine for locating staff reports, one staff member randomly selected 20 reports dating back to 2007 on the City web site and then created a list of the primary issue for each report. Another staff member then attempted to locate the reports with keyword searches based on the list of issues. The search engine located the reports on the first attempt 100% of the time. Staff next attempted to locate 30 staff reports based upon descriptions drawn solely from the memories of other staff or from requests for public records. The search engine continued to prove effective, but required multiple searches with additional keywords

more than half of the time. Although perhaps not as effective as a full subject index, the new search engine does greatly improve access to the reports.

Staff believes that the linking of the reports to departmental web pages is of limited benefit. For it to be useful, one must have an understanding of the City organizational structure and how it relates to the services that the City provides. Moreover, the Information Technology Department is currently working on other solutions to improve public access to these and other City records that involve limiting a keyword search to a specific "collection" such as Council agenda and staff reports. Staff also recommends against implementation of this recommendation due to the limited resources to meet the existing higher priority technology requirements of the organization.

EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP

Staff will continue to pursue various available methodologies to ensure effective access to City information via the Internet.

PUBLIC OUTREACH/INTEREST

Not applicable.

COORDINATION

This memorandum has been coordinated with the Office of the City Clerk.

Tom Manheim
Communications Director

For questions please contact Tom Norris, Public Records Manager, at (408) 535-8120.