



## Item No. 15 Town of Atherton

### **CITY COUNCIL STAFF REPORT – REGULAR AGENDA**

**TO: HONORABLE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL**

**FROM: GEORGE RODERICKS, CITY MANAGER**

**DATE: JANUARY 21, 2015**

**SUBJECT: PEAK DEMOCRACY – OPEN TOWN HALL  
BUDGET AMENDMENT AND AUTHORIZATION TO BEGIN WORK**

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Approve a budget amendment of \$8,000 for overlapping FY 2014/15 and FY 2015/16 and authorize staff to begin work with Peak Democracy (Open Town Hall).

#### **BACKGROUND**

I first encountered Peak Democracy (Open Town Hall) at a City Manager's conference in 2013. The platform is designed to facilitate public engagement in a civil, fair, legal and guided way.

Specifically, Peak Democracy Inc.'s Open Town Hall is a cloud-based online civic engagement platform that augments and diversifies public participation. Open Town Hall allows governments to maintain control of the public engagement process, focus on feedback from constituents, keep the dialogue civil and legal, and not overwhelm staff in ways that can frustrate residents.

Because the Town has limited staffing, most of our civic engagement and outreach tends to be one-directional. Staff simply does not have the time or resources to actively monitor online civic engagement programs. Nevertheless, these forums tend to engage constituents just as successfully as Town Hall meetings. Open Town Hall fills in the gap between the need and the resources.

#### **ANALYSIS**

In addition to monitoring forums for uncivil activity and reconciling problems, Open Town Hall provides a suite of real-time insight and reporting tools -- including geographic and demographic analysis. Open Town Hall supports social media integration (such as the Town's Facebook and Twitter feeds), multiple languages, and a range of mobile access on smart devices and simple texting devices.

Peak Democracy was founded in 2007. Today, Peak Democracy has worked with over 100 government agencies across North America to power over 1,500 online forums that have attracted over 200,000 online attendees, and have garnered a user satisfaction rating of over 95%. Headquartered in Berkeley, Peak Democracy staff are located all over the US with servers housed in a high-security, co-location facility in Montreal.

### **Forum Monitoring**

Peak Democracy staff (and software) actively monitor Open Town Hall forums to be free of profanity, personal attacks, and impertinent comments. Forums follow the order and decorum of a government hearing designed to maintain civility.

Staff and software authenticate every participant, and restrict each participant to only one comment per topic so that they do not dominate, argue or attack each other. Open Town Hall forums comply with free speech rights, requirements for public records retention and requests, and sunshine ordinances. Users are required to register with Peak Democracy for use. The agency hosting the forum (the Town) may require users to show their name or not.

Forums are guided to diversify feedback. Topics would be clearly defined and introduced by the Town. Staff and software monitor the forums to ensure that statements remain on topic and civil. The Town defines and launches a topic. We can add more to it once it develops. Peak Democracy staff and software monitor all of the forums created.

### **Forums in Action**

The public forum option (\$8,000 annual subscription) provides a host of resources and configurations that the Town can use to develop its citizen engagement platforms. It is presently used by more than 100 jurisdictions across the United States, 31 in California. The communities of Marin County, Menlo Park, Moraga, Morgan Hill, Mountain View, Novato, Palo Alto, San Carlos, San Leandro, Sausalito, Vallejo, and Walnut Creek (to name a few) are current customers.

References advise that Peak Democracy is easy to work with, provides good support, and delivers a consistent product. Peak Democracy provides a customizable interface designed to meet a community's specific goals.

The best way to see how the forums operate is to visit a few. Here are a few links to active sites. Enter the forums, review responses, and see how the responses are recorded/summarized.

Palo Alto Goals for 2015:

[http://www.cityofpaloalto.org/gov/topics/open\\_city\\_hall.asp#peak\\_democracy](http://www.cityofpaloalto.org/gov/topics/open_city_hall.asp#peak_democracy)

Menlo Park – Goals for 2015, Land Use Survey, Choosing Menlo Park:

<http://www.menlopark.org/298/Open-City-Hall>

San Carlos – Utility Undergrounding, New Sidewalks, Black Mountain Property, New High School, Community Garden, Dog Park, Street Tree and Sidewalk Maintenance, Traffic, Downtown Parking, Shuttle Services, Recreational Facilities:

<http://www.cityofsancarlos.org/shapesancarlos.asp>

Staff recommends that the Town participate with Peak Democracy Inc.'s Open Town Hall. Once established and activated, I envision returning to the City Council at an upcoming Study Session to discuss a few initial forum topics. These could include issues surrounding:

- Civic Center Project (amenities, uses, design, etc.)
- Traffic Safety (concerns, improvements, wants, etc.)
- Drainage (concerns, needs, issues, etc.)
- Budget Goals for 2015/16
- Park (amenities, uses, events, etc.)
- Community Events

Mike Cohen from Peak Democracy is present this evening with a PowerPoint presentation and demonstration to augment this staff report.

### **POLICY ISSUES**

This project will help inform the City Council discussions surrounding a number of policy issues that are encountered on a regular basis. Approval of the budget amendment and/or agreement with Peak Democracy does not in and of itself create any new policy issues for the Council. Once an agreement with Peak Democracy is executed, staff will return to the Council with a general policy on how to use the service.

### **FISCAL IMPACT**

The annual subscription to Peak Democracy's Open Town Hall is \$8,000.

### **PUBLIC NOTICE**

Public notification was achieved by posting the agenda, with this agenda item being listed, at least 72 hours prior to the meeting in print and electronically. Information about the project is also disseminated via the Town's electronic News Flash and Atherton Online. There are approximately 1,200 subscribers to the Town's electronic News Flash publications. Subscribers include residents as well as stakeholders – to include, but be not limited to, media outlets, school districts, Menlo Park Fire District, service providers (water, power, and sewer), and regional elected officials.

### **ATTACHMENTS**

Budget Amendment

**RESOLUTION NO. 15-xx**

**A RESOLUTION OF THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE TOWN OF  
ATHERTON AUTHORIZING A BUDGET AMENDMENT FOR  
PUBLIC OUTREACH AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT**

**WHEREAS**, the Town has identified that public outreach and citizen engagement are high priorities; and

**WHEREAS**, Peak Democracy, Inc.'s Open Town Hall provides a resource to expand the Town's outreach and engagement resources;

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED**, that the City Council of the Town of Atherton does hereby approve an amendment to the FY 2014-15 Town Budget to enact the changes specified in Exhibit A attached hereto.

**PASSED AND ADOPTED** at a meeting of the City Council of the Town of Atherton held on the 21<sup>st</sup> day of January, 2015 by the following vote:

AYES:            Council Members:  
NOES:            Council Members:  
ABSENT:        Council Members:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Rick DeGolia, MAYOR  
Town of Atherton

ATTEST:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Theresa N. DellaSanta, City Clerk

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

\_\_\_\_\_  
William B. Connors, City Attorney

Resolution No. 15-XX

January 21, 2015

Page 2 of 2

**Exhibit A**

**Town of Atherton  
Budget Amendment**

**Transfer \$8,000 from:**

**FY 2014/15**

**Un-appropriated General Fund Reserve**

**To:**

**FY 2014/15**

**Administration - Other Contract Services – Community Activities and Events  
Account Number: 101-12-54010-012**