City of Long Beach
Working Together to Serve

Office of Gerrie Schipske
Councilwoman, Fifth District
Memorandum

R-18

Date: January 4, 2011

To: HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF THE CITY COUNCIL

From: Councilwoman Gerrie Schipske, Fifth District
               Councilmember Robert Garcia, First District

Subject: AGENDA ITEM: City Website Transparency

DISCUSSION

Facts:

- Sunshine Review (http://sunshinereview.org/index.php/Sunshine_Review:About) is a non-profit organization dedicated to state and local government transparency. The Sunshine Review wiki collects and shares transparency information and uses a "10-point Transparency Checklist" to evaluate the content of every state and more than 5,000 local government websites. Sunshine Review collaborates with individuals and organizations throughout America in the cause of an informed citizenry and an accountable government.
- The County of Los Angeles and the City of San Diego have been given an A+ for their transparent websites.
- While the City of Long Beach website has many of the recommended items that make the website transparent, we are lacking many others.

- Sunshine Review recommends the following checklist for city websites to be considered transparent:

  o City residents and taxpayers need to be able to adequately gauge whether a city government is:

  o Effective.

  o Competent.

  o Frugal with tax revenues

  o In compliance with all expectations and relevant laws about public records and open meetings.

In order for this to happen, residents and taxpayers should expect to find key information on any city's website.

1. Budget

The city website should include comprehensive budget information.

- The budget for the current fiscal year should be posted online.

- Budgets for previous years should be posted online.

- It should be very easy for people to find this information when they visit the website. This means that prominent navigational features enabling someone to locate the budget should be included on the homepage of the website.

- Graphic features that compare the current budget to past year's budgets should be incorporated, to enable people to make sense of trends over time.

- Narrative features should be incorporated into descriptions of the budget. For example, if the current year budget is 1.2% higher, or 5% lower, or 14.7% higher than the previous year's budget, it is helpful to citizens to provide this comparative explanation at the beginning of a summary about the budget.

2. Checkbook register

The city's checkbook register should be posted online. This information provided should include:

1. The amount of each payment

2. Date

3. Check number

4. To whom the payment was made (including the address)

5. Scan of Invoice or Purchase Order or Check Request (this often provides significant drilldown detail including who approved it)

6. What it was for

7. Budgetary authority for the expenditure

8. Functional expenditure category

9. Sources of funds

10. Links to the relevant contracts under which the payment was made

3. City government meetings/agendas

The city's website should disclose all city government meetings and agendas.

- Time of meeting.

- Place of meeting.

- Agendas for all meetings that fall under rules about open meetings (which should be 99% of any government meetings);

- Whether the meeting is open or closed.

- Whether public input is allowed at the meeting and, if so, what the rules are that govern public input.

- Minutes of meetings should be recorded and posted online.

- Text of Real-Time-Captioning if created as part of the video or audio stream

4. Elected officials and elections

The city's website should disclose key information about the city's elected officials.

- Their names.

- Contact information, including phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

- Terms of office and date of next election.

- If the elected officials are elected in partisan elections, the website should indicate their party affiliation.

- Any financial disclosures and conflict-of-interest statements that the city requires of its elected officials should be posted online.

- Their Committee appointments.

5. Administrative officials

The city's website should disclose key information about the city's appointed administrators:

- Their names and titles.

- Contact information, including phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

6. Ethics

If the city has rules governing ethical behavior of appointed and elected officials:

- The process for reporting ethics violations should be available on the city's website.

- The results of any investigations that occur under any relevant ethics rules should be posted on the city's website.

7. Audits (Financial/Performance)

If the city conducts financial and management audits to ensure that it is operating in accordance with the highest standards of financial and management competence and integrity:

- Copies of performance and financial audits should be posted on the city's website.

- Routine financial audits should be posted online.

- Evaluations of the performance of any specific agencies or commissions should be posted online.

8. Contracts

The city's website should provide comprehensive information about the contracts it enters into with vendors.

- The rules the city must abide by when it enters into contracts with outside vendors should be posted on the city's website.

- When the city enters into a bidding process for larger contracts, the request for bids should be posted on the city's website.

- Publicly available information about the bids the city receives should be posted online, keyed to the request for bids the city has previously published.

- Specific contracts the city enters into with outside vendors for any amount over $10,000 should be posted online.

- If elected officials of the city have received campaign contributions from any vendors who sell services to the city, this information should be posted on the city's website.

9. Lobbying/advocacy

- If the city enters into a contract with a lobbyist or lobbying firm, full details of this arrangement must be posted on the city's website, including the name of the lobbyist or lobbying firm, the amount paid to the lobbyist or firm, and the legislation that the lobbyist is advocating for on the taxpayer's dime.

- If the city pays dues to belong to any lobbying associations, full details of these arrangements should be included on the city's website, including the name of the association, the amount paid in dues, and an identification of what positions that lobbying association is taking with the money it has received from the city's taxpayers via the dues paid to it by the city.

- If the city gives grants to non-profit organizations, these grants should be disclosed on the city's website with a reason for the grant and information about who in the non-profit organization is responsible for oversight and administration of the funds it has received from the city's taxpayers via a grant from the city.

10. Access to government records and public documents

The city website should include comprehensive information about how citizens can obtain access to public records in the custody of the city.

- When a citizen wants to file an open records request, which employee of the city handles those requests?

- What is that employee's contact information?

- The city website should provide this information in a very easy-to-locate position on their website.

- The city website should lay out the procedure for a citizen to follow who wants access to public records.

- The information should be user-friendly.

- The city website should include an annual rating of its FOIA compliance: How many requests did it receive in a given year, how many did it comply with, the average time required for compliance, and reasons for denials. If the city is currently being sued for failure to provide public documents, this information should be included.

- If the city has been ordered by a judge or public records ombudsman to provide documents it refused to produce in response to a public records request, this information should be a permanent record posted on the city's website.

Recommendations: The City Council, recognizing the need of full disclosure and transparency, shall refer this matter to the City Manager for a cost estimate of implementing those features not currently on the City website as noted above