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New online forum opens civic discussions for Lafayette residents

By Pippa Fisher

Lafayette has added another tool to its communications toolbox by bringing a new electronic communication forum for civic engagement online.

Lafayette City Manager Steven Falk made the point during a presentation at the Nov. 13 city council meeting that since 1968 residents have had only the same couple of options available for making their voices heard to local government: either by speaking at a city meeting or by writing a letter or email. With the unveiling of "Lafayette Listens!" on Nov. 9, residents now have the option of accessing the forum at their convenience any time of day or night from a computer or smartphone. As residents navigate this platform they can read what others are saying and give their own opinions on important Lafayette topics. City leaders will take into consideration these comments and responses as they make their decisions.

In this age of social media, Falk said that this tool, run by Peak Democracy, a nonpartisan company whose mission is to broaden civic engagement and build public trust in government, will be a great alternative to other social media platforms out there such as Nextdoor, which has several drawbacks including its divisions by neighborhoods, distracting advertising and an extreme range of conversation threads from dogs barking to babysitter recommendations.

Falk has high hopes that this platform will become a focal point for people registering their thoughts and he urged city council members to check the site frequently. "I know that Lafayette residents are super smart and super engaged," he said, "But they won't embrace this tool if they feel like it's not substantive and if it doesn't register with the council. We need a commitment to have real questions, even if they are 'sticky,' on the website."

Falk suggested the possibility of making periodic presentations at the council meetings to keep council members aware of opinions being shared. City Council Member Cam Burks concurred. "I heartily agree we have to demonstrate that we are receiving the input, open to the input and maybe agendaizing topics." Lafayette Listens allows only one comment per topic from each computer, preventing residents from hijacking a subject and posting multiple comments. Falk drew attention to sophisticated civility filters, taking out foul language.

The forum is intuitive to navigate and can be reached simply by typing Lafayette Listens into the browser. It is also accessible from the home page of the city website at www.lovelafayette.org.

For now there are six topics available, from the question of whether the city should own or rent its city offices to the topic of how well residents think the new roundabout is working. Users are directed to offer opinions through polls, surveys and other interactive media.

With in excess of 260 registered responses within the first 10 days of going live, it looks like this is going to be a useful new way of encouraging feedback and engaging residents on local issues.

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