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CITY COUNCIL AGENDA ITEM

ACTION REQUESTED:

Provide direction regarding youth commission/council/task force.

DEPARTMENT: Mayor's Office

SUBMITTED BY: Miranda Barfuss, Assistant to City Council

BOARD/COMMISSION REVIEW: Not required

BACKGROUND:

Noting the significant numbers of youth involved in local protests, the City Council discussed the concept of forming a youth commission/council/task force at their June 2, 2020 meeting. The Council requested staff research and report on the concept of forming a youth commission/council/task force at their June 16, 2020 meeting.

The City of Naperville currently invites high school student representation for 33 positions on existing boards and commissions. Students representatives must be a Naperville resident, enrolled in a local high school and preference is given to high school seniors; however, all high school students may apply. Student representatives on our existing boards and commissions do not have voting power, nor are they considered to be a member of a board or commission as it relates to vote counts or quorum requirements.

DISCUSSION:

Staff has researched area youth councils and others across the nation, as well as best practice research documents produced by the National League of Cities and National Civic League on engaging youth in municipal governments.

Models

Models vary by municipality; however, four main models are summarized below:

- 1) Youth Academy- a year program for high school youth that focuses monthly meetings on a specific topic and features guest speakers and interactive sessions (e.g. About the City, Strategic Planning, City Budgeting, Non-Profits, Economic Development, Civic Engagement, Lobbying, Safety and Security in the Community, My Future in Municipal Government). This model is similar to the previous Citizens Academy.
- 2) Youth/Adult Commission- these commissions have youth members and adult members and can include members from the school district, park district, library and other entities seeking to provide a forum for public discussion of topics related to activities of youth. Meetings are public facing, subject to the open meetings act with public comment, formal motions, etc. The commissions are subject to certain powers and duties, meeting quorum requirements, publishing agenda/minutes for each meeting and included in the municipal code.
- 3) Youth Commission- these commissions are comprised of only youth. Meetings are public facing, subject to the open meetings act with public comment, formal motions, etc. The commissions are subject to certain powers and duties, meeting quorum requirements, publishing agenda/minutes for each meeting and included in the municipal code.
- 4) Youth Advisory Council-these councils are comprised of only youth but are not included in the municipal code or subject to open meetings act. The arrangement is similar our city's Task Forces.

Purpose

Stated goals and purposes for each group vary, but all have the following in common:

- 1) Leadership development for youth
- 2) Promoting civic engagement for youth
- 3) Sharing input to improve the City for youth

Attachment 1 outlines the goals of youth councils from communities across the country. Staff interviewed from these groups highlight that the groups have helped the municipality intentionally engage with youth to better understand their needs as a demographic. The groups have also provided an avenue for youth to bring issues to the municipal government. The application process for all of these groups asks for applicant commentary on issues important to them and their peers at the time of application. In this way, the youth involved in the groups can drive their own agenda items and discussion on issues important to them. This provides an important distinction from our current student roles on existing boards and commissions. The groups strive to be youth-led and youth-driven.

Each year new projects present themselves and yearly goals can change. Topics taken up by these youth councils have included: clean water projects, e-cigarette usage, organizing a Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration, conducting youth surveys, creating a video about the achievement gap, etc. These groups have a small budget, or access to funding, to implement projects.

Structure

Size of the groups vary and (with the exception of one that goes up to age 21) defines eligible youth

as those who are in high school, age 14-18, within the corporate boundaries of the municipality. Each council involves an application and parental permission. Some applications also require an additional adult recommendation. All require a written answer to questions asking what the applicant believes are the most important issues facing youth in the community and a written personal statement of interest.

Two groups (Columbia and Topeka) utilize an election process through the schools to select members, while the other groups have staff and youth members review and select applicants who are then appointed by the Mayor or City Council. The groups are staffed by 1-2 City staff members and several groups utilize adult volunteers who are appointed as well.

Attachment 2 outlines the structures of the groups surveyed.

Other Considerations

Best practice articles express concern for ensuring the youth group exhibits diversity and inclusion and accurately represents the youth of the municipality. It is important to be aware of the tendency to only appoint high achievers to the group.

Best practices and the groups interviewed emphasize that the staff liaisons who work with the youth members should have experience and passion for working with youth. Unlike other boards and commissions of the municipality, the leadership and personal development of the youth participants is a primary function of the group. This means that a goal-setting process with the youth participants and sensitivity/skills in working with youth are important.

Youth input into the formation of a youth council should be considered at the outset. While initiating the groups typically is an action of adult elected officials or city staff, the first years of the group should have authentic youth engagement to drive the process.

Challenges these groups identified in interviews include (1) lack of direction for the group (2) varying degree of participation from students (3) moving student-led ideas to student-led action often requires staff to drive progress forward.

CITY COUNCIL INPUT:

We are seeking additional feedback from City Council on the scope and structure of the group. Staff recommends a more flexible structure overall with an effort to ensure that we are leveraging, not duplicating, efforts of other organizations within the community. Advancement of any of the models or a combination of the models, to form a group will not detract from, or overlap, with the existing student roles on our Boards and Commissions but can serve as an additional meaningful expansion of authentic youth engagement in the City of Naperville.

We understand the primary goal of a youth council or commission is for the forum to elevate perspectives, conversations and concerns of Naperville's youth. Staff is requesting feedback on additional goals and outcomes desired by the City Council for such a group. Incorporating this feedback, staff will create a proposed plan for City Council's consideration at an upcoming meeting.