

Big Lake BR&E Visitation Program Case Study

Project: Improvement of City Communications and Responsiveness to Business

Background

In 2006, the Big Lake BR&E Task Force interviewed 40 local businesses to survey their perception on the community's strength and weaknesses. Four priority projects were identified to address the issues learned during the interviews:

1. Pursue workforce development strategies that a) retain and motivate young potential employees in Big Lake, and b) inform businesses of workforce attributes to aid recruitment
2. Form a Business Roundtable
3. Improve cultural and recreational opportunities by creating a "Passport" program for area residents and visitors
4. Strive to serve as a resource to the City of Big Lake Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Committee

Also identified was a need for an effort to improve overall City communications and responsiveness to the needs and issues of businesses located in Big Lake or those who interact with City employees in the City.

Each project had a team of individuals that worked together to develop and accomplish the project. This case study focuses on the "Improvement of City Communications and Responsiveness to Business".

The Project

The Improvement of City Communications and Responsiveness to Business was selected as a neo-project based on the number of businesses who indicated concerns of City responsiveness to their needs along with perceived or

experienced communication issues and customer service deficits by City staff and or officials. The BR&E task force asked City staff how the issues could be addressed and/or improved upon. Specifically, the following items were identified and addressed by this project:

1. City Hall front desk customer service issues
2. Zoning Code clarification/simplification
3. Sign Code changes and clarification
4. Development Review Process
5. City Development/permit fees
6. Poorly organized/under-utilized City website
7. City Sidewalk Policy issues

Challenges

The main challenges were in identifying reasonable adjustments in City Development tools, resources, review processes and/or practices and implementing the changes in a timely manner. This included interviewing, contracting with and scheduling a consultant to conduct a training workshop for City staff on Customer Service. It also included the RFP process to contract with a web design organization to implement a more user-friendly website design.

Resources

City staff time and job or task specific contractors were the main resources used to address issues identified by this project.

Results

The results of the project were that the City of Big Lake made several significant adjustments to its development review process, polices and/or public development resources. They are as follows:

1. A contractor was hired to present a 4-hour Customer Service Training workshop. It was held in City Hall and all City Departments (except public safety; police and fire) had employees attend and participate in the training.
2. Following an RFP process, a contractor was hired to implement a new City website platform and design that was more user-friendly to the public and staff charged with maintaining it.
3. The City altered its Planning Commission meeting schedule and implanted a shorter review schedule ultimately speeding up the process by approximately 10 to 14 days.
4. The City revised its fee schedule and reduced review fees for several applications. The escrow accounts were eliminated for all but two applications (environmental reviews and pre-plats).
5. Several zoning and building code handouts were changed making them more understandable.
6. The City sidewalk policy was reviewed and it was recommended no changes be made at this time.
7. The sign code is under a review by City staff and consultants with the idea of addressing electronic signage and off-site signs opportunities and/or issues in the City of Big Lake.

Some of the activities noted above are still a work in progress and the end results of the changes may not be known for sometime.