# 2011 Annual Awards Program

## Program Excellence Awards Nomination Form

## Deadline for Nominations: March 11, 2011

Complete this form (sections 1 and 2) and submit with your descriptive narrative.

### SECTION 1: Information About the Nominated Program

Program Excellence Award Category *(select only one)*:

Community Health and Safety

Community Partnership

Community Sustainability

Strategic Leadership and Governance

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name of program being nominated: | COMPREHENSIVE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM | | |
| Jurisdiction(s) where program originated: | City of Windsor Heights, Iowa | | |
| Jurisdiction population(s): | 4,860 | | |
| Please indicate the month and year in which the program you are nominating was fully implemented. (Note: All Program Excellence Award nominations must have been fully implemented by or before January 31, 2010, to be eligible. The start date should not include the initial planning phase.) | | | |
| Month: | November | Year: | 2000 |
| Name(s) and title(s) of individual(s) who should receive recognition for this award at the ICMA Annual Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, September 2011. (Each individual listed MUST be an ICMA member to be recognized.): | | | |
| Name: | Marketa Oliver | | |
| Title: | City Administrator | Jurisdiction: | City of Windsor Heights |
| Name: | Josh Heggen | | |
| Title: | Community Services Director | Jurisdiction: | City of Windsor Heights |
| Name: |  | | |
| Title: |  | Jurisdiction: |  |

### SECTION 2: Information About the Nominator/Primary Contact

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name of contact: | Marketa Oliver | | |
| Title: | City Administrator | Jurisdiction: | City of Windsor Heights |
| Street address: | 1133 66th Street | | |
| City: | Windsor Heights | State/Province: | Ia |
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CITY OF WINDSOR HEIGHTS COMPREHENSIVE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM

1. **Problem assessment.**

The City began to develop and implement a comprehensive citizen engagement program in late 2000. The purpose of the program was to address several problem areas. The City Council felt as if the communication between the City and the citizens was not good enough, not timely and too infrequent. They also were concerned about the loss of volunteers, because the same people volunteered for many years on a number of the City’s committees, boards and commissions and, like many communities, Windsor Heights’ volunteers were experiencing burn out. Citizens complained about what they felt was a lack of timely information. In addition, the way people communicated with each other and the city has changed from a community where everyone had the local newspaper to a community with few newspaper subscriptions, but yet people still expect to know what is going on. Additionally, the City was split by the lack of a common zip code and between two school districts. Council and staff decided they needed to create a systematic and comprehensive effort to educate, engage and inspire citizens about issues, opportunities and events. The goal was to educate people about the history and background of issues being considered, engage them in finding solutions to problems and inspire them to be involved and volunteer.

The Council decided to undertake activities to improve the frequency, quality and timeliness of communications with the citizenry. Further, the Council’s goal was to engage citizens in their local government and its planning efforts and educate the community about the City’s accomplishments and goals. Also, the Council wanted to put in place some efforts to cultivate volunteers and use current volunteers more effectively. Finally, the goal was to become more efficient in tracking and responding to citizen complaints. To recap, the Comprehensive Citizen Engagement Program was designed to:

* + Improve communications (frequency, quality, and timeliness);
  + Engage citizens in their local government and planning efforts;
  + Educate community members about the City’s goals and accomplishments; and
  + Cultivate volunteers and use them more effectively.

1. **Program implementation and costs.**

In November, 2000, the Council, City Administrator and Department heads brainstormed a variety of ideas to accomplish the aforementioned goals. In January, 2001, the initial elements of the plan were put in place. First, the City created a listserve for anyone interested in receiving the City’s press releases, meeting agendas and minutes. This addressed several of the aspects of improving communications. First, it was a way of reaching more citizens. People who would not be interested in receiving the information in the mail were interested in receiving it via e-mail. It was also a more timely way of providing them the information. Since that time, the listserve has transformed into a weekly email newsletter, called the Windsor Wave, with the tagline of “Pass it on…*Wave* to a friend.”

Next, the City established focused areas of communication. At the time, the City was undertaking a major infrastructure improvement project, which involved the reconstruction of the main thoroughfare.

In September of 2001, the City hired a staff person, one of whose primary responsibilities was to update and overhaul the City’s website. The development and refinement of the City’s website is an on-going process, but prior to having the staff person on board, the website had been handled by a volunteer and information was six or more months outdated. There was also a limited amount of information available on it. By January, 2002, the site had been overhauled and dramatically expanded. In 2007, the City began hosting the entire council packet, the entire budget, and other financial documents on the site. In 2008, the City expanded into new media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Windsor Heights was one of the first cities in the Des Moines Metro and Iowa to have a Facebook and Twitter accounts and continues to use both for up-to-the-minute news and to advertise best practices, upcoming recreational opportunities, traffic alerts, etc.

In March 2002, the City began publishing its community newsletter on a monthly, instead of quarterly, basis. The quarterly newsletter was ineffective and did not contain any timely information. The monthly newsletter is designed to have a calendar that can be torn off and kept which has important City dates on it, as well as dates of interest from the three schools in the area. Because the monthly newsletter was going to come as an insert to the City’s water bill, which was a change from the direct mailing, the City advertised the change through the listserve, articles in civic group and church newsletters and information sent out to parents from the schools. In 2008, the city expanded its newsletter to come out twice monthly. A private publishing company sends out a magazine called *Windsor Heights Living*, which also includes a two page newsletter. This was an important step towards reaching even more citizens. Previously, people living in apartments or businesses that do not have their own water bill would not receive our newsletter. In addition, more and more people are going paperless for their water bill, further decreasing our newsletter infiltration into the city. Now, with the second monthly newsletter, we guarantee the city’s message reaches every home and business.

In October, 2002, the City held its first annual Open House. The purpose of the event was to showcase some of the capital improvements to the City’s “Town Center” and some physical improvements made to City Hall. This was also part of the effort to improve the frequency and quality of communications, educate citizens and cultivate volunteers. It is so common that when people deal with government, they are paying a bill or being pulled over by a police officer. So often they are dealing with representatives of government during times of frustration or crises. The Open House was an opportunity to interact with people in a positive, relaxed environment. Displays were set up around City Hall with information about the budget, upcoming capital projects, the City’s goals and accomplishments and volunteer opportunities. There were also hands-on activities such as, “Stop, Drop and Roll” and other things for kids to do. There was a jaws of life demonstration. In an effort to build on this success, the City founded an annual, family-oriented, Fall event. In fact, the City has built on this ‘open house’ concept to expand to offer several city wide special events every quarter. These events include the Windsor Heights Annual Mini Marathon, July 4th Celebration, Oktoberfest and Windsor Wonderland. These events are typically free; include live music and inflatable games and rides for kids. Every year these events grow in popularity and attendance. The July 4th festivities attract approximately 5,000 people annually – more than the population of Windsor Heights.

In October, 2005, the City launched the “Community Coffee Club.” One Saturday per month, the City Administrator and a Council Member invites citizens to join them for coffee at a local coffee shop. It provides another change to support citizens’ desire to keep themselves current on community events. Citizens are encouraged to stop by and ask questions about any subject they like. It is also a good venue for people who are intimidated to stand at the dais and speak in front of people at a council meeting.

In 2008 the council started the “Takin it to the Streets” program. This involves holding council meetings literally on the street, that are then followed up with a meet-your-neighbor reception. Every year staff selects three or 4 different locations in the city to hold a council meeting. Sights are general selected based on future capital improvement project locations to inform citizens about projects that will be going on in their neighborhood. The City has seen an increase in the variety of people who now attend council meetings after beginning this program.

Included as part of the overall Citizen Engagement Program is the cultivation of volunteers. In order to cultivate future volunteers, it is important appreciate current volunteers. The City has begun some active volunteer appreciation, such as sending thank you notes and Iowa Cubs tickets to volunteers. The City has also held periodic Volunteer Appreciation Lunches in conjunction with national volunteer appreciate week. The City maintains a database of people willing to volunteer. When a general call for volunteers went out recently to serve on an Ad-Hoc Streetscaping Committee was placed in the newsletter, the City immediately had 25+ interested parties.

Another piece of the Comprehensive Citizen Engagement Program was to create an Ad-Hoc Marketing Committee, who then would develop a comprehensive marketing plan, which would likely touch on communications with citizens, other people in the metropolitan area and businesses. The Committee was appointed in August, 2002 and has developed a plan and recommendations which were presented to the City Council in April 2003. One of the primary goals of the plan to secure a new zip code for the Community. On June 26, 2008, after ten years of trying to secure a unique zip code to unify the community and after undertaking every effort, including federal legislation, the City was thrilled to announce the 50324 zip code. This zip code took effect July 1, 2009 and enabled the development of the Windsor Heights’ Living magazine, which is delivered to every home and business in Windsor Heights and contains one of the City’s two newsletters. The Marketing Committee has again recently been reinstated to review the original marketing plan to incorporate further changes in the way our city operates.

In 2009, the City began using robo calling. This enables us to use phone numbers from voting records to inform people about spring clean up days or special yard waste collection after a storm. Also in 2009, for the 2010 calendar year, the City partnered with the Chamber of Commerce and local civic organizations to develop a calendar that lists all of the organizations’ meetings and events in one place, which was then distributed to each home in Windsor Heights. The calendar (which was also done in 2010 for the 2011 calendar year) was distributed by the Boy Scouts and has been very well received. Additionally, the City engaged a “Community Greetings” representative who visits newcomers and brings them a calendar and special business offers when they move into the community.

The City also has developed a citizen survey, which we plan to do every other year to improve communications coming from the citizenry. The survey will expand next year (2012) to now involved a nationally known survey company so the city can not only view how our citizens see our city and our services, but can be compared to other similar cities in the metro and nationwide.

To recap, the Comprehensive Citizen Engagement Program has had the following measurable outcomes:

* + Communications (frequency, quality, and timeliness) improved by:
    1. Creating listserve;
    2. Focused communication groups created;
    3. Website overhauled and updated;
    4. Use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter;
    5. Newsletter published two times per month instead of quarterly basis and distributed via different methods;
    6. “Takin’ It To The Streets” program;
    7. Community Coffee Club;
    8. Robo calling;
    9. Creation of an electronic newsletter
    10. Citizen surveying;
  + Citizens engaged in their local government and planning efforts by:
    1. Forming Ad-Hoc Streetscape Committee;
    2. Forming Ad-Hoc Marketing Committee.
  + Community members educated about the City’s goals and accomplishments by:
    1. Holding an Open House, which was attended by 250 people and kicked off expansion of special events;
    2. Community Events expanded drawing thousands of people annually;
    3. Improved communications (see above.)
  + Volunteers cultivated and used more effectively by:
    1. Engaging citizens in planning efforts (see above);
    2. Showcasing volunteer opportunities at special events;
    3. Showcasing opportunities and soliciting volunteers in the citizen survey;
    4. Appreciation efforts.

The costs of the program vary widely. The expansion of special events initially added $10,000 to the special events budget, but $5-7,000 of those costs are offset by local business support of the events. The Takin’ It To The Streets Program costs approximately $100 per year and the Community Coffee Club also costs less than $100 per year. The robo calling that was implemented costs $.06 per successful call. The Community Greetings costs approximately $100 per year, plus materials. The Community Calendar is $2,000 per year. The use of social media is simply handled by current staff as part of their normal duties. The electronic newsletter was created simultaneously with a blog section on the City’s website and programming costs were approximately $2,500. The newsletter was set up using a format that a current staff person was trained to use and on-going costs are $15 per month for the software subscription. Between the City’s two newsletters, costs are $13,440 annually.

1. **Tangible results or measurable outcomes of the program**

The outcome of the overall effort is measured by participation in events, council meeting and usage of the newsletter. There are 281 people who receive the “Windsor Wave”. Through the software, we are able to track how many people open it and which sections they read.

The Community Coffee Club has had more than 300 people visit informally with staff and elected officials since its inception. The introduction of the Windsor Heights Living Magazine means that the City’s message is delivered to every home and business on a monthly basis. The “Takin’ It to The Streets” program has typically draws 10-15 people at each meeting who have never been to a council meeting previously. One citizen was so excited about the meeting in front of his house, he uploaded a video to YouTube about it. (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7pfMFj7WB8> for a video made by a citizen.) This is a terrific way to reach out to people as well as cultivate new volunteers.

1. **Lessons learned during planning, implementation, and analysis of the program.** As always, City staff and Council learned that doing things because it was the way they had always been done or doing things simply because they had always been done is rarely or never a good reason for doing something. In fact, it seems that in communications, the more creative the better. There are some elements of the Comprehensive Citizen Engagement Program that are not yet in place, such as increasing recreational programming and issuing an annual report to the community. The annual report is currently being brainstormed and we have had some amazingly creative ideas.

Probably the most important less learned is that in real estate, the emphasis is “Location! Location! Location!” In government, the key to success is “Communications! Communications! Communications!” The Comprehensive Citizen Engagement Program has altered the way we lead. It is a much more participatory process and brings out many more ideas. Additionally, even if the City Council is in a position where it has to make tough choices on programs or budgets, citizens are much more likely to understand the issue and be part of the solution because of the City’s efforts and expansion of communications over the past decade designed to educate, engage and inspire.