



WESTLAKE
INDOWS

TGIF

TRANSPARENT GOVERNMENT IN FOCUS

**2012 International City/County Management
Association
Community Sustainability Award**

**Town of Westlake – Population 992
Communication Programs**

Project Description

“Westlake Windows: TGIF!”

(Transparent Government in Focus)

This initiative includes: a quarterly Town newsletter, conducting citizen surveys, regularly using “email blasts” and “voice shots”, continuously updating the Town’s web site, holding neighborhood meetings, placing agenda packets on-line, and using web based videos on “Westlake e-Tube”, all to promote a sense of community through enhanced communication as it pertains to cultural events, economic concerns and governmental policy at the local level.



TOWN OF WESTLAKE, TEXAS

Contents

❖ Project Summary.....	2
❖ Westlake Wire.....	3
❖ DirectionFinder Survey	4
❖ Web Site, “Email Blasts” and “Voice Shot”	4
❖ Neighborhood Meetings	5
❖ Westlake e-Tube	5
❖ Benefits & Quality of Life Improvements.....	6

❖ Project Summary

Project Need: At first glance, Westlake, Texas may seem small. However, the Town has experienced a 380% percent increase in residential growth over the last ten (10) years ~ from 207 to 992 today! Also, many Fortune 500 and international companies have made Westlake their home such as Deloitte, First American Real Estates Services, Inc., Wells Fargo, McKesson Corporation, Sonitrol, Walco International, Pfizer, Inc. and many more.

It became apparent that along with the growth in population, a need existed to develop methods to communicate with Town residents and businesses in new and more effective ways. Westlake has always been a community of individuals who promote social engagement through personal relationships and provide local government services with an eye toward fiscal conservatism. As the town grew we began to face tough questions regarding our future sustainability both financially and socially as a community.

Glaring evidence of this communication need was realized when we began to discuss the possibility of implementing an ad valorem property tax. Throughout our history, the Town has provided basic services to our residences through a single funding source of the sales and use tax rather than through a multi-faceted base comprised of the sales tax and ad valorem property tax assessment. The introduction of this proposal became a fracturing event for our residents – with divisions into groups for and against the property tax and some who even favored dissolving the local government entirely. In an effort to preserve our community and provide for the long term financial sustainability of our municipality, the elected officials and staff developed a project to enhance our ability to reach out to our residents and maintain the small-town sense of community our residents valued. This project, “*Westlake Windows: TGIF!*” (Transparent Government In Focus) became a strategic priority for the Town Council.

How the Goal was Accomplished: *Westlake Windows: TGIF!* is multi-dimensional. The program was developed to achieve several goals: **foster excellence in our outreach** - as people prefer to receive information and discuss community events in a variety of forums; **innovation at the local government level** - through video messages from the Mayor and on relevant topics such as water conservation; **enhancement through community involvement** - gatherings were held in homes around Westlake to inform our residents about major projects; **sustainability in financial sources** – to educate our residents on our long term financial outlook and efforts to be fiscally solvent.

The communication processes developed for the goals were diverse: we developed a quarterly newsletter, incorporated a survey to understand the services our community valued, updated our website to serve as a comprehensive web portal, implemented ‘voice shots’ and ‘email blasts’ to provide prompt and timely local news, held neighborhood meetings, and produced video spots for *Westlake e-tube*.

❖ The Westlake Wire

This newsletter, published quarterly, began in August, 2008 in order to provide Westlake residents comprehensive and current information about the various facets of their Town government and services. As our community has grown over the past several years, many new residents didn’t even know where Town Hall was located – let alone the names and faces of the individuals who provided the services. Our founding families (who served as long-time elected officials) had instilled the value of maintaining the ‘small town feel’ for our community and the implementation of the newsletter was one avenue to reach out to those new residents and maintain our social ties to one another. The cost was minimal as we handled the publication internally with existing staff members.



DirectionFinder Survey

In April of 2009, the Town retained ETC Institute to conduct its first *DirectionsFinders* citizen survey to gauge overall satisfaction with Town services, as well as their rating of Westlake as a place to live and work. The influx of new residents had left council and staff in a position of needing to gather information on how citizens felt the community was doing and what services they valued for the future. We also asked for their feedback on the implementation of the ad valorem property tax and received mixed results. Some residents wanted to increase the level of service through the tax assessment while others preferred to eliminate the town government and the associated staff. These survey results were placed on the Town's web site and shared with the public and they are updated on an annual basis as new surveys are conducted. (Annual cost = \$ 8,700)

❖ Web Site, “Email Blasts” and “Voice (telephone) Shots”

A key advantage of being a small community population-wise is it affords the Town the opportunity to use technology to communicate directly with residents on a real time basis. The “email blast” component was implemented to remind residents of public meetings, community events, Council agendas, zoning hearings, or the latest update on the Town's web site. These “email blasts” are sent to every resident or business owner who maintains their email address with the Town and often contains a link to the Town's web site where recipients can get more information on a particular topic. “Voice shots”, while generally reserved for high profile events or projects, are also sent to Town residents regularly using a phone bank maintained by the Town. The associated cost for these components was also minimal as we assigned the job duties to existing staff members.

The Town consistently updates its website and imbeds website links in email blasts in order to direct residents to detailed information about a wide variety of topics including major meetings, Town projects, initiatives, ordinances, and events. The Town has even created a page for its website devoted to the Westlake Windows: TGIF! initiative.

❖ Neighborhood Meetings

In the fall of 2007, the Town began holding neighborhood meetings in each of its neighborhoods as well as within its business community. These meetings involve finding a host family in each of the neighborhoods who agree to open their home to the community and hold the meeting at their house. The Town and the neighborhood share in the cost of food and refreshments (less than \$500 per gathering) and the Town mails each resident a personal invitation to their neighborhood meeting. Response has been overwhelming with attendance averaging 35-40 residents per neighborhood meeting. In addition, this forum was one of the forums that we used to convey our message on the necessity of the property tax in order to secure our long-term financial well being. While not all residents were in favor of the adoption of the tax, they were given the ability to attend a meeting with staff members and elected officials to voice their opinion in an open and accessible manner.

As Mayor Wheat noted in an edition of the *Westlake Wire*, *“At each meeting, I saw community in action. We didn’t always agree, but in our disagreement we listened to one another, respected our divergent opinions, remained committed to constructive dialog and clearly shared the ultimate objective of moving our Town forward in a positive fashion.”*



❖ Westlake e-Tube

Being a smaller community, Westlake is not large enough to have its own municipal cable TV channel for public information purposes however, the Town recently began *Westlake e-Tube* using web based videos. Now, new and old residents can access videos on a variety of Town related topics from their home computers. These videos were used to convey the Mayor’s welcome message and provide a general overview of our community. (Video costs = \$7,750)



❖ Benefits & Quality of Life Improvements

The entire focus and beneficiary of *Westlake Windows: TGIF!* has been the Town's residents and businesses. Each section and communication piece is aimed at involving our residents and business partners who work with the local government to make our Town a one-of-a-kind community and provide for our long term financial and community health.

As mentioned we have had positive feedback on our efforts. According to the Town's *DirectionFinders* surveys, 74% of Town residents are satisfied with the efforts to keep them informed. And during the time the ad valorem property tax was discussed at our neighborhood meetings, an overwhelming 91% felt the gatherings were informative and 84% felt they had the opportunity to discuss their ideas/concerns.

The programs have increased our level of attendance at board meetings, has fostered individual relationships with residents, introduced our staff members at neighborhood meetings and promoted the key components of the ICMA core beliefs of representative democracy, high standards of honesty and integrity, professional management in local government, and preservation of the council-manager form of government in our community and therefore makes the system an ideal candidate for the award.

We have learned that the key to community engagement and support is through information sharing and involvement of our residents. For a small town municipal organization, a variety of measures can be implemented with little to no cost that will make great strides toward providing all residents with a 'voice' in the future sustainability efforts of the Town. The Town of Westlake believes that a well informed and engaged citizenry is foundational to having a sense of community and effective local government. *Westlake Windows: TGIF!* can only enhance citizens' experiences in

Westlake- "A Premier Knowledge Based Community".

