



Council Meeting: September 29, 2009

SUBJECT: Revisiting the Definition of a “Study Issue”

BACKGROUND

The study issues process, one of the original components of the City’s Planning and Management System (PAMS), has been utilized since the late 1970s and provides both City Council and City staff with a valuable planning and management tool.

A study issue is currently defined as any topic of concern that may result in a new or revised City policy. Potential study issue topics can include proposed ordinances, new programs, and the examination of potential new policies or revisions to existing policies that have been established by City Council.

The study issues process is an integral part of the City’s PAMS, linking long-range strategic planning and short-range action planning. It provides a structured approach for addressing the large number of policy issues that are raised each year. With limited exceptions, such as emergency, safety-related, or legally mandated--- those that must be completed in the short term to avoid serious negative consequences to the City--Council currently reviews all study issues once a year at the Study Issues Workshop. This allows Council to separate those issues supported by a minority of the Council from those championed by the majority, and ensures that resources are spent only on those issues deemed most important when ranked in comparison to all other issues. That is, it prevents the natural tendency to expend limited resources at the beginning of the year on issues that may have seemed important when they were first raised, but that may not seem *as* important when weighed against all other issues developing later in the year. This process is very analogous to the City’s budget process, which seeks to prevent “spot-budgeting” throughout the year in favor of allocating resources only after analyzing all possible expenditure options.

Current Council policy (RTC 08-180) states that all policy issues are subject to the study issues process (i.e. they are collected during the year for evaluation and ranking at the Council Study Issues Workshop). This report recommends for Council’s consideration a revision to that policy.

EXISTING POLICY

Council Policy 7.3.26 Study Issues Process Selection of Issues for Study: any substantive policy change (large or relatively small) is subject to the study issues process (i.e. evaluated for ranking at the Council Study Issues Workshop). Policy related issues include such items as proposed ordinances, new or expanded service delivery programs, changes to existing Council policy, and/or amendments to the General Plan. Exceptions to this approach include emergency issues, and urgent policy issues that must be completed in the short term to avoid serious negative consequences to the City, subject to a majority vote of Council.

DISCUSSION

The study issues process has proven to be an effective tool for identifying, prioritizing and analyzing complex policy issues, but has caused some to question whether it is an efficient way to deal with policy issues that do not require extensive, resource-intensive study.

Current Practice

All policy issues are treated similarly, and in accordance with the study issues process. This means that every policy issue, regardless of scope, results in the creation of a “study issue paper” which is presented to Council at the beginning of the subsequent calendar year with all other study issue papers for ranking. Issues identified at the beginning of calendar year x, therefore, will wait until the beginning of calendar year y to be ranked, and (if ranked high enough by Council) will likely result in a completed study and policy action by Council prior to the end of calendar year y. The study issues process addresses the inherently difficult process of choosing which policy issues to study, given potentially competing priorities and limited resources.

One of the pros of this process is that it does not allow “spot policy studies” to interrupt the delivery of day to day services to the community. Rather, following Council’s ranking of all issues, it allows the city manager, in consultation with department directors and in light of limited time and resources, to schedule the examination of issues so the workload does not interfere with the day to day delivery of City services at levels set by Council. One of the cons, however, is that it precludes the efficient handling of issues that require only limited study and are relatively easy to implement.

An Option

One option to consider would be to provide the city manager with the flexibility to determine, at the time an issue was initially proposed, whether or not it warranted “study issue” status. That is, allow the city manager to identify any issue that he felt could be addressed outside the study issues process. This was, in fact, the practice for many years following the creation of the study issues process. It was not uncommon for the city manager to indicate that an

issue proposed by a councilmember did not warrant "study issue" status, but rather would be pursued outside that framework.

Each proposed issue is unique in terms of the resources it will require--this Report to Council is itself a good example of a proposed revision to a Council policy which, if processed through the normal study issues process would not even come to Council for ranking for another half a year. Yet the development of this report was a relatively simple undertaking which the city manager felt could be accomplished at no detriment to ongoing service delivery.

Selecting this option would allow the occasional completion of less-involved policy revisions in a more efficient manner. It would also leave open the option for Council to determine that more extensive study was warranted with regard to any particular issue, including this one (see Alternative 3 below).

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact resulting from this report.

PUBLIC CONTACT

Public contact was made by posting the Council agenda on the City's official-notice bulletin board outside City Hall, at the Sunnyvale Senior Center, Community Center and Department of Public Safety; and by making the agenda and report available at the Sunnyvale Public Library, the Office of the City Clerk and on the City's Web site.

ALTERNATIVES

1. Maintain existing policy: treat all proposed policy issues in accordance with the study issues process.
2. Reinstate the original concept behind the creation of the study issues process – defer prioritization of complex study issues until the annual workshop, thereby allocating staff resources after discussion and ranking of all complex issues – and defer to the city manager in determining what may be addressed outside of the study issues process.
3. Refer this matter to the study issues process. Other action as directed by Council.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends Alternative 2:

Reinstate the original concept behind the creation of the study issues process – defer prioritization of complex study issues until the annual workshop, thereby allocating staff resources after discussion and ranking of all complex issues – and defer to the city manager in determining what may be addressed outside of the study issue process.

This option could enable some "very limited resource" policy issues, such as the policy action being recommended by staff via this RTC, to be completed without being subject to the delays of the study process.

This alternative would also help to distinguish between those issues which are under Council's purview and those which are administrative and under the control of the city manager. It will reaffirm the authority of the city manager to set parameters for those policy issues which can be dealt with outside of the study issues process.

This alternative could also further the previous efforts of Council to reduce the number of issues brought for consideration at the Study Issues Workshop.

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