



City of Dayton Listening Tour Summary Report

City Manager Timothy H. Riordan
September 15, 2010





Between June 3 and August 10, I conducted 31 meetings with various groups of residents, community and business leaders, and City of Dayton employees as part of a community-wide “Listening Tour.” I appreciate the City Commission’s willingness to join me for many of these meetings to hear first-hand the ideas, suggestions and concerns of our customers as we seek more comprehensive solutions to our difficult budget challenges. I also want to thank the hundreds of citizens who took time out of their day to endure sometimes hot or crowded conditions to listen to our presentation and offer their thoughts.

I am pleased to say that the meetings succeeded beyond simply serving as a forum for budget discussions. The Listening Tour also spurred talk about related government practices, like enhancing customer service interactions, improving some operational efficiencies, and positioning Dayton for future growth. More than anything, the Listening Tour reaffirmed Dayton’s reputation as a community with active and informed residents who are passionate about the city’s success. While neighborhoods across the city each have their own distinct personalities, the unifying thread is their commitment to help Dayton weather these difficult economic times. Most people understand the financial challenges before us, and they respect the City’s ongoing efforts to meet those demands. They also realize there are no simple answers to the issues we face, and they accept the fact that tough decisions lie ahead.

The following information summarizes what I heard and learned from the 31 Listening Tour stops and from the subsequent budget ideas that were submitted to my office.

1. Things We Need to Fix

A concern raised frequently during the meetings focused on the quality of City services. These concerns ranged from customer service

weaknesses to specific operational issues. Below are some items that need to be fixed.

Telephone Answering – Citizens commented about the quality of getting a good answer from City Hall. More often than not, this related to how promptly the phone is answered and the quality of the response afterward.

■ **Public Works Call Center.** The 333-4800 Public Works Call Center number that responds to calls about bulk waste, waste collection, recycling and other such problems has been too slow. I have already initiated changes to reduce the wait time for our customers, with the ultimate goal of it averaging less than two minutes.

■ **Water Revenue.** Depending on the day of the week, the response time for phone calls to our Water Revenue office concerning water bills is slow. We will establish a target goal of under two minutes for this heavily-used service.

■ **Other telephone calls.** Customers shared stories about not receiving a timely response to phone calls they placed with City employees. Such delays can occur for many valid reasons. Even so, the City organization currently lacks any guidelines or standards for how quickly customer calls should be returned, whether one hour, 24 hours, or one week. We will establish a benchmark for City employees to achieve in this area.

On a related note, callers also recounted instances when they were transferred two or more times before reaching their preferred destination. With an organization as large and diverse as the City of Dayton, such transfers are bound to occur. However, we can do a better job of educating and training our employees to direct customers to the right office more efficiently.



Bill Collection – Citizens expect people who do not pay their bills or have outstanding fines to face consequences, either through increased financial penalties or legal action. The City of Dayton has already taken recent steps to more aggressively collect these funds. Our goal is to pursue additional efforts as well:

■ **Red Light Cameras.** The City of Dayton recently initiated a more aggressive enforcement of unpaid red light violations by taking excessive violators to court. We are also looking at taking additional action against violators, such as “booting” or towing vehicles until payments are made.

■ **Property Taxes.** Listening Tour participants understood the consequences that unpaid property taxes have throughout the community, affecting more than just government operations. The home foreclosure crisis has aggravated the situation. Dayton has taken steps to help identify absentee property owners and apply pressure to collect outstanding payments. Housing Inspector John Carter’s efforts in this area previously earned a national award, and we are using the REAP process for our “Lot Links” program to gain control of properties that might be re-used by neighbors or other investors. We will continue to work in concert with Montgomery County to deal with this issue.

■ **Income Taxes.** The City’s Finance Department has taken more aggressive measures in recent years to collect unpaid City income taxes, including working with the IRS to identify unpaid accounts. We will research additional steps to further expand these collection efforts.

■ **False Alarms.** We recently revised the False Alarm Ordinance to limit the number of times Police Officers respond to false alarms. Such calls waste productivity and drain our resources. Police Officers

will cease responding to alarms at any address that has had seven or more false alarms within the previous 12 months. Fines will also be enforced for business and residential properties where there are an excessive number of false alarms.

■ **Ambulance Fee.** The City of Dayton can be more aggressive in collecting fees required for transporting patients to area hospitals. Currently, we receive about 47 percent of the amount we can legally collect each year. There may be other options beyond the individual patient that we can more aggressively target in collecting the unpaid fees. We will be asking our collection agent to identify those categories of non-payments for which we have a greater opportunity to collect.

Building Demolition – The City has declined in population and many owners have walked away from their homes or investment property. These structures must be torn down more quickly than our current practices allow. Thanks in part to money provided through the federal stimulus program and Neighborhood Stabilization Program II (NSPII) funds, we have demolished about 700 structures over the past two years. Even so, we must do a better job of speeding up the process so that available funds can be quickly applied to demolish abandoned and nuisance properties that are causing heartache to our neighborhoods.

Expedited Building Permits – Business-oriented groups in particular raised this issue. The Department of Building Services has been reviewing this concern based upon previous feedback from contractors and developers. We will be looking to speed up the permit turnaround time.

Vacant Lot Maintenance – Understandably, a popular topic of discussion this summer



was the unsightly appearance of vacant lots. Fueled in large measure by the home foreclosure crisis, some neighborhoods face a more serious vacant lot/abandoned property problem than others, but talk about the mowing and maintenance cycles of these sites and other public common areas was steady. Budget cuts over recent years have limited the City's ability to mow as frequently as we have in the past. I was encouraged to hear a willingness among citizen groups to assume more responsibility in maintaining these lots on their own. In fact, a significant number of citizens suggested the use of volunteers to perform miscellaneous neighborhood services, beyond just vacant lot maintenance. Tight budgets are likely to continue restricting the City's mowing capabilities and other neighborhood clean-up efforts, so tapping into this spirit of volunteerism will be helpful. I will ask our Division of Citizen Participation, through the Priority Board network, to take the lead in coordinating these kinds of neighborhood volunteer efforts among neighborhood groups, business associations, large anchor institutions and the appropriate City departments.

Expanded Recycling Service – There was generally strong support for expanded recycling services. Our ongoing challenge is to boost the level of participation citywide in order to achieve greater dollar savings. The City pays \$38.25 per ton to dispose of regular waste at the landfill, versus just \$6.00 per ton to dispose of recyclable materials. Currently, the City collects about 300 tons of recycling a month. The \$6.00 per ton cost drops to zero once the weight total reaches 500 tons a month. If we could achieve our goal of collecting 1,000 tons of recyclable materials a month, we could save taxpayers \$343,000 a year. We used grant money to purchase approximately 10,000 96-gallon "Big Bin" recyclable containers and began distributing them to residents in targeted neighborhoods in April. We will continue marketing this campaign and related recycling efforts to ultimately reach our 1,000-tons-a-month goal.

2. Revenue Increases

There was generally support for increasing various revenue items like fines and fees. Items I will recommend for increases include:

Parking Ticket Fines – We intend to work with the Dayton Municipal Courts to explore possible increases to the existing fine structure.

Parking Meter Fees – Similar to parking fines, we are researching the various levels of our parking meter fees and are likely to recommend increasing those amounts.

Ambulance Service Fees – These fees have not been raised since 2004. In addition, we will pursue some of the unpaid bills more aggressively when we perceive a more likely chance of payment.

Parking System – Our parking system is not a well-designed system at this point. It essentially falls under the authority of four City departments requiring coordination among the parking meter and parking garage operations. A serious review of this function will determine whether a more centralized management operation is practical within our organizational structure or whether there is an opportunity to contract the service through the private sector.

Fee Structures – We will evaluate the current fee structures for various City operations.

Universal Tax Filing – A number of Ohio cities have adopted this policy, which would require all citizens to file an income tax form with the City. We will look further at adopting this option to ensure we collect all of the local income taxes we are due. This strategy must be balanced against the additional costs associated with implementing it.

Hire an Investment Manager – The City of Dayton has a diverse financial portfolio, and how that money is invested is an important part of our overall revenue stream. We should



contract with a company experienced in managing large financial investments, since we no longer have the expertise in-house.

3. A Path to the Future

There were frequent questions and comments about the path out of the difficulties we are in. The topic of how to grow the economy was a popular one.

Asset-Based Development – While the City alone cannot grow the economy, we will continue to leverage our unique assets and partner with business, academia and institutional anchors to implement our asset-based development strategy (i.e., Miami Valley Hospital, Good Samaritan Hospital, Grandview Medical Center, Children’s Medical Center, VA Medical Center, University of Dayton, and Wright Patterson Air Force Base).

Small Business Entrepreneurs – The community as a whole must create and nurture an environment that encourages entrepreneurs to establish and grow their businesses in Dayton. By capitalizing on assets like Wright Patterson Air Force Base, Tech Town and our educational institutions, we need to grow our next Fortune 1000 companies instead of hoping they will relocate here. We must build on our efforts of incubation and innovation (Entrepreneur Center, IDCAST, RFID Incubator, Dayton Campus for Advanced Materials Technology, etc.) to create a supportive infrastructure that encourages and facilitates entrepreneurialism and commercialization of new technology and a churning of new businesses. This strategy includes being more receptive and supportive of our immigrant populations, whose success will help to grow the community as a whole. Particularly, we should cultivate immigrant entrepreneurs who are seeking an environment that openly accepts and encourages their efforts.

Sale of Water – Many questions arose about

selling our water to businesses and other local governments. At a time when the availability of water is changing the face of where businesses will locate and thrive, Dayton’s clean, abundant water supply is especially attractive to large businesses that require heavy water use. Touting our water resource to attract large companies with a sizeable workforce enhances both our local economy and our income tax collections, which directly benefit our General Fund bottom line. Our Economic Development Office and Water Department will continue their efforts to implement strategies to market our comprehensive network of water assets.

Fiber Optic Cable – The City of Dayton owns and operates a large network of fiber optic cable used mainly for our traffic signal system. This network has some excess capacity that could be leased to businesses searching for such high capacity lines. We will review the potential for commercial applications while identifying ways it could also enhance more of our own public service delivery systems.

4. Cost of Government

Many of the meetings included discussions about the general cost of City government, including salary structures and health care costs for employees. Despite job abolishments, pay freezes, cost-savings days, and other personnel-related cutbacks, citizens expressed a desire for continued steps along these lines. Other ideas discussed include:

Flexible Workforce – In departments across City government, we have employee work rules and practices in place that no longer fit our organization or current economic realities. It is critical that we evaluate these practices and eliminate/modify any that are outdated and no longer apply. Changes in work rules and the strategic use of part-time workers, where practical, would have an immediate impact on reducing operational costs.



We might also utilize experienced retired persons and younger trained workers to complete specific work projects and to handle intermittent periods of peak service demands.

Contracting Out – In response to outsourcing questions raised during the meetings, I reaffirmed the City of Dayton’s willingness to contract out some services when it made good financial sense. However, I believe that contracting must occur only when it saves money and does not result in inferior service. As we have streamlined our own staff in recent years, we have found there is less cost benefit to contracting out services. Nevertheless, the savings possible through contracting compels ongoing consideration.

Regional Service Sharing with Other Jurisdictions – The City of Dayton remains open to more intergovernmental cooperation. We are currently working with Montgomery County and other regional communities to implement the Regional Dispatch Center. Once fully completed, we will realize a savings by using civilians to handle duties previously performed by sworn safety officers, who can now be reassigned. While there are other examples of intergovernmental cooperation available, the reality is that service consolidation savings are more difficult to achieve. Politics and differences in service levels are just two issues making consolidation easier said than done. In addition, whenever a service is combined, it almost always results in an increase in the service level for the entity with the lowest service level.

Whenever this topic arose during the Listening Tour, I made clear that I personally favor a regional government if it combined at least a one county area and gave one entity the sole power to tax, make zoning decisions, issue bonds, and make economic development incentive decisions for the whole county. Short of that full-fledged regional government struc-

ture, we can only review miscellaneous service sharing agreements as they are identified. I would only caution that there is a limit to the value and amount of regional service sharing that is practical and makes economic sense.

Entrepreneurial Government – Some City of Dayton government operations, such as the Dayton Convention Center and the Division of Golf, are already run as self-supporting entities that receive no General Fund tax dollars. We will explore the same entrepreneurial potential of other City services like recreation, building services, and waste collection.

Service Efficiencies – There are a number of operational items we can improve upon. They are mostly small cost-saving items, but they will serve as a reminder that similar cost savings ideas must always be pursued.

- **Eliminate unnecessary telephones.** As we have reduced the number of City employees in the workforce, we can reduce the number of telephones and telephone lines we have in service.
- **Eliminate extra vehicles.** Similarly, having fewer employees means we do not need as many vehicles in our fleet inventory.
- **Building Management.** We will look at the following options to maximize savings in managing our property inventory:
 - **Leases.** Look to eliminate extra leases and consolidate City operations into City-owned buildings wherever possible. Most of these moves have already been accomplished.
 - **Sell Buildings.** Ensure we offer unused City facilities for sale. Despite a difficult market, we must strive to eliminate any overhead expenses.
 - **Vacant Lots.** We will continue working aggressively to get City-owned vacant lots



into the hands of neighboring owners or developers through programs like REAP and “Lot Links.”

5. Reduction or Elimination of Services

The community conversations led to little consensus on reducing or eliminating public services. While citizens understand the financial realities of the day and that future reductions are inevitable to balance our budget, there were few specific suggestions of which services to cut or reduce.

6. Taxes

More people spoke unfavorably about tax increases than spoke favorably. Neighborhood groups were generally opposed to raising property taxes, while business-oriented groups were more inclined to oppose an income tax increase. Generally, there were more comments about taxes on either side of the issue than there were comments about service reductions or elimination. More than tax increases, citizens favored increases in fees and other miscellaneous charges. As we begin the process to develop the 2011 budget, we will continue to do everything possible to avoid seeking any tax increase. I will have a better idea about making a final recommendation to the City Commission after I have reviewed early drafts of our 2011 budget and see the impact of the proposed cuts.

7. Community Investments

Generally, people understood the need to build our future success through investments in infrastructure, technology and economic development. There were occasional comments about phasing-in this increased level of investment. The community especially understood the need to strengthen our information technology capabilities and to invest in computer systems that can make our smaller govern-

ment workforce more efficient. I will convene a management oversight committee to help develop and implement a cost effective community investment strategy, and to strengthen our information technology services.

The comments and suggestions we received this summer will be helpful in developing our future financial plans. How soon the general economy rebounds and how involved the private sector is in our revitalization efforts will be important factors in our success. As we discussed during each of our community meetings, there are no easy answers to the challenges that confront us, and City government cannot solve the problems alone. Nevertheless, the face-to-face and sometime spirited conversations of the Listening Tour were also valuable in educating citizens and community partners about our financial situation and in gauging their attitude as we prepare our 2011 budget recommendations and make future operational decisions.

This report will be distributed to all of the groups that participated in the Listening Tour, and it will also be made available on the City of Dayton’s website at www.cityofdayton.org.

Sincerely,

Timothy Riordan
City Manager

