INFORMATION PACKET
MEMORANDUM

To: Mayor and Members of Council

From: Jane S. Brautigam, City Manager
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        Julia Richman, Chief Innovation and Technology Officer
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Date: Thursday, Nov. 13, 2018

Subject: Information Item: Website Improvement Project Update

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Information Packet Item provides an update to City Council regarding the City of Boulder's Web Improvement Project, a multi-year project to improve bouldercolorado.gov. Specifically, it provides a summary of work completed in 2018 to engage website users and develop a plan to make the website quicker, easier and more intuitive to navigate. This memo also introduces a report of user experience findings prepared as part of this phase of the project.

FISCAL IMPACT

City Council approved $80,000 for the Website Improvement Project in the 2018 City Budget, and staff will request that any remaining funds be carried over to 2019. Council approved $200,000 in the 2019 City Budget for the next phase of this project, which will include a new website design and the potential selection of a new platform and content management system. The 2019 funding will support change management, process improvement, design, content migration and development work involved with a website redesign. Staff will request that any remaining funds be carried over to 2020 to complete this multi-year project.

COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENTS AND IMPACTS

- Economic: The city website offers many services and information to residents and business, and through this project, the city seeks to deliver those services and information in a more efficient and effective manner. This includes identifying and pursuing opportunities to add, enhance or update web services so they are easier for users and more efficient for staff to deliver. This has the potential to save both the public and staff time. The city will also be researching customer service technologies and best practices from leading-edge government and non-government websites that are achievable with public sector resources.

- Environmental: Enabling a greater number of online services can help reduce paper and transportation-related CO_2.

- Social: The city website serves as an essential free city resource for all community members and is intended to provide consistent, reliable, timely and easy to access information. It is also intended to be accessible, with automated language translation services, and Spanish-language content is available in some cases depending on the primary audience and resources available for professional translation services.

BACKGROUND

The City of Boulder website (bouldercolorado.gov) receives roughly 8 million pageviews a year, making it a primary platform for the community members to access information and services pertaining to their local government. The current version of the city website was launched in 2013, and there is strong internal and external interest in a comprehensive update to this critical resource.

The city worked with a vendor in 2016 to evaluate the website against best practices and develop a prioritized list of improvements. The city has implemented a number of those improvements, and work in 2018 was driven by the top recommendation in the 2016 report: develop a new website organizational structure and strategy based on user testing and stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, in 2017 a recommendation from the Public Participation Working Group stated that the city should implement a "one-stop, user-friendly website."

City Council approved $80,000 for the 2018 Budget to begin a comprehensive update to the site. The City Manager's Office, Communication Department, and Innovation and Technology Department began collaborating as part of what is now called the Website Improvement Project.

As a first step in the project, the city worked with a consultant from May to October 2018 to study user experience on the current city website and to develop a plan to make the website easier for the public to navigate. City Council received updates on this project in the form of a Heads Up on March 2, 2018, and a Heads Up on Aug. 2, 2018. The focus of this work was to better understand user interactions and expectations with the current city website; match users' verbiage and understanding of topics and services on the city website; and create a data-driven solution that supports both the community and internal staff needs. The goal of the user experience phase of the project is to apply a new information organization and navigation system that improves the current website while laying the groundwork for a new website in the near future.

As part of the user experience phase, the city conducted extensive user research and testing and gathered user feedback to develop plans for improving the city website. To include as wide a set of perspectives as possible, the city conducted a public open house, met with city staff in small groups, received nearly 400 survey responses and obtained nearly 8,000 feedback form submissions about the website. In-person and remote usability tests were also conducted with Boulder residents to benchmark the current website on the ease of completing top tasks and finding commonly sought information. These benchmarks, along with other data, will be used to measure the effectiveness of future changes to the website.

ANALYSIS

The 2018 user experience phase of the Web Improvement Project examined ways to improve the city website through user-centered design, a process that involves research, design and evaluation, in order to understand the users of a system and ensure that their needs are identified and being addressed. It is common within many government agencies to organize a website around internal structure rather than residents' understanding of government services. This often makes it difficult for users to find the information they are looking for, ultimately resulting in a phone call and/or frustration. The project approach focused on user-centered design so that staff could create solutions that are guided by research and evaluated using real users. Staff expects this will help ensure that those accessing a website will know where to go and what to do.

The latest research revealed that, in general, city website users find what they are looking for 72 percent of the time. For the top 15 tasks evaluated as part of site testing, users find what they are looking for 63 percent of the time. These benchmarks, along with others, will be used to measure the needs and effectiveness of possible changes to the website. The consultant prepared a [detailed research report of methodology and findings](#), including the following areas:

- on-site feedback via a pop-up dialog box (pg. 4)
- resident survey (pg. 6)
- employee survey (pg. 13)
- stakeholder goal setting activities (pg. 23)
- card sorting (pg. 25)
- tree testing (pg. 27)
- baseline usability testing (pg. 33)

The report also includes specific recommendations for improving the website (pg. 37), ranging from new webpage templates for better organization of content to identifying city processes that can be more efficiently described through numbered steps and checklists

NEXT STEPS

The city will use the research findings and recommendations to make iterative improvements to the current website and measure progress. Research indicated that the city website can most benefit from:

1) improvements to the way the city organizes and categorizes web content, so information is easier and more intuitive to find;

2) improvements to city website search effectiveness and functionality; and

3) improvements to content management so information is more consistent, up-to-date and user-focused.

Improvements to the current city website are already underway and will be pursued in 2019 as these changes will benefit the city now and into the future.

The work completed in 2018 includes a blueprint for a new city website, a more versatile organization of information, based on user research, testing and input from internal and external customers. This blueprint, and other larger-scale website improvement recommendations, will be implemented in 2019 through a website redesign process. The city plans to issue a request for proposals (RFP) for a website redesign in early summer 2019 after conducting a requirements gathering and market research process. The requirements gathering will focus on the following areas: information architecture and design; web content authoring; e-services; content governance; ongoing user testing; and development support. The city plans to issue a brief request for information to help assess current, leading-edge solutions, or the "art of the possible," in several of these focus areas to shape the 2019 RFP.

Redesigning a website is a multi-year process, and work in 2019 will lay the groundwork for the launch of a new city website in 2021, which will be followed by extensive testing and user feedback. The website will be reframed as a component of a lifecycle that can be managed iteratively in a more sustainable way into the future based on ongoing user input and evolving organizational needs.