

Creating a City Organization that is Sustainable Today and Tomorrow - Sparks Sustainable Services Initiative



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The City of Sparks recently underwent a significant reorganization dubbed the Sparks Sustainable Services Initiative, or SSSI. The purpose – prioritizing core city services in order to put the city government on a fiscal path that is more realistic with today’s economic environment.

The City of Sparks (population: 92,331, a 1.3 percent increase from 2009) is located in northwestern Nevada, and shares a border to the west with the City of Reno. The state has been hit the hardest by the “Great Recession,” with unemployment as high as nearly 15 percent. Since fiscal year 2008, the city has been forced to lay off workers and implement wage and benefit concessions. And as with many local governments in Nevada and throughout the nation, Sparks has been forced to reduce service levels and eliminate projects and programs due to the national fiscal crisis.

As the state’s economy and economic forecast continued to deteriorate, significant action was required. The City could no longer ask for wage and benefit concessions year after year, or reduce service levels to unacceptable or unsafe levels. Additionally, it had become more apparent that increasing labor costs had to be curtailed.

What became clear in the summer of 2010 was that the previous four budget cycles, which had successfully met the unprecedented revenue shortfalls, had not re-set the organization on a path to sustainability light of the great recession and its lingering effects in Nevada, particularly in the northern region of the state. The term “sustainable” was used deliberately to set the vision and mission of the project which uses a comprehensive approach to meet this era of what many government executives call the “new normal.”

Unlike most reorganizations that are often implemented based on the preferences and styles of top management, the SSSI reorganization was primarily based on identifying and prioritizing the top core city services. In early 2010, led by a team of top-level staff including the City Manager, a systematic process to prioritize core city services was underway. The process allowed for long-term planning, seven to ten years, as well as zero-based budgeting.

The City Manager and executive staff engaged the Mayor and City Council over the course of several months to create a new vision for the City's strategic plan. Numerous employee focus group meetings were held to solicit input and feedback on areas where the City could reduce services and save public dollars. And the City's Advisory Committee was provided the autonomy to conduct their own studies in order to help create a priority list of city services. The committee concluded their studies with a full-day workshop that included placing a real dollar value on city services.

The use of the initiative was an effort to describe the depth and reach we were embracing for our organization to tackle the future. Based upon extensive research, we consolidated several methods of change into a single coordinated project. A comprehensive matrix was created that listed nearly every internal and external service the City provides. Categories such as mandated services, core services, and public safety were ranked.

The primary driving forces for these changes and their results are as follows:

- Re-engineering and Consolidation of Departments: Combined the City's Public Works Department and Community Development Department into the Community Services Department. This included eliminating a department director and streamlining the two departments. In addition, the Revenue and Human Resource Divisions were combined to form the Employee and Customer Services Division, providing increased efficiencies and eliminating one manager position.
- Competition of Services: Identified key city services that could be privatized such as park maintenance and street sweeping. The City compared its costs to those vendors who bid on the same service.
- Concessions/Wages and Benefit Actions: Employee bargaining groups came to the table and gave back a portion of their wages and benefits ranging from 7.5 percent to 15 percent over a two-year period.
- Shared Services and Process Improvements with Other Agencies.
- Development of Key Services Levels: Defined and prioritized Sparks core services.
- Examination of New Revenues: A review of opportunities for new revenue did not produce any options for immediate action, but the City is continuing to explore these possibilities.
- Engaged and Informed Citizens Advisory Process: Equating to a more informed and educated citizenry.

Ultimately, the organization was restructured with a goal of efficiency and sustainability. A total of 17 positions were eliminated, and 63 positions were reclassified to reflect current responsibilities in the new structure. Today, the City is operating with a workforce not seen since 1996, despite growing in population by one third during that period.

Internal communication remains critical. Employees are kept informed with e-mail updates, City Manager/employee meetings and a weekly newsletter including questions and answers. Going forward, the City will focus on employee development, customer service and innovation.

The City of Sparks has charted a course that will take us down a more realistic path in order to provide essential services with appropriate resources to meet the needs and safety of our residents. We recognize that we can no longer be all things to all people. By identifying core services, prioritizing those services, and addressing a structural deficit, the SSSI process has created a structure that will allow our Mayor and City Council to govern in unprecedented times.

For more information, visit the city of Sparks [website](#).