



CITY OF SUNNYVALE,
CALIFORNIA

Communicating the Value of City Services

ABOUT SUNNYVALE



The City of Sunnyvale, California, is the seventh largest city in the Bay area, with a population of 158,000. City government provides public safety, public works, community development, library and recreation, environmental services, and administrative services. It has over 950 employees, a general fund budget of \$268 million, and an overall budget of \$731 million. The city has been nationally recognized by multiple organizations for achievements in public safety, procurement, innovation, and overall leadership.

Summary

The City of Sunnyvale's Spring 2023 *Horizon* newsletter took a different approach to budget and finance communications. This special edition about city finances didn't lead with fund balance, net position, GAAP basis financial statements, or inflation assumptions. It sought to communicate the role of city services in everyday life—proving that city services are an exceptional value for residents' money.

The *Horizon* newsletter is part of Sunnyvale's ongoing public education program. It is a printed, eight-page newsletter mailed to every Sunnyvale residence three times a year. To create this special edition, the chief public information officer and finance officer teamed up to present a unique look at telling the city's financial story.

Challenge

Like many other cities, the City of Sunnyvale faces rising costs, unfunded projects, and growing demands for services. With many public works infrastructure projects planned or underway, the city also needs to make significant investments in the community. For example, there was a bond measure for a new library on the November 2024 ballot. To complete these initiatives and address the many other requests for services, the city needs the public's confidence; however, getting people to engage with and understand city finances is difficult. Budgets are dense, complex, and irrelevant to most people. Understanding financial reports often requires an advanced understanding of governmental accounting, and it can be difficult to make boring budget information approachable and interesting.

enough to help gain the necessary public support. In general, finance staff have trouble telling their story and relating to different audiences. But by partnering with the city's public information office, new opportunities for communication and engagement have emerged.

Communicating beyond the budget document

Relying on budget documents, budget websites, or even budget-in-brief reports—which are usually just condensed versions of the longer budget document—can leave a giant gap in budget communications. While intended for an audience outside of government, these documents often contain a lot of information but no context, or they lack a resident's perspective. They're accurate, but they miss the opportunity to tell a compelling story.

The City of Sunnyvale took on that challenge by issuing a special edition of its citywide newsletter, *Horizon*. Taking a different approach to budget communications, the newsletter approached the topic from the perspective of explaining the value of city services. It then supported the message that city services provide great value, using simple, straightforward text, charts, and examples explaining how people pay for services and how much they get in return. The newsletter connected these concepts and filtered information to answer the hypothetical question from a resident: "What's in it for me?"

Developing the story

When the city's chief public information officer, Jennifer Garnett, started with Sunnyvale in 2012, her first assignment from the city manager was to help residents understand their city services are a great value. At the time, the City was concerned with complaints from residents about paying too much in taxes or not getting enough services. "I was charged with telling that story of services, helping people understand how they pay for them, and then allowing them to draw their own conclusions on the value of city services," she said. Unique to this approach was that the city



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JENNIFER GARNETT, SUNNYVALE'S CHIEF PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

manager put this task to Garnett, who was not in the finance office and didn't, at the time, have a detailed understanding of the city's finances. "At the time we were transparent with our finances, but the messaging needed to be different than our typical finance approach," Garnett added.

She worked with staff from finance to help collect information and develop relatable ways to explain the city's revenues and expenditures. It was important for the team to have both a finance and communication perspective, but instead of simply reporting data, the team used more of a creative writing approach. One of the ways they did this was by creating a storyboard for a "day in the life" concept that was used throughout the publication. "We developed characters that showed all the ways people interact with the city often

without even realizing it," Garnett said. The newsletter was a resounding success in 2013, when it was first published. "I confess I was nervous because we put ourselves out there with this unique approach," Garnett added. "But when people showed up to the next City Council meeting with it to say how much they liked it, that was very cool to see."

Public finance explained again

Coming up on the 10-year anniversary of the first public finance-themed *Horizon*, the city decided it was time to tell the story again. "The timing was right," Garnett said. "We have a few large infrastructure projects, we're rebuilding our wastewater treatment plant and fire stations, and there was a library bond issue on ballot." This time around, the city worked to make the newsletter more

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concise. They tweaked the graphics, polished the writing, and refreshed the information that was included.

The 2023 version of *Horizon* focusing on finance can be viewed online at gfoa.org/gfr-sunnyvale-horizon. The document has an engaging narrative, powerful graphics and images, and a clear, no-nonsense writing style. For example, the city used a dollar bill and penny as pie charts to show the city's portion of sales and property taxes relative to other governments in the area. It also labeled each funding source with a symbol that allowed the reader to trace it throughout the narrative. To personalize the publication, the newsletter included photos and names of city staff members when illustrating services. And the city intentionally didn't refer to departments. Garnett explained, “We know that the community doesn't care about departments. When something breaks, they don't think of it as a public works problem, they see it as a city problem.”

Other key elements to the communication strategy included:

Day in the life. The newsletter's cover introduced a fictitious family—including their dog, Concha, purposefully capitalizing on people's affinity for cute pets—and followed the multi-generational family throughout a typical day. This segment also ran along the bottom of every interior page, which helped draw readers through the entire newsletter. More importantly, the device showed the many ways a family interacts with city services and facilities, often without realizing it.

Big bang for your buck. The newsletter included two sidebars comparing the

average property tax payment to other monthly household costs like cell phones, car insurance, and broadband internet. This was arguably one of the most important ways the city conveyed value in the publication.

User fees, taxes, and grants.

City funding comes from many sources. This can be complex and nuanced, especially when it comes to linking funding with what the money pays for. The publication linked funding sources to services, helping to clear up misconceptions about where our tax money goes.

Community impact

The finance edition of the *Horizon* started out with an introduction by the city manager, who posed the question of value and asserted that the Sunnyvale public is getting a good deal. He also committed to being straightforward with city data and invited readers to let the city know what they think. Residents and staff responded more than usual. Examples included:

- “I wish to compliment you on the recent *Horizon* (Spring 2023). It was one of the best, if not the best, issue ever put out by the City of Sunnyvale. The information, facts, figures, and diagrams were exceptionally helpful in understanding where the city's money comes from and how it is spent.”
- “My compliments to you on this excellent, thorough, fact-based discussion of what the city does and how it is paid for.”

- “Thank you for sharing this,” a staff member commented. “I remember I used to get calls, and residents would always say ‘all the city cares about is making revenue off my taxes.’ I hope residents will read this more so they can get a better understanding of how we really value their contribution.”

When asked what resonated with this edition, Garnett said, “I think we were able to clearly tell an engaging story. People really care about what affects them and what they are getting. I also think that people saw themselves in our day-in-the-life feature and were able to see how much local government affects their day-to-day. Even though Sunnyvale had a positive message, we didn't try to appear overly self-promotional.”

Lessons learned for other governments

Obviously, all governments can improve communications and better tell their story, so why do so many find this task so difficult? “I don't think we can underestimate the value of pairing good communicators with people with good technical skills,” Garnett said. “It's not that finance staff are bad communicators. They just don't always have the time or skillset to write in a way that appeals to an audience that doesn't have detailed financial knowledge, which is critical.”

Sunnyvale's special-edition *Horizon* about the value of city services is an excellent example for other local governments to replicate when explaining their finances. Modifying examples to fit each agency's unique revenues and services is easy. The layout provides a template to communicate complex issues clearly and concisely. But the key message, needs, and purpose behind the publication will need to be unique to each community. Authenticity and honesty are required to build trust. Garnett added, “I would love to see other agencies take these concepts and run with ideas of their own.”

Contacts

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