

More International Recognition for Santa Clara's Citizen Engagement Programs

By Carolyn Schuk

The town clerk – keeper and protector of the community's recorded history – is one of the world's oldest municipal offices. In California that role goes beyond protecting the accuracy and transparency of public records to active outreach that keeps people engaged with the processes of governance.

Increasing citizen engagement is an ongoing Santa Clara City Council goal, and the City has been widely recognized for its leadership in establishing and sharing best practices; as well as its Vote Ethics program – which received the League of California Cities' 2007 Helen Putnam Award for Excellence Grand Prize.

In June the City garnered another honor for governance. The International Institute of Municipal Clerks (IIMC) recognized Santa Clara's 2014 program, "Increasing Community Participation/Engagement in the Process of Governance," with the professional organization's 2015 Program Excellence in Governance Award. This is the top technical award in the municipal clerk profession, and 2015 is the third time Santa Clara has won the award.

Under Santa Clara's City Clerk and Auditor Rod Diridon Jr., the program increased voter registration, multilingual outreach and boosted citizen interest in serving on City Boards and Commissions; providing a solid base for future efforts.

"We sometimes take for granted how hard the City works to engage and empower our residents," says Santa Clara Mayor Jamie Matthews. "This is a nice reminder that we're among the most progressive in the nation."

The program simplified the job of getting connected with the City with coordinated communications across multiple channels – direct mail, utility

bill inserts, City publications, newspaper advertisements, electronic billboards, City webpages, social media and community organizations – allowing people get information how, when and where they want; and see it enough times to remember it.

In addition, voter registration information was translated into Chinese, Spanish, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Hindi, Korean and Portuguese. A translation service was deployed, as an accessible list of City employees who speak other languages, to make communicating with City officials easier for residents. And applying for commission openings was simplified with an online application.

The effort has shown clear results. In 2012 and 2013, Board and Commission openings had to be re-advertised 15 times due to lack of interest. In 2014, commission applications jumped 107 percent, from one to two applicants per opening, to three to four. In the six months from December 2013



through June 2014, new voters registered at a 49 percent higher rate in Santa Clara than the countywide average for comparable cities.

"Our City deals with so many challenging policy issues, it's sometimes easy to get wrapped-up in the rhetoric of political debate," says Diridon. "If anything, the IIMC award should give us pause to take a breath, and remember that Santa Clara is a really special place."

To find out more, contact the City Clerk's Office at 408-615-2220 or clerk@santaclaraca.gov.