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CITY OF ATHENS RECEIVES EXCELLENCE IN MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT AWARD

Franklin, Tennessee – November 4th, 2020 – The City of Athens was recognized at the 2020 Spring Tennessee City Management Association’s conference and awarded the Excellence in Municipal Government Award. There were four award criteria for organizations state-wide to submit their nominations. The city’s submission was considered for a sustainable program that will provide a long-term benefit to the community and can serve as a model for other communities to implement. The program was the city’s ‘deliberative facilitative civic engagement’ that was used during discussion at a joint meeting between the City Council and Athens City School Board regarding to a school building project that would consolidate four elementary schools into a newly constructed campus – a contentious topic that began in 2013. Facing an impasse, the question centered on how to bring a divided community with strong opinions together without the discussion devolving into pandemonium. The City of Athens’s answer was to employ ‘deliberative facilitative civic engagement’, based on a theory introduced to City Manager C. Seth Sumner in a study on “Making Democracy Work” with the Kettering Foundation. The idea of deliberative civic engagement is to provide a process that enables citizens, civic leaders, and government officials to come together in public spaces where they can engage in constructive, informed, and decisive dialogue about important public issues (Democracy in Motion, 2012). The process used in Athens added facilitation from the city manager and the schools’ superintendent, Dr. Melanie Miller as a method to move the conversation forward.

Equal representation, direct interaction between citizens and their respective governing bodies, input from everyone attending or viewing the joint meeting, and the biggest questions and concerns answered by those involved in the process was accomplished. The citizens, informed and fully knowledgeable on the plan moving forward, followed through with voting, by referendum, an increase in the local option sales tax. This ultimately indicated the people’s desire, and willingness to pay, for the city to proceed with the school building project – the largest capital project in the city’s history.

A Model for other Communities to Implement

The use of deliberative facilitative civic engagement for the school building project was a successful proof of concept that could be implemented for other projects. In fact, prior to the advent of COVID-19, the City of Athens intended use this concept for two scheduled sessions for Civic Input into the City Budget. After the first successful use of this model, Athens City Manager C. Seth Sumner was invited to share and speak to the process at other conferences around the United States and even overseas. Sumner was the first and only city manager invited to be a member of the Tennessee Mayor’s Growing Civic Engagement, an initiative by ThinkTennessee, for his specialty in being a subject matter expert on civic engagement. He has been invited to speak on the concept and



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this process at the Academy of Arts & Sciences, the National Conference on Citizenship, the National League of Cities, the ICMA-Southeast Conference, and the Urban Management Centre in India. These invitations are proof positive that other communities desired models of best practice for including civic engagement as part of enhancing service delivery. The City of Athens is happy to lead the way with deliberative facilitative civic engagement.

The City of Athens is a full-service municipality nestled in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains and has garnered a reputation as “the Friendly City”.

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