

WEST U CITY CURRENTS NEWSLETTER – FALL 2020

A Message from Councilmember Lauri Lankford

West U excels – most of the time. Why do I say “most of the time”? I have heard complaints from West U residents about the City’s lack of communication on some issues. I also have not been satisfied with the level of communication, and, in my opinion, our City can do better.

Before further discussing this communications issue, I’d like to highlight just a few of the prestigious awards that our City departments have received this year: 1) our Public Works Department received national accreditation from the American Public Works Association, 2) our Police Department was recognized by the Best Practices Recognition Program of the Texas Police Chiefs Association, and 3) our Parks & Recreation Department received its second consecutive gold medal from the Texas Recreation and Parks Society.

Responding to real-time situations is in addition to the excellent services that each City department provides our residents each and every day. During the recent threat of Hurricane Laura, approximately 60 City employees sheltered in place inside City buildings to ensure that West U would be able to respond immediately to any storm-related issue. Thankfully, those resources were not needed, but West U was prepared. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, West U began its response by declaring a local state of disaster, canceling events, closing or limiting access to parks and recreational facilities, restricting access to City buildings, and alternating days that City employees worked from home or onsite – all in an effort to “flatten the curve.” Our Fire Chief still continues to lead the Emergency Management team for our City’s COVID-19 response.

Additionally, West U is unique in many ways. It is one of just a few cities in Texas that has its own alarm monitoring service (DirectLink) and recently completed enhancements to DirectLink to provide subscribers with more convenient functionality, such as remote access via a phone or computer app, provided residents have a compatible security system. Additionally, all West U firefighters are dual-qualified as firefighters and paramedics, which permits lifesaving measures to be provided, regardless of whether an ambulance or a fire truck responds to a call. And, while somewhat limited due to COVID-19, our Senior Services Department coordinates City resources and volunteers to help with transportation, home maintenance and repair, and special porch trash/recycling pickups for West U seniors and residents who need extra assistance. West U’s Good Neighbor team of volunteers has been in existence for over 20 years. These are only a few examples of the services that make West U one of the best places to live.

Now to where I do see a need for improvement – communication. The Texas Open Meetings Act severely limits the ways in which a City Council can communicate as a group outside of a public meeting. Since most residents cannot attend every City Council meeting and every workshop to keep abreast of all City Council decisions and to hear the reasoning behind them, this presents one of our problems. While we can communicate our individual opinions or understandings, we cannot prepare any statement on behalf of the entire City Council (or even on behalf of three

council members) without first discussing such a statement in a City Council meeting. If we violate that requirement, the Texas Open Meetings laws may subject us to criminal prosecution.

Since the swearing in of the current City Council, we have used the City's quarterly *City Currents* newsletter for communication with West U residents. We have also relied on local newspapers and magazines to report on our decisions or to publish letters from our West U mayor, and, additionally, on individual council members to explain our decisions. While this has been adequate in some cases, it clearly has not been sufficient or timely in other cases.

In an effort to address this communication inadequacy, the City Council has held four workshops over the last year to discuss ways to improve future communications. Consequently, West U has increased its social media posts, revamped its website, streamlined the categories that residents can subscribe to for receiving notifications and updates from the City, and changed the City Council minutes from its brief "action item" format to a narrative format that includes more details about what was discussed at each meeting and workshop. Additionally, in August, the City Council gave the City manager informal approval to proceed with adding a new staff position dedicated to citywide communications.

I believe that, by specifically defining expectations, evaluating options to move toward meeting those expectations, and implementing the best courses of action, we can improve the delivery of information to West U residents. Hopefully, by doing this, we will move West U toward total excellence!

-Councilmember Lauri Lankford