

GO COMMITTEE #1
September 10, 2012

MEMORANDUM

September 6, 2012

TO: Government Operations and Fiscal Policy Committee

FROM: Stephen B. Farber, Council Staff Director 

SUBJECT: Update – Legislative Branch Communications Outreach NDA

This meeting is to provide an update on implementation of the new Legislative Branch Communications Outreach Non-Departmental Account.

Background

As recommended by the GO Committee, the FY13 operating budget includes \$580,000 transferred from the Cable Fund to establish the new NDA. It is described as follows:

This NDA provides funds to strengthen the capacity of five Legislative Branch offices – the Council Office, the Office of Legislative Oversight, the Board of Appeals, the Office of Zoning and Administrative Hearings, and the Office of the Inspector General – to inform constituent communities of issues that directly affect them and to ensure that these communities' concerns are effectively taken into account.¹ Communications efforts supported by this NDA include expanded outreach to Spanish and other language communities, greater use of web and social media resources, Open Government initiatives,² and improved management of constituent requests.

Of the \$580,000 total, \$200,000 is restricted to capital equipment and start-up expenses, consistent with federal law and cable franchise agreements.

In order to understand the priorities of all Councilmembers for implementation of the NDA, we have worked closely with their Confidential Aides. In meetings on June 20, July 19, and September 5, we have reviewed extensive background information, weighed a range of options, and identified areas of primary importance.

¹ Assistance will also be provided to the Merit System Protection Board, which is located in the Legislative Branch.

² One such initiative is Bill 23-12, Administration – Open Government, sponsored by Councilmembers Riemer and Andrews, Council President Berliner, and Councilmembers Leventhal and Floreen. The bill was introduced on July 31. A public hearing is tentatively scheduled for September 18. A GO Committee worksession is tentatively scheduled for October 29.

Update

Our work to date on implementing the new NDA has led to the following conclusions:

1. Recruit a Legislative Branch webmaster

A full-time webmaster for the offices of the Legislative Branch, in place of the part-time contract assistance we have had to date, is essential to strengthening our communications outreach. We worked with the Office of Human Resources to create the position, and on July 9 we advertised it. The response was excellent, and we are now in the final stage of the selection process.

2. Acquire a Constituent Relationship Management system

A CRM solution that will strengthen the capacity of Councilmember offices and the Council as a whole to handle the intake, tracking, storage, reporting, and response processes for constituent data is a top priority. Starting in May, Senior IT Specialist Michelle Parsons convened a work group with representatives from Councilmember offices and Legislative Information Services (LIS). The group has focused on defining system specifications so that the procurement process can move forward promptly. An RFP that reflects the group's extensive work will be issued within the next several weeks.

3. Expand the number of Committee meetings televised on County Cable Montgomery (CCM)

Although some of the Council's most important work is done in Committee worksessions, only a third of the projected 180 Committee meetings in FY13 are scheduled to be televised. In the interest of open and transparent government, the ultimate objectives are (a) to have video recordings of all Committee meetings and to make them available on demand on the Council website and on CCM, and (b) to expand coverage of town hall meetings and special events and programs as well. We are working with the Cable Office on the logistics of how best to achieve these objectives.

4. Provide additional IT staff support

The IT workload on behalf of the entire Legislative Branch, now handled by our Senior IT Specialist, is highly demanding, and it will increase further as the Council expands its communications outreach via the CRM system and other technologies. The addition of an entry level IT Specialist I would be of great benefit to our operations. We worked with the Office of Human Resources to create the position, and on August 13 we advertised it. Applications closed on August 27. The response was excellent, and we will complete the selection process within the next several weeks.

5. Expanded communications outreach to Spanish and other language communities

For FY12 the Council authorized the creation of a half-time Spanish-language broadband communications contractor position. Based on the first year's experience, there is support for expanding the position to two-thirds time in FY13, with the possibility of further expansion in FY14. There is also support for increasing Council participation in the weekly half-hour program on Radio America for Montgomery County Government. We have also discussed options to strengthen our translation and interpretation capacity for other language communities and will continue this review.

6. Provide additional equipment for communications outreach

We have discussed a number of one-time, low-cost equipment options to enhance our communications outreach capacity both internally and externally. These options require further research. We will develop a process to assess needs and set priorities for items of this kind.

We welcome the Committee's views on the progress we have made to date and on other options to consider as we implement the new NDA.

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