

Markkula Center Senior Fellow in Government Ethics Judy Nadler delivered these remarks at a community forum sponsored by the Knight Commission, Sept. 8, 2008.

As a former elected official, I know first-hand the importance of communicating with the public about matters that will not only impact them today, but also for generations to come. Because I currently work in government ethics, I am even more certain that providing information to the public is not a luxury but a necessity.

I have divided my comments into three areas: Ethics and transparency; land use and planning; and civic engagement. All are critical to creating and sustaining healthy and vibrant communities.

The recent resignation of Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick is an example of the need for coverage of city hall. In part because Detroit is a major city, and because his illegal and unethical conduct cost the people of Detroit almost \$9 million dollars, this became national story. But the local paper uncovered the story, and although it garnered headlines across the country, the people most hurt were the residents of the city.

Scandals of this scale don't happen daily, but there are, unfortunately, city council members and mayors, sometimes city managers or public works directors, even police chiefs who step over the line. These actions not only cost the city money, they destroy public confidence.

A former San Jose city councilman was forced to resign when news reports showed he was accepting but not reporting expensive gifts and meals, and was using his office to exert pressure on a land use deal. It was the tenacious work of the news and editorial writers of the San Jose Mercury News that brought this to light.

The stories also signaled a shift in the overall city hall culture, as evidenced by the election of Mayor Chuck Reed. His Sunshine Reform Task Force, more commonly known as the Open Government Committee, has instituted important reforms, especially in the area of transparency. The mayor, council members, and key staff have their calendars available online to show the nature and subject of their meetings and who attends. When I served on the Ethics and Conduct Committee of this body, it was evident that the law should be the floor, not the ceiling; government bodies must pursue questionable ethical practices whether they are legal or not. Unfortunately we don't see this same transparency for school boards, water districts, or other specialized government agencies.

With Silicon Valley land costs at a premium and in-fill and remodeling projects in the pipeline, it is even more important to provide the community with information about the impact of these decisions. It is no longer enough to staple a flyer on a utility pole to alert the neighbors of an upcoming planning commission meeting. This is where the earliest decisions are made, and yet short of a few neighborhood newspapers, there is virtually no public outreach.

Finally, civic engagement. Serving on a city board or commission or as a volunteer is a great use of talent and also allows residents to get an inside look at how government works. In San Jose, these openings are posted on the Web site and on the sites of individual district representatives. But not everyone has access to the Internet, and it seems like "only the brave" are likely to step forward. An information and communication outreach plan could make a difference.

So if these are my concerns, what solutions can I suggest?

First and foremost, more local news about the things that matter to a community, not just the things that people like to read, view, or listen to. Civics, at least the way I was taught in school, no longer exists, so there is a big void. People don't really see how some of these issues relate to them. Using more friendly and easy-to-understand language in government documents would help, but it would also be great if reporters and editors had a deeper understanding of the workings of government. This is especially important when reporting on bond measures and the budget.

The Internet has become an important tool for disseminating information, but in my survey of Silicon Valley cities, the content and usability vary greatly. Many cities broadcast council meetings live, and then re-broadcast several times during the week. In the City of Santa Clara, you can even check them out from the library, so you need not subscribe to the local cable service to see your council in action.

Blogs, local neighborhood newspapers, and old-fashioned town hall meetings can also be ways to get news to people. Public libraries are the new community centers, and an excellent gathering place for dialog.

I fear unless we address these issues now, we will have a difficult time capturing this next generation and creating and maintaining an informed and involved citizenry.