2020 TCMA Award for Municipal Excellence – City of Athens

Annually, TCMA recognizes a city that has undertaken programs and efforts that have made the community a better place to live and work. The criteria used by the Nominations and Recognition Committee to evaluate nominations includes:

- Unique and creative programs developed by the municipality that have increased the efficiency and effectiveness of the local government;
- Sustainable programs that provide long-term benefit to the community and can serve as a model for other communities to implement;
- Programs that improve service delivery to citizens and generate cost savings to the municipality; and
- Initiatives that have expanded the city’s tax base and increased employment opportunity.

This year, the efforts of City of Athens, through its “deliberative facilitative civic engagement” process, has resulted in its selection as the recipient of the 2020 Award for Municipal Excellence.

With the backdrop of a community comprised of active and vocal civic leaders and citizens, juxtaposed against the costly operation of a city school system and a controversial school building project sparking battle cries from every corner of the community – people against taxes, people against consolidation (due to sentiments of losing the school they grew up in), people against the price tag, and people against the city having its own school system (advocating for the county take over the school system) – the city knew that it needed a new way to enable stakeholders to come
together and engage in a constructive and informed dialogue on such an important public policy question.

Involving a joint meeting of the city council and school board and facilitated by the city manager and director of schools, input was solicited from the overflow audience seeking their biggest questions, suggestions, comments, or concerns about the project. Based on feedback from the audience using a “sticky note” strategic planning process, the facilitators addressed the most commonly asked questions/areas identified first and opened the floor for members of the elected bodies to speak their thoughts about the topics presented by the public. The process was repeated for each group of sticky notes.

The methods applied in this process were a resounding success. Equal representation from the various “camps” on the question, direct interaction between citizens and their respective governing bodies, input from all, and the major questions and concerns being answered was accomplished. Feedback from attendees included feeling like actual productive discussion took place and went well, no group was louder than any other because everyone was on a level playing field, and both elected bodies were on the same page on the plan, the funding mechanism, and were ready to move forward.

As for the rest of the story, the citizens, informed and fully knowledgeable on the plan moving forward, followed through by approving a sales tax referendum. 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.

The city intends to use this model and methodology in the future on other projects. One example is the budget – using deliberative facilitative civic engagement, the
city will seek to facilitate, gather, and discern community values and preferences at the front end of the budget process rather than just public comment after second reading of the budget ordinance.