

FINAL DELIVERABLE

Title Maquoketa Volunteerism Policy Study

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Date Completed December 2021

UI Department School of Planning and Public Affairs

Course Name PBAF:3560 Public Policy and Persuasion

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This project was supported by the Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities (IISC), a program that partners with rural and urban communities across the state to develop projects that university students and faculty complete through research and coursework. Through supporting these projects, the IISC pursues a dual mission of enhancing quality of life in Iowa while transforming teaching and learning at the University of Iowa.

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[Student names], led by [Professor's name]. [Year]. [Title of report]. Research report produced through the Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities at the University of Iowa.

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Date: December 10, 2021

To: City of Maquoketa

From: Anna Van Heukelom, Oskar Kaut, Abbie Boeding, Grace Lincoln, Sarah Martin

Cc: Maquoketa City Staff and City Council

Re: Maquoketa Volunteerism Policy Study

Appendix: See below for drafted survey questions

SUMMARY

Maquoketa, Iowa is currently experiencing low rates of civic volunteerism, which leaves many of their boards and commissions under capacity. To reverse this trend and attract new volunteers to fill the vacant seats, the city of Maquoketa must make a concerted effort to improve communication, accessibility, and outreach within the community.

BACKGROUND

Attracting a diverse range of community members to serve on boards and commissions is a main priority for the City of Maquoketa. Currently, many board seats remain unfilled and underrepresented, with the same group of volunteers continuing to serve on either multiple boards at once or cycling through available commission seats.

Maquoketa is made up of an aging population. Not only is this one of the largest age groups in the town with 19% of the population in 2020 being 65 years old or older, but they are also the most likely to devote their free time to serve their community.¹ This can be attributed to the level of freedom that retirement often brings. This allows older generations to volunteer and serve for free on boards where younger citizens may not be able. Filling commission seats with only people from similar backgrounds creates an echo chamber rather than an environment that includes diverse perspectives. The makeup of boards is one issue, the other main area is making sure that the boards and commissions seats are filled. Currently, Maquoketa has 16 boards and commissions with boards ranging in size between 2 and 11 positions filled. In total there are 84 filled seats with 12 remaining empty. Putting Maquoketa at 14% vacancy of their civil volunteer positions. The Sidewalk board sits with the highest disadvantage of 7 seats total and only 2 being currently filled.²

If this issue is not remedied the City of Maquoketa will continue to see their boards filled with vacancies. The city would lose its best connection to the community and an avenue for citizens to voice complaints and feel involved in the local governmental process.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Cedar Rapids Website Design**

The City of Cedar Rapids has a very straightforward, accessible page for its municipal volunteer program. Included on this page is information on both how to attend and participate in city council meetings as well as how to serve on boards and commissions.³ This page makes it much easier for residents to find civic volunteer opportunities in Cedar Rapids.

¹ "U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts: Maquoketa City, Iowa." *U.S. Census Bureau*, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/maquoketacityiowa>.

² "Boards and Commissions." *City of Maquoketa*, 29 Sept. 2021, <https://maquoketaia.com/city-departments/boards-and-commissions/>.

³ *Welcome to the City of Cedar Rapids, Iowa*. http://www.cedar-rapids.org/discover_cedar_rapids/municipal_volunteer_program/civic_engagement_and_meetings.php. Accessed 29 Nov. 2021.

- **Clarinda’s “RSVP” Program**

The Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) program in Clarinda, Iowa assists seniors and retirees seeking volunteer opportunities. In addition to serving as a centralized location for the advertisement of volunteer opportunities, the program also offers accommodations and flexibility for its volunteers. The RSVP program offers on-the-job training to all its volunteers, allowing them to dedicate time without worrying about potential learning curves to certain positions.⁴

- **Carlisle City-Wide Notification System**

The town of Carlisle, Iowa has a city-wide text and email notification system that encompasses a number of functions, including emergency alerts, utility notifications, city announcements, city council agendas, and more. This system alerts residents of volunteer opportunities and encourages active involvement in local government affairs.⁵ Carlisle has roughly the same population as Maquoketa but has a higher rate of community involvement in local boards and commissions.

- **Amherst, MA – Regular Town Manager Meetings**

In Amherst, Massachusetts, the Town Manager makes sure to hold regular meetings or forums that are open to the public.⁶ This time can be used to inform the public of current community affairs and allow citizens to voice concerns or make suggestions. This provides a more informal way for residents to participate in community affairs without having to apply for a board or commission. Additionally, this can help increase civic volunteerism by giving citizens a look at what it would be like to participate on a higher level and potentially inspire more people to seek out those opportunities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Create a new civic engagement and volunteerism tab on the Maquoketa city website**

The Maquoketa city website should be updated to include a page where all information about civic engagement and volunteerism is congregated and accessible in one place, like how Cedar Rapids set up their website in Best Practices. The page should include the time and place of City Council as well as a zoom link if they cannot attend in person. There should be youth engagement information and opportunities within schools as well such as any gifted and talented programs or the unique welding program they offer in Maquoketa. Furthermore, they can link other information pertaining to gender equity efforts through strategic recruiting. Lastly, the page could also include a list of civic groups within the community including the name of the organization, the website if applicable, and the contact name of the organization. Having all this information compiled in one place is easily accessible for citizens hoping to get involved in Maquoketa.

- **Implement a city mass notification system**

One of the biggest obstacles which we have observed in encouraging civic engagement is the lack of communication strategy. Members of the community either do not have access or are not aware that they have access to volunteer opportunities in Maquoketa. The city currently uses the monthly utility bill to

⁴ Dinnebier, Kent. “Clarinda RSVP Dinner Celebrates Volunteers.” *The Daily Nonpareil - Council Bluffs, Iowa*, https://nonpareilonline.com/news/clarinda-rsvp-dinner-celebrates-volunteers/article_4594c6b1-c346-58bc-8925-52f865f75ec1.html. Accessed 10 Dec. 2021.

⁵“Civic Ready Notification System.” *Carlisle Iowa*, 20 Oct. 2021, <https://carlisleiowa.org/civic-ready-notification-system-2/>.

⁶“Cuppa’ Joe with Paul & Asst. Town Manager David Ziomek.” *Town of Amherst*, <https://www.amherstma.gov/Calendar.aspx?EID=17188>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2021.

pass information to residents, however, this is becoming outdated in the era of mobile technology. Instead, Maquoketa should adopt a citywide text notification system, which would streamline the process of communication to residents. At a relatively low monthly cost (\$20-\$40 depending on the platform used and package purchased) the city would be able to communicate information about city hall meetings, open positions on boards and commissions, upcoming events, and more. Residents would subscribe to the mass communication system with a number or a QR code that can be sent out with the city water bills and posted on the city website.

- **Develop a virtual option for calling into commission meetings**

Creating hybrid City Council and commission meetings will expand the accessibility of these volunteer opportunities and allow those with greater time constraints, childcare, or health concerns to actively participate within their community. The option to virtually join commission meetings should be posted in all spaces where the volunteer positions are advertised, whether it be on the city website, social media, or public library. Holding commission meetings in a hybrid format will allow for optimization of meaningful interactions whilst allowing volunteers to participate to their own comfort level and within their differing time constraints.

- **Host a community engagement event such as a community barbecue**

The community event should allow members of the community to come and meet the chairs of different city commissions as well as sign up to apply or receive more information. We suggest that there be sign-up sheets as well to sign up for city alerts about future events. We also recommend that the event includes community organizations and businesses that want help with recruiting volunteers as well. The event can function as a networking event as well as a community gathering to increase a sense of engagement within the community and give opportunities for volunteerism and involvement.

NEXT STEPS

- **Determine “ownership” of the city website.** It may be necessary to make admin changes to ensure that the recommended “Civic Engagement and Volunteer Opportunities” tab is being actively updated with new information and opportunities as they become available.
- **Confirm the individual or group who manages the city water bill as a method of communication.** This would be an effective mode of delivering information about engagement opportunities, a survey about volunteerism (see Appendix I), and the QR code for the recommended text/email notification system.
- **Implement and maintain a Zoom option for future commission and council meetings.** This remote option may make council and committee meetings more accessible to those who are usually unable to attend in-person but want to participate in the community.
- **Create and maintain a list of councils and committees with vacancies.** Using this list, the city will be able to target groups who are not seeing their desired number of volunteers and curate plans to assist them, perhaps through an altered communication strategy or more exposure to the community.

APPENDIX I

Survey Questions (Draft)

1. Have you ever volunteered in the Maquoketa community?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. If you answered NO to the previous question, what factor(s) have kept you from volunteering?
Select all that apply:
 - a. Transportation
 - b. Time commitment
 - c. Child Care
 - d. Other
3. If you selected "Other" for question 2, please elaborate. What other volunteer opportunities should be available?
 - a. Text box
4. Would you benefit from a Zoom/hybrid meeting format at City Council and Commission meetings?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. Have you been made aware of volunteer opportunities available in Maquoketa?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
6. If you answered "No" to the previous question, would you be more likely to volunteer if you were made aware of the opportunities?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. N/A
7. How do you currently access information from the Maquoketa community? Select all that apply:
 - a. City Website
 - b. Newspaper
 - c. Flyers
 - d. Social Media
 - e. I don't currently have an effective method