

City hires group to create community discussion

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by Jason Lamb

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- Mayor Dan Sullivan is looking for a better idea of what Anchorage citizens truly value before he has to make big budget cuts for next year's budget, which could top \$20 million.

Those ideas will come with help from an outside company Sullivan has hired to get a pulse on the community. The group is called Viewpoint Learning and for about \$55 thousand their job will be to create, what they call "choice dialogues" with people in the community.

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Cheryl Frasca, Anchorage budget director, says the city faces a big problem next year.

"The fact is our costs are going to continue to go up," said Frasca.

According to Frasca, the city may be looking at a possible \$20 million gap next year.

Sullivan has hired Viewpoint Learning to find out whether Anchorage residents are willing to pay for better city services or if they would prefer to see the city cut down its budget.

Viewpoint Learning was recommended to Sullivan by Frasca.

"They do an objective scenario building, and they bring community together to talk about the choices," said Frasca.

Frasca says this company specializes in bringing together a representative sample of citizens in communities for discussions on what they'd like to see in their city.

"In this case, we're trying to be more collaborative and form our budget based on what we hear from the community," said Mayor Dan Sullivan.

"As opposed to our traditional, you go to a public hearing and you have three minutes to say your piece and everybody goes off into their corner," said Frasca.

The city is paying the California based company \$55 thousand collected from private donations and interest earnings from a city savings account.

Heidi Gantwerk, a representative from Viewpoint Learning, says they can conduct these dialogues better than the city could.

"This kind of development of values based choices, the practice of facilitation, this structure of dialogue, is something Viewpoint Learning does and does well, and would love ultimately to build a capacity here so you don't need us to come back," said Gantwerk.

"They bring a skill level and research level, this is a research company that uses different techniques to help citizens analyze issues," said Frasca.

The Viewpoint Learning group began their meeting process this week by talking with members of the Anchorage Chamber and Anchorage Assembly. The group will meet with the general public in August.

Contact Jason Lamb at jlamb@ktuu.com.

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