

Councilman checks Newark for civic health

Case study suggests areas for improvement

By ROBIN BROWN
 The News Journal

ONLINE EXTRA

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When it comes to the health of Newark, City Councilman Ezra J. Temko isn't talking about sculpted abs or hot yoga.

His focus is on what he calls civic health or "the strength of a community's economic, civic and social infrastructure, a measure of the community's capacity to address opportunities and challenges it faces."

After extensive research and a question survey of a cross-section of the community, Temko concluded that Newark's civic health is "close to adequate, but not terrific."

He examined the issue, with Newark as a case study, in a paper toward his recently received master's in public administration from the University of Delaware's School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy.

Temko's presentation of his findings at Newark City Council's last meeting drew applause.

Council members said they look forward to discussions and growing public involvement.

"His research was fascinating," Councilman Paul A. Pomeroy said.

An involved community already makes the city a great place, Temko said, but "there's always room to expand the level of civic engagement... and I think it's incumbent upon elected officials to go out and solicit as much of that broad-based opinion and expertise that's out there."

He cited the National Civic League's description of the trend: "Where old leaders talked, new leaders listen; where old leaders argued, new leaders look for common ground; where old leaders were closed and secretive, new leaders are open to share information and information resources."

Instead of governments' early role as funder, regulator, controller and provider of services, they now succeed by bringing together groups and people to resolve conflict and partner for change, the league said.

But Temko also noted his findings of citizen frustration, discouragement and anger

with ineffective, business-as-usual government, bad publicity and "dysfunctional politics."

More meaningful dialogue, collaborative planning and sustained action comes from small group discussions and consensus-building, along with such tools as mediation, he said.

Residents and city staffers he surveyed praised strong points, such as Newark's many nonprofits from Aetna Hook, Hose & Ladder Company to its various churches - and the city's longtime Newark Community Day, a showcase for nonprofit groups to raise awareness.

Temko suggested the city build on that annual event, possibly by creating an online directory of nonprofits and highlighting their success stories.

Areas identified for improvement include communicating Newark's vision for the future, boosting neighborhood and nonprofit involvement, as well as building leadership.

He suggested "further exploration" of diversity, university-community relations and cooperation across jurisdictional lines.

The city should have "programs to develop and encourage emerging leaders," he said, adding that they should reflect the diversity of the community.

To improve the city's overall civic health, he said, the community needs to be involved in the development of the vision for its future, with collaboration of those stakeholders - residents, business, nonprofits, city government and LID, Temko said.

Still, his survey found good news in Newark's strengths including a government seen as "responsible and accountable to its citizens," an active and highly visible Downtown Newark Partnership and a business community involved in a wide range of efforts for community improvement.

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 Thu, Dec 20, 2018