Atascadero City Council
Staff Report – City Manager's Office

City of Atascadero
Employee Ethics Survey and Follow-up

RECOMMENDATION:

Council receive and file this report.

DISCUSSION:

The Atascadero City Council has made ethical training and transparency in City government a priority. As part of this effort, the Council directed staff to conduct a survey to determine the health of the City’s ethical culture. In compliance with this request, staff contacted the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) based in Washington D.C. ICMA is a national professional organization committed to good government and is known as a leader in creating and promoting ethical practices. ICMA was able to assist the City and sent Catherine Standiford, Assistant City Manager for the City of Santa Ana and a certified ethics trainer to assist.

The first step in the process was for employees to complete an online survey. The purpose of the survey was to gauge the current perceptions of ethical behavior of employees, managers and the Council, and to determine the level of understanding of how to deal with ethical dilemmas. A copy of the survey instrument and the results are attached (Attachment A).

The survey was developed by both ICMA and the Institute for Local Government (ILG). It was sent by email to Atascadero employees about three weeks prior to the actual training. The intent of this survey was to gauge the current level of understanding by employees of how to deal with ethical dilemmas, and to identify opportunities for clarifying expectations, policies, procedures or other factors that contribute to a culture of ethics in local government organizations.

There were 76 respondents to the survey, more than 50% of the total number of employees. In an effort to assure employees that their responses would be confidential,
the survey did not ask them to disclose information about their specific position, the level of the organization they represent, or the department in which they work.

Based on statements from Ms. Standiford, survey findings included:

- “Employees feel they are usually surrounded by co-workers who know and care about the difference between ethical and unethical behaviors, and a high percentage report they work with one or more trusted confidantes with whom they feel comfortable discussing work-related ethical issues.”
- “A strong majority of employees know they are expected to follow the spirit and letter of the law, to follow stated policies, as opposed to the desires of individual elected or appointed officials, and to use ethical behavior in getting results. A strong majority report that this expectation is set by the City’s executives.”
- “There is a strong perception that executives treat the public with civility and respect and treat all members of the public equally, without regard for their personal or political “connections”.”
- “Employees perceive that executives do not use public resources for private purposes.”

On October 11, 2007, three ethics workshops of approximately two hours each were conducted throughout the day. The results of the survey were discussed with the employees in attendance. The workshops were well attended by employees and all departments were represented. The workshops were broken into two categories:

a. **Workshops for the City’s employees.** These workshops were designed to provide supervisors and employees with the skills and practical strategies needed to identify and resolve ethical issues and strengthen the ethical culture in work teams. The workshops provided participants with the opportunity to resolve real world ethics issues in an interactive setting such as small group discussions. Employees were given the opportunity to discuss the ethical culture of the organization and share ideas on how employees could reinforce ethical behavior on a daily basis.

b. **A workshop for the City’s management team.** This workshop was designed to provide the City’s managers with a framework for building on the ethical culture within the City of Atascadero. Ms. Standiford facilitated a process of identifying the key elements that the City’s executive managers need to consider to be the guiding ethical values for the organization. She also assisted the executive managers in developing an action plan for fostering an ethical culture based on comments provided by the employees and on best practices.

As a result of the training, staff gained valuable knowledge and insight into how to conduct themselves ethically when working for the citizens of Atascadero and reinforced their ethical beliefs. Additionally, employees reviewed the three “Core Principles of Public Service”: no personal financial gain, no personal advantages or perks and
transparency and fairness in government. The employees left the training with tools and strategies for creating a more ethical culture.

Immediately following the training the sessions, the City began working with employees to enact policies, communication methods, and additional training to further strengthen the ethical culture. Specifically, direct results from the training include:

- A newly enacted administrative policy, “Acceptance of Gifts or Gratuities by Employees”. This policy is attached (Attachment B).
- The City Council has emphasized ethics as an important issue and has participated in the required ethics training included in AB1234.
- Better communication and transparency within and among the departments. This is being accomplished by sharing information more quickly with employees and making sure managers and employees are having more frequent conversations about what is happening in the organization and how the City is doing business. News releases are also circulated to employees citywide.
- Reviews of policies, procedures and regulations in departments to ensure employees are familiar with them.
- Ethics and situations where ethical principles come into play are discussed at department staff meetings.
- The Police Department offered a special training session on Saturday, March 15, 2008 focused on Leadership and Ethics.
- The Executive Team has been trained in AB 1234 ethics law and is committed to maintaining this training on a regular basis.
- The City Manager has conducted a series of roundtables with employees to discuss city operations, policies, and what is happening around the City and City Hall.
- The City’s Customer Service Committee will be hosting a training course in July, “Creating a Respectful Work Environment”. This training will be specifically tailored to Atascadero’s employees, and will have a section of ethics and ethical scenarios. Respectful environments encourage ethical culture.

On October 18, 2007, Catherine Standiford sent a letter to the City Manager in which she followed up on the process of the survey, the training and the results. Ms. Standiford stated, “You have a wonderful group of dedicated, caring employees, who demonstrated high interest and commitment to this topic through their active participation in the training”. She said that “there is already a good level of awareness among employees of the importance of ethics and ethical behavior, as well as opportunity for further improvement. The training provided to the City of Atascadero employees was an excellent starting point for further enhancing the positive culture that already exists in your organization”.

Employees are encouraged to continue to share ideas on how the City’s ethical culture can continue to be strengthened. Staff from the City Manager’s Office have been assigned to this process and will continue to build on the ethical culture in the organization. The process has proved to be very beneficial.
FISCAL IMPACT:

The cost of the survey was $5,000.00. There are no additional expenses anticipated at this time.

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment A: Ethics Survey Instrument and Results
Attachment B: Administrative Policy #14 – Acceptance of Gifts or Gratuities by Employees