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Secret volunteers to rate city service

By Chris Cassidy , Staff writer
Salem News

SALEM - The mayor is recruiting a few trustworthy residents to work undercover.

Their mission won't take them far from home or even require much risk - but they might have to duck some red tape.

The city will soon launch a new customer service campaign, dubbed the **Secret Shopper Program**, designed to evaluate how efficiently city employees respond to the public's request for services.

City-appointed "secret shoppers," as the city calls them, will act like a food critic reviewing a new restaurant - except they'll be **sampling the customer service skills of city employees instead.**

Each secret shopper will contact a city department with a request that could range from paying a parking ticket to reporting a pothole to asking for sidewalk repairs. Then they'll **critique just how effective the department was.**

City departments will be chosen randomly, and, at least in theory, **staff won't be able to distinguish between a secret shopper and an actual resident.**

They'll also be contacted in a variety of ways: in person, by e-mail, over the phone and in writing.

Based on how well the transaction goes, the "undercover taxpayer" will fill out a customer evaluation form, which will be sent straight to the mayor's office.

"We've always been focused on wanting to professionalize city government and open up how our government works," **Mayor Kim Driscoll said. "It's a great way for us to get feedback to improve the delivery of services."**

You don't have to be one of the city's volunteer undercover scouts in order to rate your dealings with City Hall, either. The customer evaluation form will soon be posted on the city's Web site, www.salem.com, and anyone can fill it out.

The form asks people to rate, from one to five, the demeanor, responsiveness and level of respect shown by staff, the timeliness of the transaction, and whether the office appeared clean and professional.

"Did you have to go through five different departments? Were they responsive?" Driscoll said.

There's also space for residents to write additional comments.

Once the feedback rolls in, Driscoll said, the city will explore ways to improve service.

The program is clearly designed to put city workers to the test - one they say they're ready for.

"I think it's a great idea," said Kevin Foucher, president of the AFSCME union, which represents the city's clerical workers. "Our members are also resident taxpayers and extremely professional while performing their duties. I have so much confidence in our membership that the secret shopper program probably isn't even necessary."

Salem borrowed the idea from the city of Somerville, and Driscoll learned about it at a meeting of mayors last year.

Driscoll touted the program as another way the city is trying to professionalize city government. In the last two years, the city has encouraged residents to join committees and boards, developed an automated e-mail and phone system to dispatch urgent news, and revamped its Web site.

"Truthfully, we get a lot of positive feedback," Driscoll said. "This one will make sure it's consistently happening throughout our operations and also make sure we know when things aren't going so well. Programs like this help you direct resources to where you need them most."

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