



CITY OF SEBASTOPOL CITY COUNCIL

AGENDA ITEM REPORT FOR MEETING OF: September 2, 2025

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To: Honorable Mayor and City Councilmembers
From: Mary Gourley, Interim City Manager
Subject: Business Economic Gardening Initiative – Listening Session: Consideration to conduct:

- a. Either Special City Council Meeting (Town Hall Format Listening Session); or
- b. Informal Listening Session of Businesses as part of the Economic Gardening Initiative and provide report back to the City Council on results of listening session and next steps

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RECOMMENDATION:

That the City Council consider options to conduct a Listening Session with local businesses as part of the City's Economic Gardening Program, and provide direction on preferred format and next steps.

PROCESS OF AGENDA ITEM:

- a. Presentation of agenda item by Councilmember Carter
- b. Questions and discussion from Councilmembers
- c. Public comment period
- d. Council deliberation and motion

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The City of Sebastopol is planning to host a Business Listening Town Hall to hear directly from local business owners about their challenges, priorities, and ideas for supporting a thriving business environment. The event will provide a platform for the Council and city staff to listen to the concerns and comments from the business community in an open forum.

BACKGROUND:

The City is implementing elements of an Economic Gardening Program to strengthen the local business environment and support sustainable economic growth. A key component of this effort is engaging directly with business owners to understand their needs, challenges, and priorities.

City Councilmembers and City staff have heard from businesses that businesses in the community feel their concerns are not being fully heard. As part of the Economic Gardening Program, it is proposed that the first step would be to conduct a listening session to hear concerns, frustrations, and comments in an open forum.

DISCUSSION:

The listening session will be conducted either during a Council Town Hall meeting or a less formal environment (discussed below), allowing business owners and representatives an opportunity to speak opening on issues important to the business community.

Staff is presenting two options for Council consideration to conduct a business listening session. The choice between a full Council Town Hall meeting or a listening session led by a designated Councilmember.



Option A – Special City Council Meeting (Town Hall Format)

- Provides opportunity for all Councilmembers to hear directly from businesses.
- Offers a formal public setting
- Can accommodate a large audience and diverse input.

Option B – Councilmember-Led Listening Session (Maximum of Two Councilmembers - less than a quorum)

- Flexible scheduling and potentially less formal environment.
- May encourage more open discussion from participants.

City staff will be utilizing the business licenses to invite all business to this event. It is anticipated that the outcome of this event is to create a summary of key business concerns; schedule a second economic gardening program event; and develop stronger relationships between the City and business community.

STAFF (RESPONSIBLE DEPARTMENT) ANALYSIS:

Staff believes that a listening session is a critical first step in identifying concerns from our local businesses. A formal town hall offers the benefit of the entire Council presence, ensuring that all members hear feedback firsthand. A more informal listening session may be easier to schedule and could encourage more informal, in-depth and open conversations with participants.

This is an opportunity to hear directly from businesses on issues and concerns. Some recent concerns raised by local businesses have been:

- Concerns about rising costs for City services, such as water/sewer rates and garbage collection
- Improvements for beautifying downtown.
- Lack of recognition for long-standing businesses.
- Marketing and visibility to attract both residents and visitors and incorporating all businesses
- Interest in stronger partnerships between the City and the business community.
- Lack of easy-to-read bills, including utility statements.

Staff is proposing that this event be held September 30, 2025 from 6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m. at the Sebastopol Cultural Community Center.

CITY COUNCIL GOALS/PRIORITIES/ AND OR GENERAL PLAN CONSISTENCY:

This agenda item represents the City Council goals/priorities as follows:

Goal 4 – High Performance Organization

Achieving staffing/ Program targets that match best standards and efficiency/operational staffing efficiencies/baseline budgets/performance management

This agenda item represents the City Council General Plan Consistency (if applicable):

N/A

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact with this approval.



COMMUNITY OUTREACH:

This item has been noticed in accordance with the Ralph M. Brown Act and was available for public viewing and review at least 72 hours prior to schedule meeting date. The City has also used social media to promote and advertise the City Council Meeting Agenda Items.

As of the writing of this agenda item report, the City has not received any public comment. However, if staff receives public comment from interested parties following the publication and distribution of this agenda item report, such comments will be provided to the City Council as supplemental materials before or at the meeting.

RESTATED RECOMMENDATION:

That the City Council consider options to conduct a Listening Session with local businesses as part of the City's Economic Gardening Program, and provide direction on preferred format and next steps.

CITY COUNCIL OPTION(S):

1. Deny the recommendation to conduct a listening session.

ATTACHMENT:

Example of Invite

APPROVALS:

Department Head Responsible for Agenda Item:

Approval Date: 8/26/2025

CEQA Determination (Community Development/Planning):

Approval Date: 8-26-2025

The action is not a project under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

Administrative Services (Financial):

Approval Date: N/A

Costs authorized in City Approved Budget: ☐ Yes ☐ No ☒ N/A

Account Code:

City Attorney Approval

Approval Date: N/A

City Manager Approval:

Approval Date: 8-26-2025

Subject: Invitation to Sebastopol Business Listening Session

Dear Sebastopol Business Owner,

The City of Sebastopol invites you to participate in a Business Listening Session to share your ideas, priorities, and concerns about doing business in Sebastopol.

This session is part of the City's Economic Gardening Program, an initiative focused on strengthening the local business environment and supporting sustainable economic growth. The event will provide a forum for business owners and representatives to speak directly with City Council and staff about the challenges and opportunities you see for our business community.

Date: September 30, 2025

Time: 6:00 pm – 8:00 pm

Location: Sebastopol Cultural Community Center, 395 Morris Street, Sebastopol, Ca

At the session, we want to hear directly from you:

- What challenges are you currently facing in your business?
- What opportunities could strengthen Sebastopol's business climate?
- How can the City better support your success?

Your feedback will help shape the City's economic development priorities and ensure that the voices of local businesses are reflected in future programs and policies.

We encourage all Sebastopol businesses—large and small, established and new—to attend and participate.

Please RSVP by: September 23, 2025 to: vhenkel@cityofsebastopol.gov

If you are unable to attend, you may send your responses to the above questions to vhenkel@cityofsebastopol.gov

Thank you for your continued investment in our community. We look forward to hearing from you and working together to build a thriving business environment in Sebastopol.