



MEMORANDUM

City Manager's Office

DATE: October 5, 2020

TO: Council Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Race, Equity, and Inclusion

FROM: Audrey Seymour Ramberg, Assistant City Manager/
Chief Operating Officer

VIA: Kimbra McCarthy, City Manager

SUBJECT: Gender-Inclusive Pronoun Use in City Policies and Documents

BACKGROUND

The English language does not have a gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun that can be used to refer to indefinite pronouns (such as everyone, anyone, someone) or for nongender-specific singular nouns (such as individual, resident, employee). Approaches for addressing this have evolved over time, including using the male pronoun "he" as a default, using "he or she," or rewording the text, if possible, to avoid the use of pronouns or to use only plural nouns and pronouns.

While the City of Mountain View does not have an explicit policy about pronoun use in City policies and other official documents, the current practice is to use variations of he/she, him/her, his/hers when a nongender-specific singular pronoun is needed. Recently, in its periodic updates to Library policies, the Library Board has discussed replacing such language with they/their/theirs, making these changes as policies are otherwise being updated.

ANALYSIS

Default use of "he" presumes male gender and use of "he or she" does not recognize people who identify as other than male or female. In addition to being awkward and inaccurate, using this gender-specific language is not inclusive. Accordingly, over the past few years, it has become more common and acceptable to use "they" as a singular, third-person pronoun, either as an indefinite singular pronoun (referring to a person of unspecified gender) or as a specific person's preferred pronoun (referring to a person whose gender or sexual identity does not correspond to the traditional binary opposition of male and female).

Many major style guides, including the Associated Press, the *Chicago Manual of Style*, the *MLA Style Manual*, and *APA Style* accept the usage of the singular "they" in speech and informal

writing and, to an increasing extent, in formal writing. The APA endorses the use of “they” as a singular third-person pronoun in the seventh edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, noting that it is inclusive of all people and helps writers avoid making assumptions about gender and is, therefore, good practice in scholarly writing.

In 2019, Merriam-Webster designated the singular “they” as their Word of the Year. Merriam-Webster uses three criteria in adding new words or meanings: meaningful use, sustained use, and widespread use. They state, “nonbinary they has a clear meaning; it’s found in published text, in transcripts, and in general discourse; and its use has been steadily growing over the past decades.” In addition, the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *American Heritage Dictionary* have added notes supporting the use of the singular “they” when the gender is not known. The *American Heritage Dictionary*’s usage note states that, “Despite the apparent grammatical disagreement between a singular antecedent like someone and the plural pronoun them, the construction is so widespread both in print and in speech that it often passes unnoticed.”

RECOMMENDATION AND NEXT STEPS

Grammar evolves over time, and staff believes it is timely to transition Citywide to the use of the singular they/their/theirs as a nongendered pronoun in order to be more inclusive in the way the City communicates. The intention is for all residents and employees to feel represented, accepted, and respected by their City government and workplace, regardless of gender or gender identity (which may include gender-nonconforming, gender-neutral, gender-fluid, gender-queer, or nonbinary individuals).

Staff proposes an initial focus on the City’s approximately 250 Council Policies and Administrative Instructions. The change can be made over time as Document Processing staff capacity permits. It is estimated that the update process could take one to two months to complete. Pronoun use in other official City documents such as Council reports, agreements, and correspondence would be updated as they are created and/or on a case-by-case basis in coordination with other updates.

Staff welcomes the input of the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Race, Equity, and Inclusion at this time.

We will pursue this as an administrative matter, keeping the Subcommittee and the City Council updated on progress.

ASR/HM/4/MGR

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