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City Hall installs hearing loop system after advocacy from Samohi students

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CITY HALL Samohi students John Butchko, Isaac Horwitz-Hirsch and Xander Lee decided to advocate for additional access for those with hearing loss in the City as part of their 10th grade community service project for English class.

They made public comments in front of the Santa Monica Disabilities Commission, the Planning Commission and City Council. And on July 22, as a result of their efforts, City Hall installed an induction hearing loop system.

"When my English teacher assigned the community service project, I had already been trying to get looping in some of the new projects that were proposed to be built in Santa Monica and realized

HEARING

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that it was going to be a difficult task," Butchko, 16, said. "I thought it would be a good community service project and was excited to have two friends help me try to change the laws to require additional accommodations for those with hearing loss."

The boys approached Otojoy, a Santa Barbara-based company that has installed over 100 hearing loop systems, about implementing the system in City Hall.

"We sat down together and I explained hearing loops in detail to them. How they work, what they do, how it connects to the sound system and so they got a really good understanding of it so they could present it to the Planning Commission and the City Council. They did a really good job with that," Otojoy president, Thomas Kaufmann, said.

The project was of special interest to Butchko as someone who deals with hearing loss.

"I'm deaf, so I sometimes struggle to hear people, and this gets worse in public spaces where there is a lot of background noise. The technology to make things easier for people like me is already available, and I wanted to let our public officials know about it and encourage them to change the laws to improve the situation," Butchko said.

According to Kaufmann, "A hearing loop is an assistive listening system that transfers the sound from a venue's public address system directly to the user's hearing aid or cochlear implant.

"It allows the user to simply walk into a room, sit down, and press a button on their hearing device to directly tap into the sound system. It turns their hearing aids into wireless earphones that broadcast sound customized for the individual's level and pattern of hearing loss.

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"Much like eyeglasses, hearing aids are always personalized and calibrated for someone's individual hearing loss. With the hearing loop system, we're utilizing that calibration, which results in the user not only hearing sounds louder, but much clearer.

"What also contributes to the clarity is the direct connection to the sound system. The user does not perceive distracting noises in the room or echo and reverberation that make it more difficult to understand the spoken word. To them, it sounds like the person speaking into the microphone speaks to them from three feet away."

Though Butchko has only experienced the use of a hearing loop system once, based on that experience and the testimony of others, he believes it to be a worthwhile venture for the City.

"Since so few places are looped, I have only had one opportunity to try looping, and that was in a small room with little background noise. I have spoken with people with hearing loss who have tried looping in large venues and they think it is great because it allows them to go to the theater and enjoy shows that they would otherwise not be able to hear," Butchko said.

Mayor Kevin McKeown was involved in the project as well, as the team approached him to learn about the civic process; but he gives full credit for its success to the students.

"Johnny [and two of his student teammates] made this happen, not me," McKeown said in a statement. "I met with them early last school year at Samohi, and they outlined the need and their plan."

McKeown advised the team on how to take their idea and make it heard and get it advanced through the Disabilities Commission and the Planning Commission, before bringing it in front of the City Council for funding.

"After they did so, with enthusiasm and professionalism, I was happy to propose to staff that the funding for the assistive looping be baked into the 2015-2017 budget. We passed that budget on June 23, and one month later the looping in City Council chambers was an installed reality," McKeown said.

According to Kaufmann, hearing loop technology is widespread in Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom, where hearing loops are mandated by law; but the technology is not used as much in the United States.

"And what is underestimated is how many people actually struggle with hearing loss ... in the U.S. it is about 20 percent. And people think it's just old people who have hearing loss and hearing aids," Kaufmann said.

"But what a lot of people don't see is that young people, like John Butchko, have hearing loss. And that's why I thought [this project] was so great because it raises more awareness about hearing loss. Hearing loops can really help people to participate in meetings and groups, a thing a lot of us take for granted."

According to Kaufmann, implementing the hearing loop system in City Hall cost less than \$6,000.

"If you look at the overall cost of the building, it is very inexpensive to install a hearing loop. And it's even less expensive when it's included in the original construction compared to a retrofit ... so it saves money if it can be included in the original construction," Kaufmann said.

During the process of advocating for the hearing loop system, Butchko and his friends learned how difficult it was to get their idea through all of the proper channels and achieve the outcome they wanted.

"It's been surprisingly hard to change local law regarding new public venues and commercial facilities to require accommodations for those with hearing loss, but I will keep pushing the City leaders to try to find a solution and I think that we are making progress," Butchko said. "My next project will be to try to get looping in the new movie theaters that are proposed to be built in Santa Monica."

According to City Clerk Sarah Gorman, the City will consider installing hearing loop systems in other locations on a case-by-case basis. Gorman said there have been no other requests for looping, other than council chambers, and that the service would be relevant for large public meeting spaces.

Butchko plans to speak in public comment at the City Council meeting on Aug. 25 at 5:30 p.m., to thank the Council.

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