

Project to gauge how city serves residents

By Dorie Turner and Herman Wang Staff Writers

Got a beef with city services? The Community Research Council wants to talk to you.

The privately funded research group is launching a nine-month project, called chattanoogaCITIZEN, to find out how city government can better serve its residents.

"The citizens can act as citizen auditors, looking at city government," said David Eichenenthal, president and CEO of the Community Research Council. "This is a new vehicle that will continue to improve the quality of government and engage citizens."

In early May, the research council will hold citizen focus groups to talk about issues of interest to residents. Faculty at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and Georgia State University will work with the council.

UTC political science faculty members Stephanie Bellar and David Edwards, along with UTC students, will meet with neighborhood associations across the city to gather input.

This fall, the research council will compile the information into a report for the Chattanooga City Council and the mayor's office.

Dr. Bellar said chattanoogaCITIZEN is a way to entice residents to become engaged in the governmental process. She said the goal is to determine the interests of Chattanoogaans and what they want from government.

The research council also will work with John Thomas, a Georgia State faculty member, on assessing how user-friendly the city's new Web site is.

The effort is funded through a \$100,000 grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The foundation funds numerous grants, including those designed to make governments more responsive to citizens. It is the largest grant in the research council's history.

Mayor-elect Ron Littlefield said communication with citizens is the key to a successful government.

"You learn a great deal if you just get people to sit down and talk plainly and comfortably about issues that are important to them," he said.

City Councilman Jack Benson said he's looking forward to hearing what the researchers find out from the community meetings.

"Anytime we can get another assessment of the need, it makes us more current on being able to address (needs)," Mr. Benson said.

The research council is a United Way-funded agency that provides data about the Chattanooga community to city government and nonprofit organizations to help with public policy decisions.

E-mail Dorie Turner at dturner@timesfreepress.com E-mail Herman Wang at hwang@timesfreepress.com **GET INVOLVED** If interested in participating in chattanoogaCITIZEN, call the Community Research Council at 267-7766, ext. 13, or e-mail chattanoogacitizen@researchcouncil.net.