

City of Newcastle
Communications Strategic Plan
Recommended by the Communications Committee
August 3, 2010

PURPOSE & VISION

In order to meet the needs and expectations of our community, the City of Newcastle is committed to facilitating effective communication with its city staff, elected officials, citizens, and business community. Effective communication includes the transmission and receipt of timely, reliable, concise and clear information.

GOALS

The proposed strategic plan and policies has been developed to accomplish the following:

- Increase awareness, interest and participation of the citizens of Newcastle in city governmental affairs, enhancing public participation in city decision making.
- Build community pride among citizens and positive identification with their city.
- Break down any barriers that community members feel in communicating with city staff and elected officials.
- Increase awareness, interest and participation of City employees in the goals and activities of the city.
- Provide the community with the information they want in the manner they most want to receive it.
- Create a stronger connection between communication and technology and minimize costs by using the city website, e-mail and other social networking tools in the most effective way.
- Create an environment that encourages residents to engage in communication with city staff and elected officials. The results of these improved communication processes will be shared during Council comments at regular meetings.
- Actively seek methods that will allow information to be received by the most number of stakeholders.
- Actively seek methods that will allow the most information and feedback to be received by council and staff from city residents, businesses and stakeholders.
- Ensure that city initiatives, issues, and projects include early identification and regular public outreach so that citizens are included, heard, and informed.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

This plan is based on the following principles.

1. Open versus closed communication

Newcastle intends to foster an open communication system with information shared both throughout the organization and the community. This plan emphasizes two-way communication –

between employees and top management and between citizens and their government. Open communication – a key ingredient in community problem solving – provides the most practical means of communicating operational information.

2. Community problem solving versus government as sole problem solver

Newcastle City government exists to serve the needs of its citizens, businesses and others. But city government cannot solve all community problems alone. This communication plan emphasizes active citizen involvement in solving community problems; arming citizens with accurate information through various means; allowing citizens, stakeholders and businesses to make fully informed choices.

3. Inclusive versus exclusive

Including everyone in the communication process builds teamwork and a feeling of belonging, breaking down traditional “us versus them” attitudes. Through improved communications, the City of Newcastle strives to include everyone who cares to participate in local government and to encourage participation among citizens, stakeholders and businesses not currently engaged.

POLICIES & STRATEGIES:

Policy: Build networks for effective communications throughout all levels of government and between the city and its stakeholders.

Strategies:

Actively seek both traditional and new methods and opportunities, increasing coordination and cooperation, to deliver information to the most number of stakeholders.

- Reinforce the communication mission statement among staff.
- Establish regular updates to the public.
- Provide accurate and prompt exchange of information using appropriate citizen service standards, and employee policies and procedures.
- Establish protocols and procedures for communication between staff, Mayor and City Council.
- Continue to support regional and inter-agency groups in addition to supporting participation in work-related statewide and national organizations.
- Assign Council members or staff liaisons, community meetings to attend and foster a connection with the City. Collect input on items of interest, explain recent Council actions, and pulse attendees on upcoming City decisions.
- The agenda bill format and process should present all sides of issues and all options in open and unbiased methods, fostering informed decision making.

Policy: Establish, document, and communicate a standard, consistent, and understandable set of procedures for identifying information that should be communicated and methods for communicating that information.

Strategies:

- Develop guidelines for when and how it is appropriate to use each communication channel.
- Schedule a review of the communications plan as part of the budget cycle to ensure that it remains aligned with the city's goals.
- Plan and budget for project-specific communications.
- Information provided by the city will be easily accessible, relevant, and timely.
- Develop and implement a standardized, but flexible, range of options for communications about specific projects.
- Maximize the use of the monthly newspaper.
- Plan for the inclusion of emerging technologies.
 - Continue working toward a more interactive city web site that contains timely information about the city and community.
 - Study thoroughly the use of other social media, such as face book and twitter.
 - Review options for using the Newcastle.411 city blog again by making it easier for all departments to post their stories, and regulating the posting of comments.

Policy: Disseminate information through a wide variety of media in order to reach as broad a spectrum of the community as possible.

Outgoing communication: Special events, community activities, City news and information, City calendar, ordinances and resolutions, municipal codes, emergency information, crime reports, Council minutes, project explanations, sources of funding, storm water management, vacation checks, business opportunities, weather, public hearings, e-alerts, budgets and priorities, commission vacancies, Council updates, education on City issues. This list of outgoing communication is not all-inclusive.

Strategies:

- Continue to find venues in which the City Council members and/or staff members can discuss issues and receive comments outside of city hall and its regular meetings.
- Continue e-mail alerts for emergency situations only, such as: traffic issues, flooding, fire incidents, or other events that would immediately affect residents in their daily activities.
- Continue to use a variety of media, including the city website and print publications to reach the citizens.
 - Consider restoring the on-line live audio of City Council meetings.

- Consider publicly televised city meetings, starting with City Council meetings and expanding to commission meetings as budget allows.
- Ensure that city initiatives, issues, and projects include early identification and regular public outreach, providing for timely public comment, feedback and input, so that citizens are included, well-informed, heard, and know they have a say.
 - Establish standard communications models for the public outreach as a standard component of all projects.
 - Establish a protocol for regular reporting to council on progress toward accomplishing agreed upon deliverables, issues and due dates.
 - Communicate messages of local relevance and concern without delay through appropriate channels, meaning the most people who may be affected will receive the communication.
- Regularly report Council actions to keep the public informed.

Establish and implement a public outreach program

- Develop a public education program about city government, such as “Government 101”, “Budget 101.”
- Develop a guide for citizen residents to understand Newcastle city government.
- Develop a guide for new and existing local businesses to understand Newcastle city government.
- Schedule organizational and legislative news publications for regular city-wide distribution.
- Regularly publish in various sources, a list of community events sponsored by the city.

Policy: Make it easy for the city to receive information and feedback from residents, businesses, stakeholders and the community.

Strategies:

Incoming communication: Budget priorities, requests for action, questions, new issues and concerns, creative ideas, volunteer offerings, public vetting, input on upcoming decisions. This list is not all-inclusive.

Ensure that communications from the community are received by the City in effective channels to which the staff can digest, respond, and disseminate as required.

- Assess for effectiveness the various means/channels of receiving input from citizens and staff.
- Implement the most effective means/channel for each type of communication. For example, e-mail is the least expensive means of broadly transmitting general information but is not suitable for discussion of controversial topics.
- Place a complaint area with proper complaint forms, Request for Action, on the city website.

- Implement effective and timely mechanisms for addressing complaints, assuring that the person lodging the complaint receives satisfaction in the transmittal of the resolution to the complaint.
- Place information about and standard forms for obtaining public records on the city website.

Improve communications regarding changes taking place within the city in a timely and coherent manner.

- Provide an opportunity for public input on significant policy issues.
- Introduce new ordinances with public outreach using the 2 readings process to ensure that the public receives adequate notice and opportunity to comment before the city council takes action.
- Develop a process for relaying Council's decisions to staff that includes procedures for new ordinances, orientations, initiatives and projects.

Offer a variety of methods for the City to receive citizen, businesses, neighborhoods and stakeholder communications.

- Encourage citizens to express their ideas, concerns, and judgments through written suggestions or comments, presentations at public hearings, responses in surveys, comments at meetings and service on citizen committees.
- **Forums** - Hold regular public forums open to all for public comments on publicly chosen, relevant city subjects.
- **Open Houses** - Hold open houses to showcase city projects and initiatives to educate the public and provide opportunity for feedback on the same.
- **Surveys** - Disseminate periodic scientifically valid city-wide citizen surveys on issues, concerns, and suggestions of citizens, including an opportunity for citizens and relevant stakeholders to express their ideas and opinions.
- **Neighborhood Liaisons** - Develop neighborhood liaisons and connections. Designate certain elected officials and/or staff willing to serve as liaisons to specific neighborhoods to improve receipt of communication.
- **Multi-family Connections** - Engage multi-family residents in activities to build connections with, and a stronger sense of, community.
- **Conferences** - Hold citywide conferences designed to encourage open discussion of neighborhood issues and collaborative city/neighborhood problem solving.
- **Public Comment/Public Hearings** - Continue to receive public comment at all city meetings. At City Council meetings, add a public comment period at the end of the meeting so that those who observe the entire meeting may comment on any aspect of the meeting.
- For all the above highlighted venues, provide instructive handouts or introduction to the attendees on what type of public involvement is appropriate to that venue; i.e. when the public is free to express opinions and when the public is attending a meeting to observe a meeting in progress or receive information or presentations.

- Promote citizen-led committees. Actively assist city departments in recruiting persons for city commissions, and in volunteer and other ad hoc roles and capacities throughout the city. Reach out and allow for as much response to calls for volunteers on standing committees to allow for the best assortment of qualified individuals.
- Promote citizen volunteerism in government.
- Develop a citizens' academy designed to acquaint and educate concerned citizens and community leaders about all aspects of city operations, programs, services, and activities.
- Invite community participation in city-sponsored events.
- Engage the diversity of the Newcastle community. Encourage mutual understanding among citizens about the increasing demographic diversity of Newcastle.
- Promote events that include opportunities for heritage and cultural events, highlighting the diversity of Newcastle and its residents.
- When appropriate and feasible, the city should support, help develop, and implement community-sponsored neighborhood, community, and city-wide events.