



CITY OF KIRKLAND
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MEMORANDUM

To: Kurt Triplett, City Manager

From: Michael Olson, Director of Finance and Administration

Date: October 24, 2016

Subject: 2017-2018 BUDGET STUDY SESSION #2

The November 1 study session will be a continuation of the budget deliberations from the October 27 study session. Any follow-up materials requested by the City Council at the October 27 Study Session will be distributed at the meeting.

There will also be a discussion of the draft Communications Study results which is still in production. Part I of the report is included as Attachment A and the remaining information (Public Records, Open Meetings and ADA Compliance and Organizational Capacity) will be presented by the consultant at the November 1 Study Session.

City of Kirkland

Communications Strategies

Task 2: Evaluation and Review of Kirkland's Current Practices

October 18, 2016

Submitted to:

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Summary Report: Evaluation and Review of Kirkland's Current Practices

1. Introduction

The city of Kirkland is engaged in a proactive assessment of the ways it shares information with Kirkland residents. The city brought us (EnviroIssues) in to provide an objective, third-party review of its current communications practices and tools, along with recommendations that may lead to an increase in the number of Kirkland residents who engage with the city on a number of issues. For this study, the city wished to emphasize opportunities to expand reach and effectiveness on social media and the best communications practices of other cities.

In our introductory conversations with city leaders and communications staff, we asked about specific needs and priorities within the realm of external communications. Based on what we heard, we focused our resources to address a handful of top priorities:

- Sharing positive stories about the city's work and services
- Building internal capacity to respond more quickly when issues arise within the community, and knowing which circumstances warrant a more deliberate response
- Creating and implementing a balanced communications program to reach a wide variety of audiences
- Engaging in more two-way conversations with residents
- Showcasing more diverse voices, both from within the city itself and from Kirkland's diverse neighborhoods and constituencies

We focused our resources for this task on social media and web tools, acknowledging that other engagement activities, such as in-person outreach, direct mail and advisory groups, also play valuable roles in a city's communications toolbox.

This report provides ideas and recommendations that may help the city of Kirkland pursue the priorities listed above. An in-depth analysis of available data from Kirkland's existing communications channels, which is beyond the scope of this report, will help validate effectiveness and help the city of Kirkland test against the evaluation criteria we recommend below. Lastly, social media and web engagement tools are a rapidly-changing landscape, and so we identify places to look for best practices and encourage city of Kirkland communications staff to prioritize keeping up on trends and budgeting time and resources to try new things.



2. Kirkland's communications landscape

To understand the city's existing efforts and opportunities beyond current practice, we spoke with city leadership, communications staff and members of their IT/graphics team.

Type of Interaction	City Staff Participating	Date
Individual phone interview	City of Kirkland Webmaster	9/7/16
Kick-off meeting	Kirkland Communications Manager	9/9/16
Small group workshop	Kirkland Public Information Officers (PIOs)	9/13/16
Group interview	City Manager Deputy City Managers Chief Information Officer	9/28/16
Group interview	IT/graphics team Communications Manager	9/28/16

In addition, we reviewed a handful of the city's external communications materials and channels, and some available analytics on where residents are currently engaging. City Hall represents a healthy mix of institutional knowledge and new staff interested in innovative ways of engaging with the community. Across the board, employees shared pride in their work and a commitment to inclusivity and transparency. We also observed opportunities where current communications efforts could be streamlined in order to free up resources for new initiatives.

We made the following Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) observations after taking the group interviews, workshop with PIOs, print and digital materials and analytics data into account. From these observations, we offer other insights starting on page 4.

Strengths:

- High-functioning and experienced city leadership
- Survey results from the 2016 biennial residents survey show high satisfaction with "delivering services efficiently" and "keeping residents informed"
- A strong network of neighborhood associations across the city
- A collaborative spirit within the communications staff
- A mix of digital channels and tools (News Bites email, Currently Kirkland and other videos, several Facebook pages, Kirkland Conserves blog)
- Interest in measuring the effectiveness of current tools and trying new approaches to expand reach and interest across the city
- Experiments with digital tools and boosted posts on Facebook are showing early positive results

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- New, well-maintained website
- Seasoned IT/graphics team has dedicated video, web and graphics expertise across several team members; several team members have been with the city for 5+ years
- Robust city calendar featuring many events appealing to wide range of audiences

Weaknesses:

- City policies are unclear on the role and responsibilities of PIOs in representing the city on social media
- There is no PIO for the Kirkland Fire Department, and the Police Department is lacking official social media policies
- City's YouTube channel is updated, but lopsided in the amount of content uploaded across different playlists and over different time periods
- The current decentralized PIO staff often feels over-extended by current workloads, and may need more resources to implement new initiatives. In contrast, other cities have dedicated social media personnel.
- City Update newsletter is resource-intensive, with an inflexible format
- Legacy print material is time-consuming to update
- Very little data on the reach or effectiveness of City Update and other print pieces
- Inconsistent application of Kirkland's logo and brand on all materials and outreach tools
- Large number of GovDelivery bulletin options, many of which have under 500 subscribers or have added fewer than 100 subscribers in the past year
- Visual and tone inconsistency between City Update, News Bites and Kirkland Conserves
- Diffused and inconsistent city branding when different departments create their own logos or material

Opportunities:

- Residents and new voices are out there; city needs to support pathways for their stories to be told
- Many existing materials (including print) could be revamped to become more easily shared across multiple platforms (News Bites, City Update, Currently Kirkland)
- Updating materials to emphasize graphics and bullets over narrative text may continue creating stronger connections with households that speak multiple languages
- Targeted Facebook ads and boosted posts may dramatically extend reach for relatively little cost
- Network of PIOs are an untapped resource for generating content
- The naming of a new Kirkland Police PIO is an opportunity to experiment with new social media sites, tone and topics
- Youth program on YouTube, "We've Got Issues" provides a voice for young residents

**Threats:**

- The IT staff is managing a large upcoming implementation (SharePoint) that will extend well into 2017, thereby limiting their capacity to train new staff on other day-to-day tools and practices
- Some new staff may not have public sector experience, and are not receiving standardized training about opportunities and mandates associated with public sector communications
- Residents notice when an official social media site isn't being kept up to date; long-term sustainability must be evaluated with each new tool
- Lack of clear policy on new social media platforms like NextDoor has encouraged some PIOs to speak on behalf of city in ad hoc fashion
- Possibility of a public disclosure request asking for social media content
- Resident questions and complaints currently travel through multiple pathways to reach a decentralized number of communicators (e.g. help desk, Council email address, city website, social media). Tracking the topics and volume is inconsistent across channels. Responsiveness varies, along with the approvals required at each checkpoint.
- Adding or expanding digital formats at the expense of print or PDF documents may shrink access for some less web-oriented audiences
- Very limited non-English material

Overall, the SWOT observations reveal the following: a potential disconnect between resources and goals, and some liabilities for the city in the absence of clear communications guidelines in social media specifically. However, the SWOT exercise also raises opportunities to leverage staff expertise and their increasing interest in creative outreach tools. For the city, one key to long-term success in implementing new tools or communications initiatives is to set up for short-term wins. The remaining sections of this summary will take this focus.



3. Social media's double-edged sword

Social media continues to change how cities communicate with their residents. While Facebook remains the most widely-used platform, other social media platforms with different value propositions for their users (e.g. Reddit, Snapchat, NextDoor) are presenting opportunities for cities and other public agencies to experiment with new methods of engagement. Facebook continues to add features that make the platform more robust, while tinkering with its algorithms and business model in ways that make it increasingly a pay-to-play space for public agencies.

The benefits of local government entities experimenting with a variety of social media platforms include:

- Reaching new and diverse audiences by going to where they are
- Opportunities for experimentation in tone, message and medium
- Demonstrating responsiveness and accountability
- Providing residents with increased access and greater transparency to city decision-making and services
- Opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness of different campaigns across platforms, such as clicks, shares and likes
- Declining costs make it possible for local government to experiment with new platforms

The table below presents a current snapshot of the city's main social media metrics compared against other peer cities in the region. In most cases, the city's main Facebook page lags behind other smaller cities such as Issaquah and Olympia.

Social Media Account Followers					
City	Resident Population	Main Facebook	Main Twitter	Other Facebook pages	Other Twitter accounts
Kirkland	87,000	765	2,423	Kirkland Conserves: 440 OEM: 339	Kirkland Conserves: 709 OEM: 541
Bellevue	139,000	3,813	7,092	Fire Dept: 2,409 Police: 2,562 Parks: 1,020 Arts: 738	Police: 11,019 Fire: 6,056 Transportation: 1,247 Parks: 450 Mobility: 297
Issaquah	36,000	7,396	5,104	n/a	Schools: 3,333
Olympia	50,000	4,659	3,225	n/a	Police: 5,179 Construction: 1,182 Parks: 1,054
Federal Way	95,000	1,207	913	Police: 5,132 Fire (South King): 3,103	Police: 4,454 Fire (South King): 1,779



There are risks if local government wants to jump “all in” on social media simply because more platforms are available. With more pages comes the risk of diluting messaging or speaking with too many voices. Here are some key variables to pay attention to if the City Council wants to evaluate the potential return on investment for greater social media activity:

- With more platforms, “city voice” becomes less consistent
- Maintaining multiple channels can take substantial staffing resources over time
- Abandoning channels due to limited resources sends the wrong message to the community
- There are nuances involved in measuring return on investment; it can be time-intensive to do this right
- Unclear legal landscape on how public records retention rules relate to social media

More recommendations and best practices within social media are listed in section 5.



4. How to evaluate existing and proposed tools and materials

Cities across Washington state are responding to engagement from their residents by trying different approaches to creating proactive, meaningful dialogue with various communities. One piece of this work is to assess current communications tools in light of the city's desire to expand conversations with residents across departments and projects.

More than ever, the city of Kirkland today stands at a communications crossroads with a mix of digital tools and sites, print materials and several major public works projects in different phases of design and construction. Producing communications materials because "We've always done this" or "It seems like a good idea" are both paths to unfocused and ineffective storytelling. In working with several cities facing similar challenges, we know that effective external communication toolkits are built around:

- Creating a plan and a set of policies to provide internal and external guidance on implementation
- Identifying goals that are measurable, attainable, and relevant
- Monitoring and measuring efforts
- Adjusting as necessary

On the next page, we provide criteria to use when evaluating various communications materials. We have shown how the criteria can be used to review City Update and the TV program Currently Kirkland. Based on the goals we heard from city staff, we recommend the city evaluate several high-value communications including:

- 5 current Kirkland Facebook pages
- 3 current Kirkland Twitter accounts
- GovDelivery subscription lists
- City-managed websites besides Kirkland.gov (kirklandparks.net; www.environmentalservices.cityofkirklandblogs.com)
- News Bites newsletter
- Any regularly-printed and distributed newsletters or mailings
- Print collateral displayed in front racks at City Hall

Doing this work as a team between now and Q1, 2017 will create more buy-in within the PIOs as to which materials to keep, scrap or improve.

Here are the five criteria we recommend city PIOs use when evaluating current or potential new efforts:

1. **Voice and alignment:** How well does it (the piece/tool) fit with the city's voice? And does it further the city's goals of being accessible, helpful, friendly and useful?



2. **Current and potential reach:** Is the piece reaching its intended audience? Can that reach be measured?
3. **Timeliness and relevancy:** How quickly can the city produce and distribute it? Is it relevant to residents' concerns, and can it address trending topics and approaching milestones?
4. **Adaptability:** Can this material be repurposed for use in another way? How easily can its audience share it with their own networks to maximize impact at low cost to the city?
5. **Sustainability:** How much support do the materials need long-term? Does Kirkland's current communications and IT/graphics staff have the bandwidth to produce new material in a way that improves upon current practice?

We used these criteria to evaluate two high-profile city materials.

Example material: City Update quarterly newsletter

Voice and alignment: Tone is helpful and informative, and fits the look of the piece, which is similar to an e-magazine. Content is varied to capture a wide range of interests and topics. Visual consistency over time has likely helped build a brand and an audience.

Current and potential reach: The open rate (30-33%) is quite good, but the subscriber base (approx. 2,400) is small. There's also no way of knowing which specific stories readers find interesting or valuable.

Timeliness and relevancy: The quarterly publication schedule means this is not a good vehicle for reacting to new issues. The wide-ranging digest approach is likely appreciated by people who lack the time or patience for reading more frequent, smaller updates.

Adaptability: Text-heavy PDF format makes it cumbersome to post individual articles elsewhere, and the look/tone would seem out of place on Facebook or in a blog post.

Sustainability: The quarterly production schedule makes this a periodic but time-intensive product.

Recommendation: A flagship piece like City Update should be reaching a larger audience, but the current format and tone are barriers to expanding distribution. Transitioning this content to into a blog format will give the city a better understanding of which individual stories are most popular, allow stories to be shared on social media, and spread the production time and resources out over time, which may help with workloads.



Example material: Currently Kirkland YouTube videos

Voice and alignment: Well-aligned with main city voice. However, some Currently Kirkland segments seem to use the same script as City Update pieces, which translate poorly to video or voice-over.

Current and potential reach: TV ratings and viewer demographics are unavailable, but anecdotally, the city receives calls when Current Kirkland does not air on local TV. YouTube and Facebook provide analytics for online access.

Timeliness and relevancy: The monthly release does build in some lead time, but video carries less expectation of rapid response. However, the city is increasingly practiced at creating one-off videos in response to an emerging issue. Publishing all the segments to YouTube at the same time is a missed opportunity.

Adaptability: Breaking up Currently Kirkland episode into segments is a big improvement. Video can be very successful on Facebook and is easily shared by audiences, partner agencies and other cities.

Sustainability: With a dedicated video position in place, the question is how many PIOs would need to be trained to take on additional editing needs, special projects (i.e. public safety videos or videos in other languages) or work with community partners to cross-promote Currently Kirkland.

Recommendation: Cross-promote videos on other social media channels and the city's main web page. Publish Currently Kirkland's individual stories over time, rather than all at once, so YouTube subscribers and the city's other social media channels receive more regular content. Continue tagging the videos in YouTube to make it easier for people to search for what interests them. Train 1-2 PIOs to shoot and edit some degree of video so there is an increase in capacity within this area. Consider a non-English playlist or dubbing some videos in different languages.



5. Best engagement practices and a social media checklist

The unique characteristics of any given city—factors like population size, demographics, community relations history, and available staff resources—will influence which communication activities and efforts are most effective. While it is beyond our scope to design a communications strategy or extensively survey the expansive field of digital civic engagement, we can provide a high-level view of best practices, places to look for ideas and resources, and a checklist of low, medium and high-effort things to consider against available or expanded staff capacity.

There is a robust online community of public sector communications practitioners who share tools and tactics via blogs, white papers, annual awards and social media. We recommend as good practice monitoring this community for regular doses of inspiration and insight. Good places to look for best practices in community engagement and social media include:

Federal/national focus

- [Center for Digital Government](#)
- [Official U.S. Federal Portal for Digital Government from General Services Administration's Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies](#)
- [Golden Post Awards](#)
- [TransComm Skills Contest Awards](#)
- [Public Relations Society of America](#)
- [Government Social Media Organization](#)
- [National Information Officers Association](#)

Local/city focus

- [National League of Cities](#)
- [Association of Washington Cities](#)
- [Municipal Research and Services Center](#)
- [Civic Plus](#)
- [Institute for Local Government](#)

There are many approaches to effective social media. Based on our experience managing social media accounts for various public agencies and tapping into the resources listed above, here are some common characteristics of successful public agency social media engagement:

- Agency has clear goals for each social media platform, and has dedicated staff time to its maintenance
- Leadership/elected officials have bought into the plan
- Clear, but not overly prescriptive policies and guidelines

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- Tone and approach shows the individual people behind the accounts, instead of using an impersonal “agency” voice
- The communicators managing the accounts have substantial autonomy and are fluent in current key messages
- Content and answer-review processes are clear and quick
- Agency takes criticism in stride and knows what to address/escalate and what to ignore

When evaluating which platforms to use in Kirkland, consider this checklist before diving in:

	Facebook	Instagram	Reddit
	Twitter	NextDoor	
Identify your goals for using this platform, and the boundaries for the content/conversations you want to have	X	X	X
Dedicate a budget for staff time and paid posts or ads	X	X	
Experiment with and become familiar with the platform’s internal tools (e.g. Facebook Live) and community conventions (e.g. Reddit Ask Me Anything)	X	X	X
Use analytics to identify your successful content and decipher what makes it successful	X		
Develop a protocol for PIOs to share information, content ideas, and know who manages which accounts and when	X	X	X
Create and use a 6-month content calendar to plan campaigns	X	X	
Develop a protocol for engaging with media/press on that platform		X	X
Define boundaries for tone, informality, and administrators’ leash for using language/community conventions of given platform	X	X	X

Additional considerations and recommendations for specific platforms:

Facebook:

- Very few of your page’s fans will see your posts if you do not pay to boost them. Experiment with boosting posts to determine which seem to get the best response. Don’t be afraid to boost posts that share important information
- Facebook Live video streaming is a good way to broadcast an event or hold a Q&A
- Engagement (actions taken with your content) is a more valuable metric of success than page likes and impressions

Twitter:

- Twitter is a good tool for engaging with reporters and for sharing real-time, actionable information (traffic, event updates, emergency information, etc.)



- Engagement (actions taken with your content) is a more valuable metric of success than followers and impressions

6. Recommendations and things to try

From our own evaluation of the city of Kirkland's communications, and our conversations with communications staff, we have compiled a range of suggested initiatives and adjustments for City Council, city leaders, department heads and the PIO cohort to consider. The scope of this summary was limited to providing ideas and best practices, not a budget recommendation or implementation strategy. From here, the city should be able to move toward the assessment process we recommend, and ultimately prioritize which medium and long-term activities are most important to pursue in 2017.

We have broken these ideas and suggestions into high, medium and low-effort categories, where effort refers to the staff time and energy required to undertake and, where relevant, maintain the proposal.

High-effort:

- Department managers incorporate any new or expanded communications initiatives into their 2017 budget requests
- Invest in an internal database that tracks and categorizes select incoming communications
- Invest in a social media monitoring platform that organizes the communications team and assists with data analysis (e.g. Sprout Social, Hootsuite, Simply Measured, NUVI)
- Install monitors in city-owned facilities to display an events calendar and city social media (senior center, library, maintenance center, community centers PKCC, NKCC, City Hall, court)
- Invest in in-house training content for new junior communicators and new PIO managers (possibly produced as online modules from IT/graphics as well as other content for in-person trainings)

Medium-effort:

- Determine PIOs' role in handling social media, then create a protocol and hold trainings to reinforce the approach
- Examine authorization structure for social media and other communications efforts, to ensure proper balance of autonomy and oversight
- Use regular PIO meetings to hold training sessions on social media, graphics/IT, and other communications topics
- Turn the City Update newsletter into a blog that emphasizes infographics and bullet points over newspaper-style articles, and allows for guest posting, social sharing, and more creative content
- Standardize the tone, look and feel of the many GovDelivery bulletins and e-mails
- Create a fact-checking or rumor-dispelling page on city website (modeled after Kansas City, MO initiative)

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- Empower PIOs to take videos and photo in the field, either to share directly on social media or send to communications leads for sharing
- Mail periodic postcards to new citizens introducing ways to engage with the city, or send a citywide postcard when introducing big changes to city services or communication channels
- Replace business newsletter with an annual business survey or 1:1 interviews to better understand business community's needs
- Include a formal IT/graphics training as part of new employee orientations, led by IT/graphics leads
- Experiment with ways to incorporate City Council into communications (e.g. "City Councilmembers in Cars Getting Coffee"; State of the City video teasers; Q&A video series)
- Identify key language audiences within Kirkland and establish a system for regularly translating materials
- Continue to explore how other cities use social media platforms
- Organize meetups with other Eastside civic communications managers to share knowledge and brainstorm methods of collaboration

Low-effort:

- Display events calendar and city social media feeds on monitor in City Hall lobby
- Post a master PIO list on city's intranet identifying roles and positions within larger city structure
- Create a "menu of services" that explains the types of products the web/graphics/video department can publish, and the level of effort required
- Create protocol for routinely informing key city staff about emerging online conversations or escalating content
- Standardize use of city logo on print and web materials
- Pursue collaborations with other Kirkland information sources like Kirkland Reporter
- Compile "evergreen" print and digital story topics from different city departments for production when time allows
- Designate a person to live-tweet Council and Planning Commission meetings or broadcast them via Facebook Live
- Consolidate the number of GovDelivery mailing list options
- Spread out the uploading of Currently Kirkland video segments to create a regular stream of content
- Maintain a list of teens, residents and businesses who might have an interest in working on video feature stories (i.e. festivals, tourism or adventure segments, new businesses, entrepreneurs, neighborhoods, family fun)
- Try posting short, cellphone-shot videos of events or trending topics to YouTube or Facebook as an avenue to resource-light engagement



- Consider using brief online questionnaires once a year to learn where tech-savvy Kirkland residents get information and engage with city services

Next steps

Enviroissues will submit two additional summaries as part of this scope of work. One will focus on social media as it relates to public record and open public meeting compliance. The other will revisit the city's current organizational capacity to carry out current work and any new efforts that may emerge as top communications priorities.