City of Montpelier
vermont

SUBJECT: City's Communications Plan

SUBMITTING DEPARTMENT: City Manager's Office

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Discussion and Council input

RELATED COUNCIL GOAL/PRIOR ACTION: Responsible and Responsive Government

EXPENDITURE REQUIRED: N/A

SOURCE OF FUNDS: N/A

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS: N/A

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: City staff have been working to improve and expand public awareness of issues, challenges, opportunities and successes throughout the city. This has been a priority for the Council, as well. The City Manager's office developed a Communications Plan for improving public outreach, and would appreciate Council feedback and input.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS: The proposed plan is attached

INTERESTED PARTIES: City Manager's Office, Residents

CITY MANAGER'S APPROVAL:

Communications Plan
Office of the City Manager
September 26, 2018

On any given day, the public seeks information large and small from and about the City of Montpelier. They might want to know who to call to obtain a dog license, where and when to pay their property taxes, inquire about construction going on near their home or business, determine the accuracy of rumors, and more.

We have vastly improved our ability to provide that information in a timely manner, expanding social media, reaching out to the press, and updating the City's website. We have also expanded the voices delivering that information so the best, most credible sources speak on appropriate issues.

Our communications work has become a model for other communities, and we have been asked to speak about it at municipal conferences.

That said, we are now addressing what's not working, and improve what is.

Goals:
1. Increase and expand the use of a variety of platforms to provide the public with information about City meetings, events, issues and other pertinent information, and offer opportunities to comment.
2. Update the City's Web site in a timely matter.
3. Actively and pro-actively engage the press and public in issues.

Currently:
Use of social media on a daily basis, including Front Porch Forum, Facebook, Twitter and the City of Montpelier Web page to provide information and reminders on:
- Meetings, agendas, City-sponsored events and deadlines, Montpelier-focused news, etc.
- Significant news events, urgent notifications like weather emergencies, public advisories
- Montpelier-based human interest stories, good news events, quirky goings-on.
- Challenges and problems facing the Council, the City, residents and businesses.

Use of VTALERT to immediately inform residents and others of urgent situations in and around the City
Use of press releases, press conferences, op-eds to the Times Argus and The Montpelier Bridge on timely and/or complicated issues for community discussion
Use of departmental (including Community Services) and Montpelier Alive e-mail lists and newsletters to communicate with the public
Use of Department of Public Works door-to-door outreach and neighborhood-specific e-mail alerts
Public posting of the City Manager's Weekly Report
Use of community speaking opportunities, such as Rotary, to discuss public events.

Council policies on Press and Public Relations.
Can be found in the annual City Council Handbook and attached to this document.

Public information.
The City has dramatically increased its social media audience, which is a good way to very quickly provide information to the public. We post on Front Porch Forum and Facebook, and Tweet information large and small: meeting topics and times, traffic advisories, promotional info on City-sponsored events and deadlines, advisories about extreme weather or snow parking alerts, etc. This has been a good way to convey information and allow the public to comment. We monitor the comments closely.

Our departments maintain their individual social media style and presence, and we are increasingly cross-sharing posts to expand the reach of the information.

We also have actively promoted the 'good' things going on in the City, including progress on development projects like TIF and 1 Taylor Street, work on Council-passed initiatives, and money-saving, innovative action to remind people that Montpelier is a great place to live, work and play. In addition, we are publicly addressing the problems and negative events that also occur in our City.

To build on that focus, we are considering the use of other avenues like Instagram, which is a good way to reach a younger audience. In addition to monitoring public comments on issues, we will quickly respond to false information with correct facts from our best sources (not add to argumentative threads, but instead put forward the facts that help most people better understand the issues).

In addition, we will be pro-active in providing information to address the rumors that inevitably spread in close communities like Montpelier. We have encouraged our departments to share tips, rumors and information they receive in the course of a day; we invite the Council to pass along to the City Manager's office similar questions and concerns they receive from the public, as well.

Montpelier Web Page.
The City's Web page underwent a significant makeover several years ago, with a more photo-based, cleaner look. We continue to tweak the pages to update information and remove stale sites. This has been a painstaking process, but we continue to work toward the best Web page possible. We appreciate hearing about problematic information!

Our mission now is to not only have a clean and accurate site, but ensure the public can easily access the information. To this end, we're moving time-sensitive information to the front page [we created a prominent button on the opening Web page to highlight information regarding the proposed parking garage, for example], and increasing our use of urgent or emergency notifications right up front.

In addition, we continue to improve the public's ability to search for information. Some information is easy to access; other pages, including meeting minutes, can be a challenge.

We are studying other communities' Web pages (we find searchability is a common problem with sites across the country) and meeting with our tech contractor to implement improvements. Our goal is to provide a Web page that uses common-sense prompts and visuals to quickly provide accurate information.

Engage the press.
There is so much good news these days in Montpelier, and we are getting the word out through traditional sources like The Times Argus, Montpelier Bridge, WDEV, television and radio, and other media sources that

reach people who aren't connected to social media. We are also ensuring the press is informed of the challenges, complex issues and problems we are dealing with.

To this end, we actively reach out to the press, setting up news conferences to tell our stories, and sending out fact sheets to the media to ensure they have the information they need. City Manager Bill Fraser and Mayor Anne Watson use the City's monthly column in The Montpelier Bridge to talk about what's going on in the City, and we will be submitting op-eds when appropriate to other media sources, including The Times Argus.

VTALERT.
VTALERT is an on-line system allowing the City to notify the public of critical, time-sensitive events – road closures, snow storms and other weather events, flooding, gas leaks, etc. Staff throughout City government are currently training on the system; Vermont Emergency Management backs up municipalities when staff is too consumed with handling an event to send out the alert.

VTALERT messages are sent via cell phone, landline or e-mail. We have used the system in the past, particularly to inform the public of weather issues and winter parking bans. We will promote VTALERT sign-up in the coming months so more residents and businesses are able to receive messages. In addition, we will periodically test the system to ensure it works properly and educate the public about its functionality and availability.

This system also links to social media, traditional press, and can be copied on the City's opening Facebook page.

Overall.
We are proud of the strides we've made to expand access to public information, give the public a more active voice in their local government, tell our City's stories, and work with the public to solve our problems.

The mission now is to be much more pro-active, promote our good news and get ahead of negative and incorrect information, and ensure easy access to the facts.