



**CORPORATION OF THE TOWNSHIP OF ESQUIMALT**

**COUNCIL POLICY**

**TITLE: MEDIA RELATIONS**

**NO. ADMIN-70**

**POLICY:**

The Township of Esquimalt values an open, positive relationship with the media, as it is an effective tool to distribute information on Township issues, programs and events to residents and other stakeholders. "Media" includes traditional media forms (print, radio, and television) as well as social media and online news and event outlets. To tell our story well and to help the media do their job, we must take an organized approach to media relations. Every attempt should be made to assist the media in their news gathering by responding promptly and accurately.

Enquiries from the news media are given top priority by the Township of Esquimalt and should be responded to as quickly and efficiently as possible. Routine enquiries are handled at the discretion of departmental directors. Enquiries and communications during times of crisis, or during other significant community issues, should be coordinated through the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and the Communications Coordinator.

All Township employees should notify the CAO and Communications Coordinator when contact has been made with a media representative regarding a significant Township project or issue. This will ensure that a complete and timely response is provided to the news media and that the contact is documented. It is not necessary to notify the Communications Coordinator when the media has been contacted concerning day-to-day programming, a departmental event, or program promotions.

**GUIDELINES:**

**1. Spokespersons**

Clearly defined roles and responsibilities save time and confusion. Township spokesperson guidelines are listed below:

- Ultimate responsibility for communication at the Township of Esquimalt rests with the Mayor and CAO.
- Directors and identified management staff are authorized to speak with the media on operational issues that fall within their areas of expertise or responsibility.
- All other employees should refer any media enquiries to their Director, the CAO, or Communications Coordinator. Pass along the reporter's name, contact information, time of call, nature of enquiry and media deadline.
- A spokesperson may be appointed by the CAO on an issue of major significance. These spokespersons may be subject matter experts, legal counsel, or fire department public information officers. All managers will be notified of spokesperson appointments and all inquiries regarding the emerging issue should be forwarded to the appropriate spokesperson.
- Any questions regarding political issues should be referred to the CAO, who will coordinate a response with the Mayor.
- Any questions regarding new, existing or upcoming policy should be referred to

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Council via the CAO. It is the responsibility of staff to implement the policy set by Council, not to comment on this policy.

- Staff never answer, through any media channel including social media, questions that would require:
  - expressing personal opinion about Township staff, legislation, programs, operations, policies or practices;
  - speculating about policy direction, future funding, resources (including staffing); or
  - announcing new programs or initiatives prior to an official corporate launch or grand opening.

## **2. Social Media**

Those staff members who have been authorized by the CAO or department director to post to social media sites follow the same guidelines as Township spokespersons. In addition, the following guidelines apply to staff involved in social media communications:

- Information posted to these sites must follow all existing Township policies concerning freedom of information and protection of privacy, code of conduct, Council's Strategic Plan, and other administrative and legal guidelines.
- Anyone posting to social media sites is restricted to communication that falls within their area of expertise.
- While social media communications is inherently less formal than other forms of communications, all information posted must be accurate, current and relevant to our residents and other stakeholders.
- When staff members encounter social media posts or images that may require an official response or follow up from the Township, staff must notify the appropriate Director, and alert the CAO and Communications Coordinator.

## **3. Media Toolkit**

When dealing with the media, effective message delivery depends on using the right tool at the right time. Essentially, we release information in two situations:

- Regular information updates to inform residents and other stakeholders of Township business, programs and new initiative, and
- Major announcements and issues-oriented communications.

Social media and online communications are playing a larger role in media relations by providing options to the traditional news release. The decision to issue a formal release to media, or to issue information through online forms or other means, should only be made after consulting with the CAO and Communications Coordinator. The primary media relations tools available to the Township include:

- News Release – A media or news release provides newsworthy information of public interest that the Township wishes the media to broadcast. It is important that the Township issue only real “news” under the banner of a news release. When the release is received by the media, it should be seen as essential information for residents and other stakeholders, not as inconsequential or trivial. The document is usually no more than one page long and answers the W5 (who, what, where, when, why) of news reporting. Other forms of information releases to the media can include:
  - A public service announcement: used for events, traffic updates, public works

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information, etc.

- A media advisory targeted to media representatives to advise of a photo or interview opportunity.

All media releases are issued by Corporate Services. In the absence of the Communications Coordinator, the Director of Corporate Services should be contacted. All releases must be pre-approved by the CAO.

- Advertisement – While paid advertising is generally not considered under the heading of “media relations” it does guarantee placement in a publication, and complete control over the message. The Township purchases advertising to inform the public of upcoming public meetings and events, open houses, and new programs/services. In addition, individual Township departments make promotional advertising purchases related to tourism. Township branding, and parks and recreation programming. Most Township advertising purchases are made in print media only, but there may be situations where purchases in social media, television or radio are warranted and appropriate.
- Opinion Editorials – When there is confusion concerning a Township issue, or misinformation circulating in the community concerning a Township program or policy, an opinion piece is a way to set the record straight. This can be a full-blown editorial of 800 words or more, or a simple statement of the facts and/or correction sent as a letter to the editor. Normally only the CAO or Mayor, with assistance from Corporate Services, is authorized to submit an opinion piece on behalf of the Township.
- News Conference – News conferences save time and effort when issues arise where information is changing rapidly. Briefing all regional media at one time and within media deadlines is an efficient way of communicating information. News conferences can be held in Council Chambers, or at a location that is appropriate to the subject matter. They usually include a statement or presentation from the Mayor or Township representative on the topic, and an opportunity for a question and answer period. A news conference often concludes with an opportunity for reporters to interview spokespersons one-on-one. News conferences should be managed so that all media representatives understand what time the conference concludes, and the time available for questions and individual interviews.
- Social Media – Social media provides the opportunity to issue key information to stakeholders immediately, and to monitor potential emerging issues. It is now an integral part of media relations and is used in combination with traditional forms (linking from Twitter/Facebook to news items on the website) and on its own (monitoring, posting relevant information of interest to residents, and responding to queries).
- *Note: In order to maintain consistency in Township communications, all proactive media contact should be initiated through Corporate Services. This includes news releases, media advisories, public service announcements, media events, news conferences and photo opportunities.*

**4. Issues Management**

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All staff members have a role to play in managing communications issues. Effective issue management relies on:

- Predicting areas of media interest;
- Gathering relevant information beforehand rather than scrambling for information once reporters' deadlines are looming;
- Identifying the appropriate spokesperson; and
- Being Proactive – If you are questioned by a reporter on an issue or believe that a project will be controversial and likely to draw public attention, inform your manager and/or department head. He or she is then responsible for immediately completing a briefing note, which should be copied to the Mayor and CAO as soon as possible. Briefing notes are considered confidential internal information and must include the following information:
  - The name of the issue, program or situation;
  - Background, including:
    - A brief summary/chronology of the issue;
    - The name of the reporter/media outlet and telephone number;
    - Clipping of the news article, if relevant;
    - Suggested response to the issue;
    - Name and phone number of contact for more information; and
    - Date the briefing note is written.

**5. When the Media Calls**

- First Point of Contact – Any staff member contacted by the media should be courteous, business-like, and helpful, but should not answer specific questions about an issue or program if they are not qualified to do so. Most major media outlets call the Mayor's office directly. Township directors may also have established relationships with local reporters and the media may contact them directly. Or, reporters may contact any staff member within a department that they feel may provide information on an issue. In these cases, administrative staff has a vital role to play as the media's first point of contact within the Township. The first step when receiving a call from the media is to get all pertinent information from the reporter:
  - Name and phone number;
  - Employer (radio or TV station? Newspaper? Freelance?);
  - Question(s) or general area of inquiry;
  - Deadline (how quickly do they need the information?);
  - Will others be interviewed on this topic?; and
  - When will the story be broadcast/printed/posted?

Provide this information immediately to your director and also notify the Communications Coordinator, in case calls have already come through on the issue. The director will either return the call to the media or arrange for an appropriate spokesperson to call the reporter back with a response.

- If the Media Arrives Unexpectedly – If a reporter arrives and is carrying a camera, or is accompanied by a video camera, politely escort the reporter to the waiting area and contact your manager or department head. They will establish what information is required, if the Township is in a position to provide it, and designate a spokesperson. Remember that no one is obligated to grant an interview on the spot. As a professional

courtesy, however, you can offer to arrange an interview at a later, mutually-convenient time.

- Media Relations Reminders for Authorized Spokesperson
  - Speak to only what you know and your own area of expertise
  - Don't ever guess (if you are unsure of the answer – then say so)
  - Don't say "no comment" – it makes you look like you have something to hide
  - Don't repeat negative words in your answer to reporters – emphasize the positive
  - Don't lay blame
  - Don't belittle the situation
  - Honesty is the best policy
  - It's always on the record
  - Plan before you speak and, if required, buy yourself time by asking the reporter to repeat the question
  - Stick to the facts
  - Never answer questions that would require discussing ideas underlying existing policy, or speculating about policy direction, future funding, resources (including staffing) or announcing new programs or initiatives.
  
- Radio/Television Appearance Requests – The CAO should be contacted prior to any staff member accepting an invitation to appear on a radio or television program. The CAO will determine, if it is advisable, who should appear and if a member of Council should also appear on the program.

**6. Staff and the Media**

- Speaking on behalf of community organizations – In their private lives, staff members are often involved in community organizations or personal activities which have a public focus. In general, no employee should serve as media spokesperson for any community organization dealing with issues relating to the Township. Neither the public nor the media is likely to discern the difference between the roles of employee and community spokesperson. Such a situation is almost certain to place the employee in a perceived conflict of interest. If you are uncertain if your personal dealings with the media may put you in this position, speak with your director. If you find yourself in a position where you must speak to the media about any Township matter which is outside of your duties, notify your manager and ensure the CAO is informed in advance of the nature and purpose of your interview.
  
- Staff responding to media stories as private citizens – Everyone has the right to express personal viewpoints on any issue. If staff members wish to comment as private citizens, using traditional or social media, on a topic that involves the Township, the following guidelines should be used:
  - Correspondence may not be prepared on Township time or distributed through official Township channels.
  - Telephone or email contact may not be made on Township time using Township equipment.
  - Communications on the issue should not include the employee's official title or imply that the response is on behalf of the Township.
  - If speaking at a public meeting, a disclaimer must be given if the employee is not representing the Township on the issue.

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**6. Correcting Information Released by the Media**

The Township has the responsibility to clarify or correct any information released by the media that contains inaccuracies regarding a Township-related issue. The CAO, Mayor and appropriate department heads should be notified if an editorial comment or news story does not adequately represent a balanced perspective of the issue or if the media has released information containing a factual error that significantly impacts the public's perception of the Township. They will determine whether an official Township response is appropriate and, with input from the Communications Coordinator, will decide on the appropriate media form and timing. This response could range from a phone call/email to a reporter, to issuing an op-ed piece to the media outlet clarifying the position of the Township.

**7. Public Safety and Emergency Communications**

- Fire Department – Fire department staff members respond to incidents of public and media interest on a 24/7 basis and therefore have designated staff acting as media spokespersons in rapidly changing situations. These spokespersons are designated by the CAO or fire chief after appropriate training. Any calls from media on a fire issue should be immediately re-directed to the fire department. Information released to the media by the fire department should be in a standardized and consistent format and be forwarded to the CAO and the Communications Coordinator as soon as it is released. During Township business hours, the Communications Coordinator can assist with writing and editing of releases on significant incidents.
- Police Department – The Victoria Police Department has its own media relations personnel and guidelines. The Communications Coordinator works closely with the Police Department when policing issues affect Township departments.
- Emergency Communications – During a major community crisis or emergency, media relations activities are specified in an emergency plan developed by the Township's Emergency Program. The primary point of contact during an emergency is the designated information officer. The spokesperson during an emergency is identified in the emergency plan, and could be the Mayor, the CAO, a designated department head, or the information officer. In an emergency situation that requires the activation of an Emergency Operations Centre (EOC), all messages are approved and released through the EOC.

**8. Role of Mayor and Council Members**

The Mayor is the official spokesperson for the Township, but Council members also respond directly to media enquiries. If a Council member offers an individual opinion on an operational issue, it should be clearly stated that it is an opinion, and not the official position of the Township.

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