MUNICIPALITY OF NORTH Cowichan

Council Communications Plan

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COUNCIL COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Overview

Effective communications are key to the success of North Cowichan and the well-being of its community including residents, businesses, Municipal employees, and community and stakeholder groups. Open and proactive communications ensure that Municipal employees and the public receive clear, relevant, timely and consistent information from the Municipality. A well-managed communications plan strengthens public confidence in its local government, and results in increased resident and business satisfaction and high employee morale.

North Cowichan's Communications Committee, a standing committee under section 141 of the *Community Charter,* was tasked with developing a Council Communications Plan to guide civic engagement and manage Council communications. Creation of the Council Communications Plan (the Plan) is the first stage in the development of a Corporate Communications Plan.

The Communications Committee, with the assistance of staff, undertook a review of current corporate communications practices and local government best practices to develop a strategic Council Communications Plan which includes:

(a) issue management;
(b) enhanced public engagement; and
(c) public awareness and education.

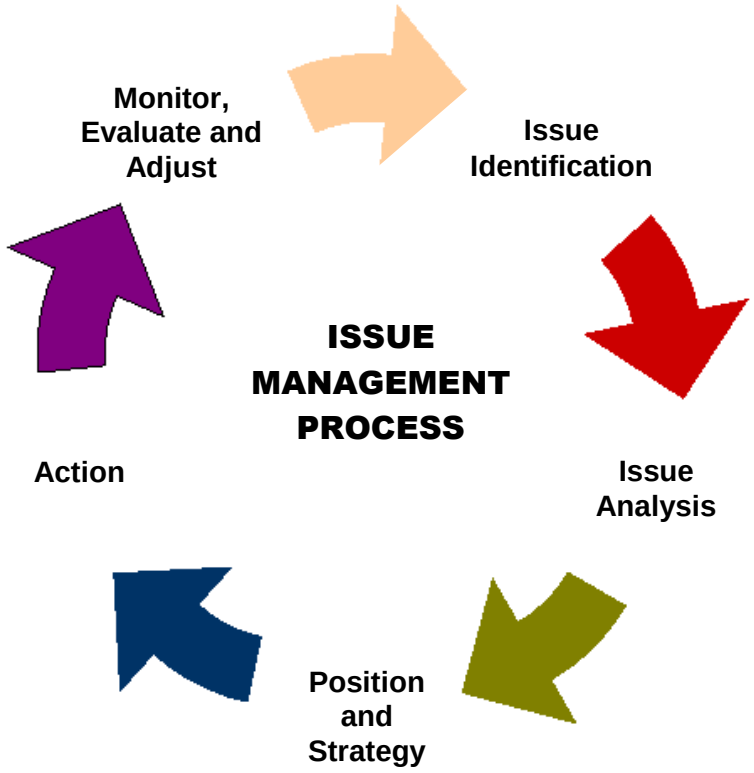
.1 Issue Management

An issue's potential outcomes can have a significant impact on North Cowichan's regulatory burden, reputation and financial well-being. Well-handled issues present opportunities to build awareness and trust among key stakeholders in North Cowichan. When issues are handled incorrectly, the Municipality faces the very real risk of litigation, the loss of reputation and public acceptance and trust. The difference between taking advantage of opportunities and suffering additional costs lies in the timely identification and prioritization of issues and the development of appropriate responses to inform the final outcome.

North Cowichan's Issue Management Strategy will capture both an "inside" analysis (i.e., as seen from North Cowichan's perspective) and an "outside" analysis (i.e., as seen from the point-of-view of the public, media and external stakeholders). It ensures that potential issues are identified, and also recognizes linkages and ensures we take action to prevent crises from occurring.

In order to ensure that we are capturing the right issues and prioritizing them so they can be managed effectively, an Issue Management Team will be formed for each issue that is identified. The team will analyze the impact and urgency of potential issues in order to develop a set of priorities to manage the issues. These priorities, in turn, will inform and shape numerous decisions and responses.

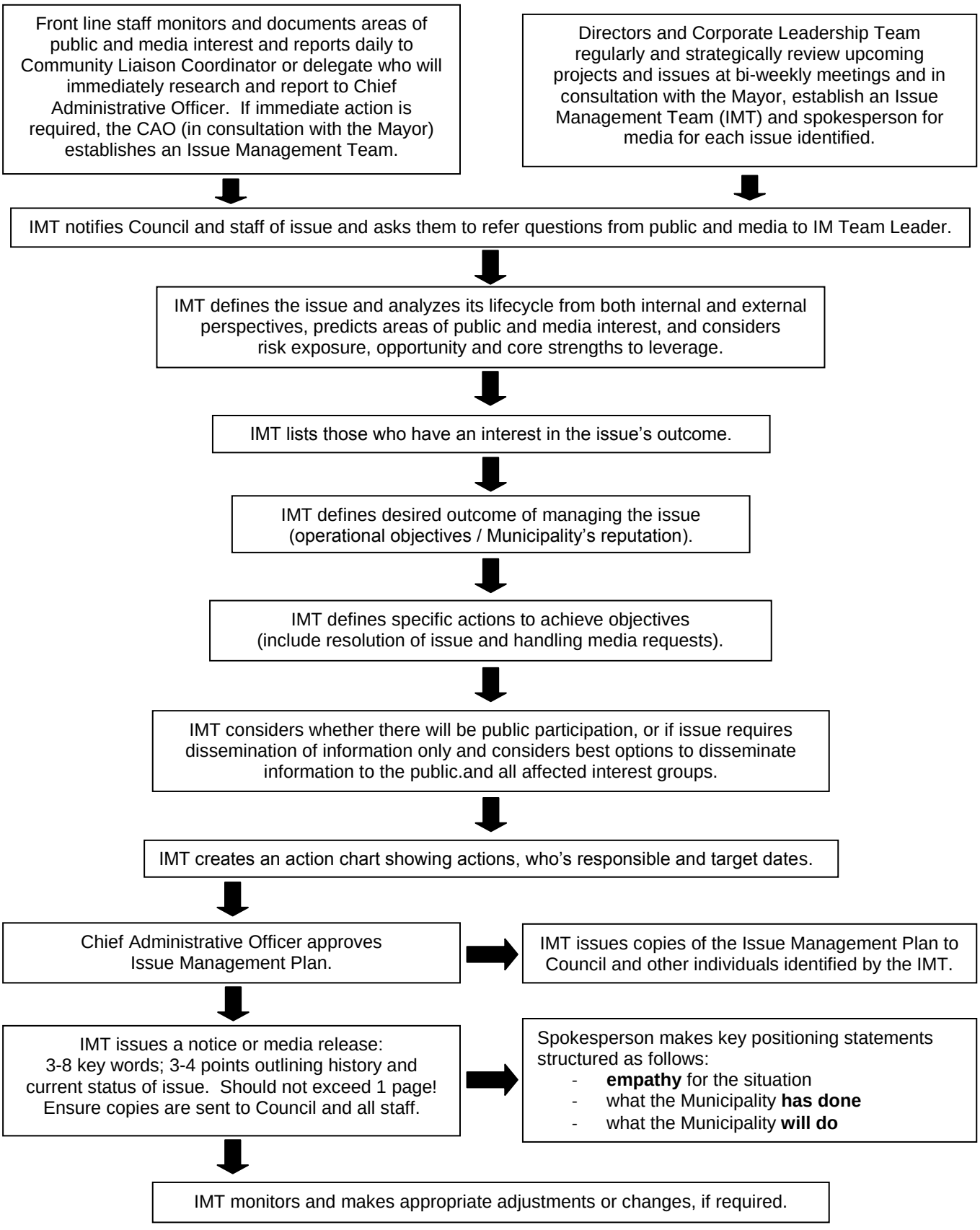
As North Cowichan begins to interact both internally and externally, more feedback and information will be gathered about the issue: the types of risks and opportunities; the identity and motives of protagonists and antagonists; and a finer understanding of what key stakeholders expect from North Cowichan.



A key challenge of issue management is to resolve the problem quickly and move on, with as little impact to the Municipality as possible. This strategy provides a structure for making decisions when issues arise.

It's also important to conduct a post-implementation review to evaluate and learn for future issues. The more that is learned about our issues, the better prepared we'll be for the next one. Some issues might occur again, so by recording what we've learned from previous initiatives, it will be easier for subsequent issue management teams to identify the issues and resolve them successfully. Other issues might be part of a risk pattern that can be proactively identified and managed with early risk assessment.

Issue Management Strategy



.2 Public Engagement

Often, the public is uncertain about the role that it should play in North Cowichan's decision-making. As elected officials, Council members are legally responsible for municipal decisions on the understanding that Council will represent the interests and values of the community. Public engagement offers many benefits to Council's decision-making process and is a key component of open and transparent governance. If decisions can be influenced, public engagement is appropriate.

For some residents, engagement is a form of empowerment as it allows the public to influence decisions. The Municipality will benefit immensely by providing frequent and more active opportunities for public engagement through the sharing of information, consulting, involving and collaborating on projects, policy development, strategies and plans for strategic investments. Public engagement includes any process that allows the public to be involved in problem-solving or decision-making and uses public input to help make decisions.

North Cowichan's current engagement practices occur in two ways:

- engagement mandated by legislation (e.g., Public Hearings, notice requirements), and
- other engagement (e.g., workshops, town hall meetings, etc.).

Public engagement should not be considered a singular approach that can be applied rigidly to all situations. The steps below will provide guidance to ensure the most important aspects of designing a public engagement process are addressed, while allowing for flexibility based on the issue. Once it is established that public participation should take place, it will need to be determined how to do so in a way that considers the needs of Council, residents, and other interested parties.

1. Determine who the decision-maker is, what the pending decision is, and who will be affected.
2. Decide if public engagement should be used (Will the public be significantly affected? Has Council made a previous commitment to public consultation on the issue? Are there unknown public perceptions and other information gaps? Is there controversy around the issue or decision?)
3. Determine the issues related to the decision for each affected party.
4. Determine the level of public engagement that is needed to help make a decision, and what to consult on.
5. Determine the type of public participation needed to suit the needs of participants.
6. Determine how public participation will support and link to the decision.
7. Determine how the results will be used.

(a) Guiding Principles

To confirm Council's commitment to public engagement, in every process, regardless of the scope, the following principles will be the foundation for public engagement activities.

Authenticity	The pending decision has not been made and Council commits to be influenced in the decision-making to a specific level that will be communicated in advance.
Accountability	Council will demonstrate that results and outcomes are consistent with the commitment to public participation that was made to stakeholder groups and the public at the outset of the initiative.

Inclusiveness	Council will make a reasonable effort to include stakeholder groups and the public affected by the pending decision.
Transparency	Council will ensure that stakeholder groups and the public that are affected understand the scope of the pending decision, decision process and procedures, and that any constraints on the decision-maker are known.
Commitment	Council will provide appropriate time to ensure that those involved can participate in a meaningful way.
Integrity	Council will address public and stakeholder group concerns in an honest and forthright way.

(b) Core Values of Public Participation

Although Council is elected to make decisions on behalf of North Cowichan citizens, some of those decisions will benefit from additional public participation. The following set of core values will provide a solid platform for engaging the public, especially when additional public participation is required for a specific issue. Adoption of a statement of core values on public participation will assist Council in making better decisions that reflect the interests and concerns of the public, and will assist staff in the development and implementation of public participation processes.

1. Public participation is based on the belief that two-way communication between Council and the public provides opportunities for open and constructive dialogue.
2. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
3. Public participation is designed to respect the opinions of all those involved.
4. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will be considered in the decision.
5. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision-makers.
6. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
7. Public participation seeks input from participants on how they wish to participate.
8. Public participation provides the information that is necessary to participate in a meaningful way.
9. Public participation communicates to participants how their input has affected the decision.

Public engagement will provide opportunities to share ideas and values, and discover areas of mutual interest and concern. It will also identify potential and existing concerns and areas of conflict before they escalate. Ideally, an effective public engagement strategy will allow individuals and groups to build cooperative working relationships and mutual understanding.

Public Engagement Strategy

INFORM

Provide the public with balanced and objective information so they understand the problem, alternatives, opportunities and / or solutions.

Objective:
Keep the public informed.

Tools:
- fact sheets
- newspaper notice
- public open house
- website
- social media (Twitter, Facebook)

When to Inform
- public education initiatives
- safety initiatives
- disruption of services

CONSULT

Obtain feedback on analysis, alternatives, and or decisions.

Objective:
Keep the public informed, listen and acknowledge concerns, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.

Tools:
- invite public comment
- focus group
- surveys
- public meetings
- public hearings

INVOLVE

Work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.

Objective:
Work with the public to ensure their concerns are directly reflected in the alternatives and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.

Tools:
- workshops
- deliberative polling

COLLABORATE

Partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.

Objective:
Ask the public for advice and ideas to find solutions. Incorporate public advice and recommendations into the decisions as much as possible.

Tools:
- advisory committees
- consensus-building
- participatory decision-making

EMPOWER

Allow the public to make the final decision.

Objective:
Implement public decision.

Tools:
- ballots
- delegated decision-making

When to Engage

(The strategy will be adaptable to fit each specific issue identified for public engagement.)

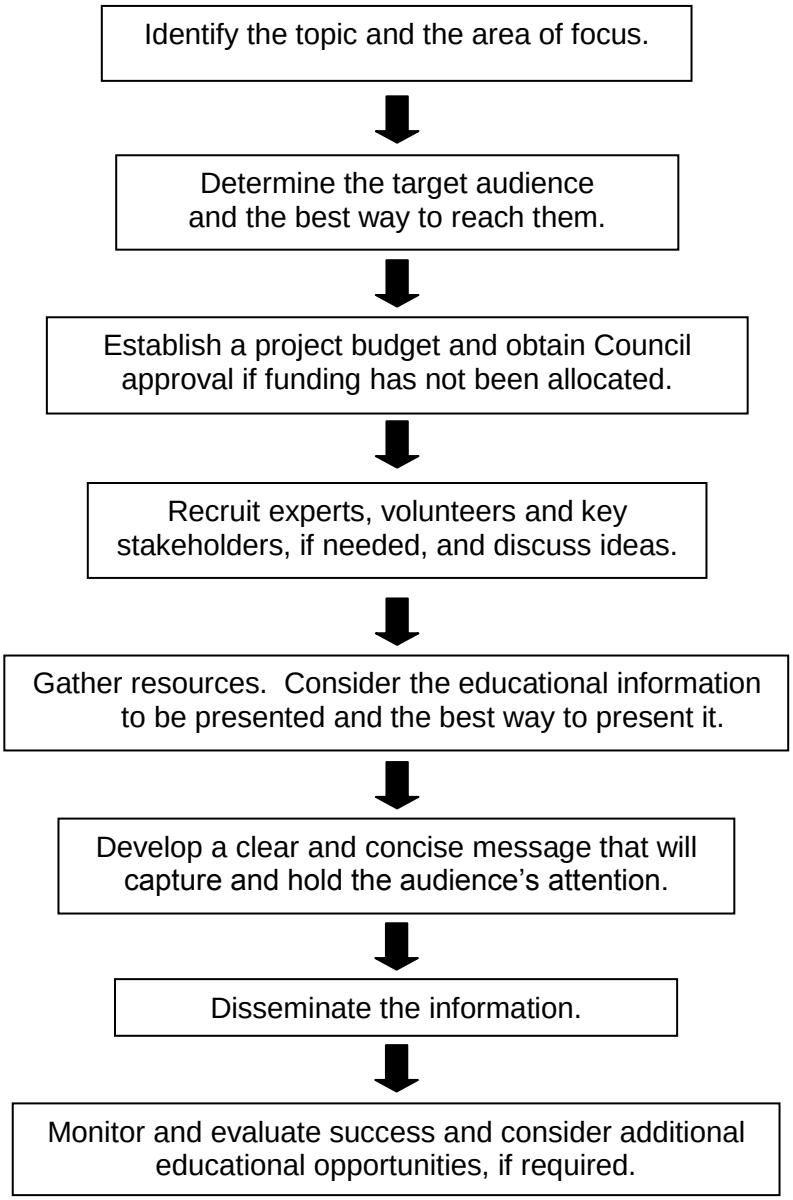
Examples:
- policy development
- annual budget / financial plan
- development variance permits
- Official Community Plan Bylaw amendments
- Zoning Bylaw amendments
- community amenity projects (e.g., boardwalks, parks, multi-use trails)
- program development
- municipal services review
- ALR exclusion/ inclusion applications
- development concepts for municipal property
- local area services
- neighbourhood plans

When to Empower
- elections
- referenda

.3 Public Awareness and Education

A public awareness and education strategy will allow the Municipality to provide awareness in general or focus on specific topics to the entire population or specific groups. Opportunities for public awareness and education may include upcoming Municipal initiatives, bylaw requirements, provision of a new service, general local elections and other voting.

The framework for public education will consist of the following process.



Concluding Remarks

Communication is essential to understanding. The Council Communications Plan reflects North Cowichan Council's commitment to better connect with its residents, businesses, employees, the media, and community and stakeholder groups through consistent messaging and sustainable open and transparent communication. It is a commitment that Council will allow the public opportunities to express themselves, and acknowledge that they have been heard and understood. The opportunity for both Council and the public to hear each other will provide a better understanding of the issues early on in the decision-making process, and establish a process that will ultimately result in understanding, acceptance and trust between all parties.

Next Steps

An effective Communications Plan takes time and resources, both of which are in limited supply. The Committee recommends the hiring of a part-time Community Liaison Coordinator and additional operational funds to co-ordinate the development of a Corporate Communications Plan and manage the implementation of the Plan in support of the Council Communications Plan developed by the Communications Committee. The Corporate Communications Plan should include:

(1) the expansion of external communications through:

- (a) development of communications policies, strategies and tactics;
- (b) alignment of communications strategies with corporate objectives;
- (c) corporate branding, identity and visibility;
- (d) public surveys including a customer satisfaction survey;
- (e) the creation of a regularly-published "Municipal Page" in the local newspaper (possibly shared on a rotating basis with the CVRD and the City of Duncan);
- (f) an enhanced social media presence;
- (g) additional opportunities for public consultation and collaboration;
- (h) co-ordinated and targeted advertising;
- (i) development of a corporate style guide;
- (j) special needs (language, disabilities) considerations;
- (k) communications training for Municipal spokespersons; and

(2) the expansion of internal communications through:

- (a) a survey of Municipal employees to obtain input on how to better improve internal communications;
- (b) the development and implementation of customer service standards;
- (c) an "Innovations Committee" (comprised of staff from all levels of the organization) to review current practices and procedures and discuss areas for change, improvement and cost-savings;
- (d) enhanced employee orientation, training and professional development; and

(3) the requirement for an annual report of the previous year's accomplishments.