



## CITY OF SAN MARCOS, TEXAS

### COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

#### PURPOSE

To establish policy, procedures and guidelines for public communication between City officials and employees and those citizens, news media representatives and others requiring information concerning City issues, programs, projects, services and activities.

#### POLICY

It is the policy of the City of San Marcos to encourage positive communication and to ensure the exchange of accurate, timely information among City Council members, City employees and administrators, citizens, media representatives and others interested in City issues, policies, operations and services.

The Director of Communications & Intergovernmental Relations (Communications Director) is responsible for developing, directing and implementing the City's overall community and media relations function. The Communications Director will assist in the planning of key programs and projects to ensure that community and media relations concerns are fully considered.

The Communications Director will act as a consultant to City departments to design communications strategies for City services and programs, develop guidelines for publications, and coordinate a consistent graphic identity for the City.

#### COMMUNITY RELATIONS

City departments and their staffs, in cooperation with the Communications Director, have a joint responsibility to initiate and develop community relations material, whether printed, displayed or produced through audio/visual media. The departments will consult with the Communications Director to ensure the presentation of a consistent, positive, and professional image for the City. Non-routine materials shall be routed through the Communications Director at an early stage for review and for approval at the final draft stage.

#### NEWS MEDIA

When questions arise from the news media, a reasonable effort should be made to answer or address them in a timely manner - generally within the business day **and according to the following levels of responsibility:**

**City Council Members, the City Manager and Assistant City Managers** will provide information on policy issues.

**Department Directors and Assistant Directors** will provide information on the planning, direction, effect, and status of policies and programs or events within their areas of responsibilities.

**Project Managers** will provide information concerning the individual projects and services within their areas of responsibility, as designated by a Department Director or Assistant Director.

## **I. CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA**

Directors should notify the Director of Communication before an interview.

In most situations, the Director should respond to media inquiries as quickly as possible with either the requested information or a timeframe for acquiring that information. This will ensure the media is given the best and most complete information in a timely manner.

All employees who handle media requests must have passed the State of Texas Open Records Act online course and must participate in media relations courses offered by the Communication Office.

When an employee is going to be interviewed by a reporter, the Director shall notify the Communication Office in advance. This will allow the Director of Communications to contact the reporter to find out if additional information or interviews are needed. (Communication Office does not need to be notified about routine Police and Fire Department contact with the media regarding blotters.)

The Communications Director will notify the City Manager, Council and other departments (when necessary) about the story being developed. This will ensure the necessary individuals are prepared if they are also contacted by the reporter. It will also prevent them from being surprised by the story when it airs or is printed.

In order to promote a consistent city-wide message Mayor and City Council should consult with the Communication Director regarding any media interviews. Under the direction of the City Manager the Communication Office will also work with the Council to promote City programs, events and policies and coordinate their participation in City activities.

## **II. PRESS RELEASES**

All news releases issued by the City shall be channeled through the Communication Office, (with the exception of daily Police and Fire Department reports or blotters). This allows all releases to follow a consistent format and makes it possible for a central file for all releases. This also keeps the Director of Communications better informed of newsworthy activities in all departments.

Press releases promoting routine events and activities should be written and edited by the individual departments and e-mailed to the Communication Office for distribution. These may include:

- a. Announcements for scheduled exhibits, classes, programs and activities at the library, activity center, parks and other City facilities; as well as City programs and initiatives
- b. Annual events sponsored by a department.
- c. Awards or special recognition given to a department or employee
- d. Construction or repair projects that will disrupt normal flow of traffic

Press releases should be as complete as possible, explaining the who, what, when and where of the activity or event.

Departments should contact the Communication Office for assistance in writing (non-routine) press releases.

The Communication Office will ensure all local media outlets are treated fairly and provided with the same information. The Communication Office will also forward news releases to the City Manager's Office and City Council so they will stay informed about City activities.

### **III. CONTROVERSIAL/CATASTROPHIC EVENTS**

All Directors will keep the Communication Office and City Manager informed of events and activities that are likely to make the news. Types of stories to be reported are those with a potential for controversy, those that might be considered negative or embarrassing, those that threaten public health and safety, and those that might produce follow-up questions from the media.

Directors should report in person or by telephone as soon as possible when:

- a. Controversial statements, accusations or debates occur in meetings of advisory boards or commissions;
- b. City services such as water, transit or garbage collection are disrupted;
- c. Personnel problems occur, such as suspensions or resignation of key individuals.
- d. Fire, explosion, accident or other emergencies result in damage of City property or cause injury or death to City personnel;
- e. An industrial accident causes injury or death to employees of contractors or vendors doing business with the City;
- f. Accident on City property results in injury or death to citizens. This might include a fall in a City building or a drowning in a City pool;
- g. Other incidents involving City personnel and injury or death to citizens. This could include a traffic accident involving a city vehicle;
- h. Litigation filed or decisions rendered;
- i. Any other events that might threaten the safety or welfare of the community.

All information should be coordinated through the Communication Office. The Director of Communications or another spokesperson will be identified to respond to all media inquiries about the event.

Having a single spokesperson will prevent conflicting, incomplete and inaccurate information from being released.

Steps should be taken to assure that no information is released by employees who are not designated to speak with the media.

If more than the media has already contacted more than one City employee, a briefing may be held to avoid the release of conflicting or contradictory statements. The City Manager will approve all press releases of a controversial nature.

In the event of a natural disaster or other catastrophic event, the City Manger, the Mayor, Emergency Management Coordinator, Police Chief, Fire Chief or Director of Communications will serve as the City's official spokesperson and will call a press conference to

ensure that information is disseminated swiftly and accurately to all media sources. The Director of Communications is the primary public information contact when the Emergency Operations Center is activated.

Every effort will be made to respond quickly and provide correct and realistic facts about the controversial or catastrophic event. By cooperating with the media, we can minimize confusion, speculation and rumors. We can also minimize the consequences of unfortunate incidents and prevent stories from being dragged out over an extended period of time with corrections and additions.

The designated spokesperson will stick to facts that have been verified and authorized for release to the media. The spokesperson will avoid answering questions that require speculation or opinion.

#### **IV. CORRECTING INACCURATE INFORMATION**

The City should clarify or correct any information released by the media that contains inaccuracies that significantly impact public perception of a city-related issue.

1. **Factual Discrepancies.** It is the responsibility of the Director to immediately contact the Communication Office when a story has been published or aired containing a factual error that significantly impacts the public's perception of the issue being discussed. Depending on the nature of the error, the request for correction will be made by written letter or an informal telephone call.
  - a. The Director and Director of Communications shall ask the City Manager's Office for direction if they feel an official City rebuttal or response is needed. If there are repeated problems with City officials being misquoted by a certain reporter, officials will be directed by the Communication Office to respond to that reporter.
2. **Letters to the Editor.** When appropriately presented, letters to the editors of newspapers and electronic media can be effective tools in clarifying a misconception of City policy or programs or correcting inaccurate information that has been widely reported by the press.
  - a. Those Directors who believe, as public officials, that a City rebuttal is warranted shall discuss their concerns

with the City Manager. The City Manager and Director of Communications will determine if a response is appropriate as well as who should prepare and sign the letter. The City Manager must review all letters sent to the editor, which identify the author as City employee/official acting in an official capacity on behalf of the City.

3. **Responding to Media Stories as Private Citizens.** The City respects employees First Amendment right to respond to the media as a private citizen. However, the following guidelines shall be followed for those employees who choose to contact, initiate or respond to City-related news stories as private citizens.

- a. Letters may not be prepared on City time, distributed on City letterhead or mailed at City expense.
- b. Telephone contact may not be made on City time using City telephones.
- c. Use of City facilities or supplies is prohibited.
- d. Responses or letters shall not include the employee's official title or status or state that the response is on behalf of the City of San Marcos.

## V. PROFESSIONAL PUBLICATIONS

The City encourages all employees to contribute articles to professional publications and journals, both as a means of enhancing personal development and highlighting City achievements.

- a. **Professional Articles.** Managers are encouraged to submit articles promoting City services/programs to the appropriate professional journals. Copies of all articles identifying the author in their official capacity or prepared on-duty shall be forwarded to the Director and Communication Office for review and comment prior to submittal for publication. The name of the publication and the tentative publication date shall be noted.
- 1) The Communication Office is available to assist in preparation, review and edit articles scheduled for publication in professional journals. Please make all requests for assistance in a reasonable time frame.

**CITIZEN REQUESTS –  
NON MEDIA**

When information is requested by a non-media customer, each City official and employee shall respond in a professional, concise and timely manner – generally within the business day – within his or her area of responsibility and knowledge.

Each employee shall notify his/her supervisor when a potential communication problem or misunderstanding may develop and what action might mitigate the situation before it becomes a serious problem.

**PUBLIC  
INFORMATION  
ACT REQUESTS**

Public Information requests (sometimes referred to as Freedom of Information Act) are processed by the City Clerk’s Office. Requestors shall be referred to the City Clerk’s Office to file public information requests directly with that office.

**EXCEPTIONS**

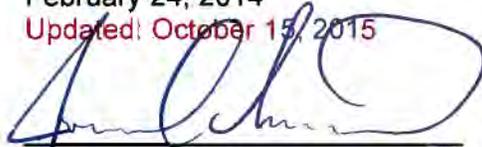
In the event of a natural or technological emergency/disaster, the City’s Emergency Management Plan and procedures will take precedence. Annex B of that document outlines Emergency Public Information and Communication procedures.

**RELATED POLICIES**

- Public Information Policy
- Emergency Management Plan
- Internet Use Policy
- Computer and Network Usage Policy
- Social Media Policy

**EFFECTIVE DATE**

February 24, 2014  
Updated: October 15, 2015

  
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Jared Miller, City Manager