

COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION

by Bob Jean

In real estate or economic development discussions, we hear it's all about location, location, location. When it comes to good governance, whether in council-manager or mayor-council-administrator forms of local government, it's all about communication, communication, communication.

Since I retired in 2005 from full-time city management, I've completed five different interim assignments, some where the manager/administrator moved to take a new position and some where they were asked to leave. The successful managers/administrators spent about one-third of their time with members of their council, whether in council meetings, with committees or one-on-one meetings. And, while emails are a good source of quick updates and information sharing, they do not replace the one-third face-to-face communications time.

As fewer assistant city manager positions are available due to budget cuts, so too are the opportunities for future managers/administrators to engage with councilmembers in the way successful city managers/administrators do. When I first started as a city administrator in the mid-70's in Troutdale, Oregon, I thought my job was to manage the City's business effectively. I quickly learned that while good management is part of the job, without good ongoing council-manager/administrator communications I missed things, such as the nuances of decision-making; without good council communications I quickly got into trouble. Fortunately for me, my first mayor in Troutdale liked a sip of single malt scotch after work. I soon learned that was a good time to

update the mayor on events and get his feedback

It is critical to find a meeting time that fits the mayor's or councilmember's schedule—office, breakfast, lunch, dinner, or after work. Remember, for the most part, your councilmembers are volunteers and give up time away from their business and families to serve the community. Whenever there is time, meet.

For those just coming into the city management profession, perhaps from the business community or military, remember "job one is communication." The artificial line between policy and administration is not a demilitarized zone not to be crossed, but rather a way of recognizing that good two-way communications lead to better decisions and better clarity on who's responsible for the actual decisions on the policy side and the administration side.

Some ground rules for good governance and good council-manager/administrator communications can help. One rule is "no surprises." Very few good decisions occur at the last minute and with little preparation or discussion. That's not to say new ideas can't pop up, but they generally should be continued to a next meeting when there's been time to study the idea and then continue the conversation.

Another communications ground rule is, "seek first to understand, then be understood." Ask clarifying questions and don't assume motives, other than that everyone wants the best for the community. A good council-manager/administrator team seeks to represent a real cross-section of community opinions, not power-based factions. If information and ideas are shared openly, better decisions are made.

When communicating with the community—especially in today's media blitzed and tech-obsessed world—I like to emphasize the 10-5-1 guideline. You need to send someone a message 10 times, expect that they see it five times, and hope they understand it once. That means consistently communicating the same message multiple times in different media. When formulating a communications plan, I like to emphasize message, messenger, and media. Using a council-staff team is how I like to brainstorm and test messages. Shaping a clear, clean message is not easy. Once the message is sharp, decide who is the most effective voice or messenger, and don't default to the mayor or manager/administrator. Let the mayor and council spread the good news. I usually saved the tough love or hard messages for myself to deliver, but always as a champion for the community.

Finally, remember the 80/20 rule—"20 percent of a group usually leads the other 80 percent." Find your opinion leaders in the community and get to them early and often, starting with your council. *Communicate, communicate, communicate.*

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