

City of Piedmont
COUNCIL AGENDA REPORT

DATE: April 17, 2023

TO: Mayor and Council

FROM: Rosanna Bayon Moore, City Administrator

SUBJECT: Informational Update on the City of Piedmont Communications Program

RECOMMENDATION

Receive an informational report on the City's Communications Program.

BACKGROUND

Recognizing the need for enhanced communication and community engagement, the City Council approved the creation of a Communications Program Manager position in the FY2021-2022 budget cycle. This position was filled in August 2022. This report provides a summary of activities during the first six months of the City's Communications Program.

FOCUS AREAS

Communications Program Manager Echa Schneider began on August 29, 2022. In collaboration with City Administrator Sara Lillevand and Assistant City Administrator/City Clerk John Tulloch, three focus areas were identified for initial program activities:

- Understand internal communications needs, current practices, and the City's existing communications landscape
- Establish a steady flow of clear, actionable messaging to the community
- Invest time in building up channels that have the highest potential impact

Needs Assessment

Ms. Schneider engaged in the following activities to develop a portrait of the City's communication needs from an internal perspective:

- Reviewed two years of messaging across all channels
- Conducted a comprehensive content audit of the City's website
- Collected and reviewed analytics for City communications over the past two years
- Held individual meetings with City staff to understand current practices, satisfaction with available tools, challenges, opportunities, and priorities for future work
- Held meetings with representatives of local news media

- Conducted interviews with individual community members

This information was used to develop a preliminary calendar of annual messaging, establish a baseline for measurement of future communications, and create a rough framework for the long-term development of the City's Communications Program.

External messaging

The second focus area has been to increase the flow and impact of messaging to the community. Between September 2022 and February 2023, the City has published 66 news releases, averaging 11 per month – roughly triple the previous pace of messaging production.

Concurrently, the City has adopted a new structure and stylistic guidelines for news releases. These guidelines are intended to support the creation of clear, accessible, actionable messaging, bringing information published by the City into alignment with industry best practices for effective, user-oriented communications.

The Communications Program Manager meets regularly with individual department and program staff to identify and prioritize future communication needs. In addition to day-to-day messaging, Ms. Schneider has also worked to support individual departments with longer-term communications plans for high priority topics, including Community Pool construction, the Housing Element update, the November 2022 wildfire evacuation exercise, firefighter recruitment, a joint Piedmont Police/Piedmont Unified School District gun safety campaign, and the upcoming launch of an online permitting portal.

Communications channels

The City's website and email newsletter were identified as the highest priority channels for enhancement. These channels were selected both for their existing reach and because they have the greatest potential for impact of all the City's outreach platforms.

On the website, the Communications Program Manager has:

- Began publishing all news releases that are sent to local media concurrently online
- Created an online news archive where community members can view all messages published over the past year
- Re-organized the way news is presented, modifying the sitewide navigation menu to include top-level links to a newly created "News & Events" section that consolidates content previously scattered across several sections of the website
- Re-written all pages in the News & Events section to align with industry best practices and ADA accessibility guidelines

For the period of September 2022 through February 2023, there was a 50% increase in average views per published news article compared to the previous year. With the recent navigation and information architecture changes, this trend is expected to accelerate. Since launch of the

consolidated News & Events section in February 2023, there has been a 260% increase in weekly traffic to the City news landing page.

For the City's email newsletter, Ms. Schneider has:

- Rebranded the newsletter from "COVID-19 Update" to "Weekly eNews"
- Added more content and regular features, including job postings, meeting and events listings, and "behind the scenes" snapshots that highlight often unseen work of City staff
- Published a "one-stop" webpage that lists all City newsletters and social media channels at piedmont.ca.gov/subscribe
- Redesigned the newsletter template for improved experience on mobile devices
- Used industry standard testing techniques to identify ideal subject lines, send times, and other strategies to maximize engagement

From September 2022 through February 2023, the City saw a 93% increase in engagement with weekly eNews and a 67% drop in unsubscribe rates compared to the previous year. Email open rates, which already exceeded industry benchmarks by a significant margin, increased slightly.

The City's use of social media has been a secondary focus area. This work has included:

- Increasing posting frequency on existing channels ([Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Nextdoor](#))
- Launching two new channels: Instagram ([@piedmontcagov](#)) and LinkedIn ([City of Piedmont, CA](#))
- Upgrades to the City's YouTube channel ([@piedmontcagov](#)): removing outdated content, adding original KCOM productions for online viewing, and redesigning the channel landing page
- Changed social content strategy to engage in positive storytelling in addition to the dissemination of information

NEXT STEPS

With a baseline flow of regular messaging established, core channels positioned for better accessibility, and a framework for message distribution now in place, the focus of the City's Communications Program will shift in the coming months to emphasize:

- Development of templates, tools, and trainings to support the creation of high-quality, user-oriented communications by staff at all levels
- Implementation of standard distribution protocols for public notifications and day-to-day messaging
- Increased engagement with community members to better understand external perspectives on communications needs, through a community survey, individual interviews, and meetings with community organizations

FISCAL IMPACT

Several items in support of the City's Communications Program will be included in the proposed FY23-24 budget.

By: Echa Schneider, Communications Program Manager