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County of Grande Prairie 2016 Communications Audit

Final Report Executive Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations

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Introduction

In October 2015 the County of Grande Prairie #1 retained *Downey Norris & Associates Inc.* to perform a thorough communications audit to assess the County's external communication programs and to provide a basis of information to revise and update the County's longer-term external communications strategies for the period 2016-2019. The goals/outcomes of the project included:

- ❑ A thorough review of current external communication plans, processes, activities and materials of the County and an assessment of how effective those plans, activities and materials are in achieving the both current and future County communications objectives
- ❑ Development of a comprehensive external three-year communication strategy for the County, including a recommended work plan for implementation and necessary supporting financial and human resources
- ❑ Development of monitoring tools for use by the County to assess achievement of communication plan objectives

This executive summary of the final Report and Appendix outline the methodology used to conduct the project; the broad and detailed findings of the audit of current communications activities and products; and the key recommendations on external communications for the County.

The communications review and its recommendations address external communications at the County of Grande Prairie from the broadest context, and not only those activities under the direct responsibility of the Communications Manager. The review findings and recommendations are forward looking and focused on aligning external communications efforts and messages with current and future directions of the County of Grande Prairie.

The findings and recommended external communications strategies in this report are the independent and objective professional views of *Downey Norris & Associates Inc.* and may or may not correspond to the views and opinions of the County of Grande Prairie as a whole, nor to the views and opinions of the various individuals who participated in the communications review processes.

Methodology

Research was conducted between November 2015 and February 2016. A number of methods were used to assess communications plans, programs, products and activities, and to help assess the views of County of Grande Prairie leadership in the support of the development of future external communications efforts.

Research methods used in developing the report and the recommendations include:

- ❑ Individual interviews were conducted with 21 Councillors, senior leaders and managers at the County of Grande Prairie. These interviews were designed to solicit the views and perspectives of those involved regarding major issues facing the County over the coming years; the County's communications priorities and priority target audiences; strengths and weaknesses of current County external communications initiatives, activities and tools; and areas of potential future increased emphasis for County communications.
- ❑ A detailed review and analysis was carried out on a variety of County of Grande Prairie external communications tools, processes and vehicles, including communications plan, newsletters, pamphlets and brochures, and the County of Grande Prairie external website and social media channels.
- ❑ Telephone interviews were conducted with four individuals identified by the County as active community and business leaders in the County. The objective of the interviews was to assess the overall quality and effectiveness of the County in communicating with its business and community leaders.
- ❑ Telephone interviews were conducted with the communication leads in three comparable counties in Alberta including: Strathcona County, Leduc County and Parkland County. The counties were selected based on recommendations by the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties and Consultant experience and observations of best practices in municipal communications. In addition to conducting telephone interviews, the consultant compared the websites, published news releases, newsletters and social media channels of each County. The purpose of the comparison was to assess the County of Grande Prairie's communication practices, materials and approach against that of its peers.
- ❑ An electronic communications survey for residents and businesses was posted on the County's internet website during January 16-31, 2016, inviting residents and local business owners/operators to provide input on the County's external communications. (Detailed results are included in the Appendix.)

Key Findings

- ❑ The County of Grande Prairie communication function has matured over the past six years and is an integral strategic function for the County. The leader of communications has been promoted from the position of Coordinator, to that of Manager, in recognition of the skills and expertise the individual brings to the role. The promotion also recognizes the high need for strong leadership and experience to effectively drive and manage strategic communications.
- ❑ The function has grown from a single resource in 2010 to a team of 3 individuals in 2016.
- ❑ The County of Grande Prairie continues to maintain a wide range of high quality communications tools and processes, supporting generally effective communications with County employees and residents. The breadth and quality of the County's communications efforts are comparable in quantity and quality to those of other Counties who exemplify "best practice" in communications.
- ❑ The County's communications programs and initiatives are supported and enhanced by the fact that it has a dedicated Communications function with a strong leader. The high level of ability, skill and initiative of the communications manager contributes very significantly to the County's overall successes in its communications efforts.
- ❑ The leadership of the County, including both Council and senior administrators, demonstrate an understanding of the importance of effective communications and are supportive of the communications function. Recognition of the need for communication plans related to issues and initiatives is widely accepted and encouraged by leaders. This understanding and support directly contributes to the County's overall successes in its communications activities.
- ❑ The combination of County growth, the addition of new communication vehicles, and the increasing volume and complexity of issues and initiatives at the County, has created a volume of communications work that is starting to outstrip the capacity of the communications team to effectively support all of the varied requirements of the County and its departments.
- ❑ Given the relatively high level of current communications activities by the County and the small number of resources dedicated to the function, the workload and expectations for the Communications Manager and team must be continually prioritized.

- ❑ The increasing workload of the current communications team and the clear expectations of residents and employees for continued quality communication indicate there is a growing need for additional resources to support communications. There are a number of potential options to supplement resources that can be reviewed and considered in the context of the County's current resource and hiring strategy.
- ❑ Given the growth in the County employee base, and the number of new leaders and staff, communication policies, guidelines, standards and templates should be formally documented with training provided to leaders on a prioritized basis.
- ❑ Overall the County's communications programs are of high quality and improvements will be a matter of fine-tuning, enhancing and strengthening what exists today.
- ❑ Overall, the County of Grande Prairie has a wide range of very professional, high quality communications vehicles and processes that are effectively utilized to communicate with residents and local businesses within the County. The overall quality and level of external communications by the County is comparable to efforts by similar sized or larger municipal jurisdictions.
- ❑ Residents, business owners and community leaders are generally pleased with the County's efforts to communicate with them.
- ❑ While there is room for improvement, it is a matter of primarily focusing on enhancing and improving existing communications vehicles and processes rather than implementing large-scale changes or major new initiatives.

Highlights of key findings from the resident and business survey include:

- ❑ Of the 10 key statements about the County's effectiveness on communications, there are three statements on the County's effectiveness of communication where farm residents and/or business operators differ significantly in levels of agreement from that total respondents including:
 - I have a good understanding of the issues and challenges facing the County (business respondents had 8% lower overall agreement)
 - Overall, the County does a good job of communicating with residents (farm respondents had 9% lower overall agreement; business respondents had 13% lower overall agreement)
 - Overall, I support the long-term directions being pursued by the County (farm respondents had 10% lower overall agreement; business respondents had 9% lower overall agreement)

- ❑ The two topics respondents most frequently indicated they do not get enough information on are:
 - How tax dollars are spent
 - New services being offered
- ❑ Top five useful communication tools rated by residents and businesses are:
 1. County Website
 2. TV, radio or newspaper news coverage
 3. County pamphlets, brochures, reports, etc.
 4. County Connections
 5. Newspaper or radio advertising
- ❑ The print publications of the County of Grande Prairie are generally of high professional quality, incorporating clean graphic design, relevant content and are well-written using plain language that is easy to read and understand. The publications reflect many of the County's specific key messages and overall reflect a positive image of the County.
- ❑ The County's Facebook page and Twitter feed added since 2010 are well used and appropriately and consistently promoted in all materials.
- ❑ County branding is very consistently and appropriately applied in terms of the use of the County logo/colour and design elements on all printed and electronic communications.
- ❑ There is an opportunity to introduce and leverage the use of a County "brand statement" that exemplifies the value proposition that the County offers its residents and rate payers. County news releases are well-written in a concise and clear manner and are consistent with media release standard formats. News release content appropriately highlights important information related to the issues/topics addressed by the news releases. The Reeve, Council and Senior Administration are appropriately used as spokespersons for the County.
- ❑ The County continues to have very effective relationships with local media and employs a variety of techniques including news releases, Council Highlights, special events etc. to ensure the news media has the important and relevant County information covered.
- ❑ The County Connections newsletter is well-designed and well written and provides a solid foundational vehicle to convey important County information to all ratepayers. The newsletter is however quite long with a great deal of content and a wide variety of topics being covered.

- ❑ The County's external internet website, www.countygp.ab.ca is a good quality and effective electronic communications tool. Overall the website is well-designed and information is well-organized and categorized. The site design appropriately reflects the County branding. The navigation is user intuitive and appropriately highlights quick access to services residents need and use.
- ❑ The County should continue to use a wide range of communications vehicles to effectively communicate with residents given the wide range of demographics.
- ❑ The County should continue to sort and prioritize information for residents to provide the best possible opportunity for residents and ratepayers to pay full attention to information that is directly relevant to, or impacting on them, at the immediate point in time. County information must continue to be relevant, succinct, easy to understand, and repeated through a variety of communications vehicles and over an extended period of time.
- ❑ The Communications Manager is appropriately involved in broad County issues and initiatives by the CAO and at the direction of Council. However, the Communications Manager is not always involved early or informed of County projects and initiatives that are being driven out of specific departments. In some cases, the Manager or leader working on a specific initiative may not be aware of the impacts to bigger picture communication strategies. This disconnect inhibits the County's ability to be proactively consider broader communications implications in a timely or strategic manner.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the review of external communications at the County of Grande Prairie, the following are the overall recommendations for changes or enhancements to current communications activities.

- ❑ Current and planned County external communications activities should continue.
- ❑ The County's Communications Manager should be engaged at the onset of all department specific initiatives and projects that have potential to require external communications.
- ❑ The Communications Manager must work with CEO and leadership to continually prioritize/assess and assign communications support for initiatives that are of the highest importance/risk to the County.
- ❑ The County should consider options to apply additional resources to communications that will be required to continue to execute the day-to-day and strategic requirements of the County.
- ❑ The Communications Manager continues to require direct access to leadership and Council to effectively and proactively identify needs and support strategic communications and should therefore continue to report directly the County CAO and participate in senior manager meetings.
- ❑ The County should develop and document formal communication policies, guidelines and resources for managers and project leaders to help them understand the authority and approval requirements, their role and responsibilities in external communications; when and how to engage the communications team; and what processes, tools and templates are available to assist them.
- ❑ The County should develop training for managers and supervisors to support the roll-out of the policies and guidelines.
- ❑ Continue to use and promote social media channels as a way to engage younger audiences who are more technically savvy and eager to receive information in this manner.
- ❑ Develop a formal "government relations/advocacy plan" and communications strategy to guide County relationships/advocacy with the provincial government and neighbouring municipal governments over the next several years.

- ❑ Conduct an advocacy/government relations training workshop for County Council members and senior County administrative leaders.
- ❑ Reduce the length of the County Connections external newsletter by revamping content so that articles are shorter and highlight important information in a way that is quick and easy to read. Also, revamp the layout of the newsletter to better categorize types of information for easy reference. For example create standing content sections that are consistent issue to issue.
- ❑ Develop a communication plan and key messages to position the “value of services” with residents and businesses to meet resident desire for more information on how tax dollars are spent and to reinforce and demonstrate prudent spending by the County as well as County efforts to be more efficient and cost-effective.
- ❑ Continue ongoing expansion, enhancement and refreshing of the County website with a focus on creating a user intuitive experience with quick access to forms and information that is most needed by residents and businesses.
- ❑ Further develop and improve Linked In presence as a business and economic development tool