



CITY COUNCIL STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLAN

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Introduction

This document defines a long-range plan for actions that will

- convey the value and impact of Bellingham City Council efforts,
- create a better-informed electorate,
- connect community members with opportunities to participate in local government and engage with Council Members.

Communication on behalf of the City Council is evolving. This plan builds upon a draft [City Council Communications Plan](#) that the City Council voted 7-0 to approve at the July 24, 2017, City Council Regular Meeting. Notably, this plan considers the addition of a City Council Communications and Community Relations position to the City Council Office, as well as a City Council Communications Work Group.

This plan exists within a supportive and growing culture of communication at the City of Bellingham. It references plans and guiding documents that help formalize City-wide communications and community engagement goals and practices.

Relevant goals, plans, and policies

2009 Legacies and Strategic Commitments

Quality, Responsive City Services

- Deliver efficient, effective, and accountable municipal services
- Use transparent processes and involve stakeholders in decisions
- Provide access to accurate information

2025 Bellingham Plan

Bellingham Plan Goal CW-E: Community Engagement

- CW-32: Continue implementing systems and strategies to inform the community of City processes and provide meaningful opportunities for public engagement.
- CW-33: Build community trust and foster transparency in City decision-making processes.
- CW-34: Proactively reduce barriers to engagement for community members across a continuum of needs and abilities, prioritizing access, accessibility, ease of use and cultural sensitivity.

- CW-35: Coordinate and balance community engagement efforts, ensuring outreach is sensitive to social context and overall community capacity.
- CW-36: Strive to tailor community outreach strategies, considering an achievable range of engagement levels before identifying the appropriate approach methods to meet specific project needs and address community expectations.
- CW-37: Continually evaluate effectiveness of engagement strategies to reach populations that may be most impacted by the City decision(s) under consideration.
- CW-38: Focus resources to increasing involvement by under-represented and historically-marginalized community members.
- CW-39: Foster a culture of service among City staff, supporting and enhancing their roles as City ambassadors.

2026-2028 City of Bellingham Strategic External Communications and Community Engagement Plan

Guiding Principles

- **Accurate, timely, coordinated communications** – We work to tell the City’s story in a way that is factual, timely, and coordinated across City departments. We collaborate within our team and with subject matter experts to provide the best possible information.
- **Transparency and authenticity** – Our communications are trustworthy and authentic, conveying our messages with integrity and upholding commitments to transparency in decision-making and accountability in the City’s work.
- **Inclusion and belonging** – We work to provide opportunities for feedback where everyone has a voice, and to ensure that our communications are inclusive, accessible, and available to all.
- **Ongoing improvement and owning successes** – As a team, we celebrate our successes and share ownership for work done well. We proactively look for ways to increase the effectiveness of our work by learning together, innovating, and growing our skills.

City Council Communications and Community Relations Objectives

Communicate proactively

We will

1. provide timely information to Council Members and the public;
2. provide timely, meaningful public input opportunities; and

- 3.** educate people about issues by
 - a.** addressing likely misunderstandings, particularly for technical or procedural matters,
 - b.** presenting information through multiple channels,
 - c.** explaining the “why” for Council actions, and
 - d.** sharing facts about
 - i.** their history,
 - ii.** the timeframe,
 - iii.** decision points,
 - iv.** public input opportunities,
 - v.** challenges/obstacles,
 - vi.** potential solutions, and
 - vii.** alignment with other City plans and efforts.

Build public trust

We will

- 1.** increase the availability of information by utilizing multiple channels;
- 2.** ensure the public feels heard by providing timely acknowledgment and responses; and
- 3.** whenever possible, find opportunities to humanize Council Members and include them in the life of the city, which may include appearances at
 - a.** hallmark events integral to Bellingham and
 - b.** activities that convey the values of the City Council and the City.

Speak with one voice

We will

- 1.** apprise the Mayor’s Office and other City Departments of City Council communications efforts, as needed;
- 2.** whenever possible, amplify Mayor’s Office communications efforts with unified City Council messaging and individual Council Member voices; and
- 3.** present a unified message after the City Council votes while respecting minority voices and individual opinions.

Key Audiences

- **Community members:** The primary focus for most external communications efforts.
- **City staff members:** Well-informed staff members are the City’s best ambassadors.
- **Elected officials of other government bodies:** Efforts to engage this audience would be irregular and specific to the occasion. The Council Office Manager may perform logistics and scheduling work. The Legislative Policy Analyst may contact other jurisdictions to understand issues.
- **City Council, Council Members, Council Member groups:** Communications with this audience would include talking points for issues of community interest, research on issues, summaries of public comments and constituent emails, and email responses.

Communications and community relations modes

1. Digital and online channels

- a. City website
 - i. Council webpages
 - ii. News posts
 - iii. Agenda pages and public notices (meetings.cob.org)
- b. Email
 - i. Press releases
 - ii. Responses to messages sent to the City Council email inbox
 - iii. Distribution of agendas and public notices
 - iv. Newsletters
- c. Social media
 - i. Facebook (Bellingham City Council account)
 - ii. Other platforms, as needed and as approved
- d. Third-Party online engagement platforms (engagebellingham.org)

2. Broadcast and video channels

- a. Meeting videos and livestreams
 - i. YouTube livestreams
 - ii. YouTube recordings posted on agenda pages
 - iii. Comcast BTV channels

3. Media and external outreach

- a. Columns and guest editorials in local media outlets
- b. Press releases (use as email channel listed above, but placed here conceptually as media outreach)

4. Public participation and engagement channels

- a. Public forums (in-person, online, or hybrid)
- b. Surveys
- c. Focus groups
- d. Public Comment Periods

5. Internal coordination and messaging

- a. Talking points/key messages
- b. Support for media inquiries

Strategies

This is how we achieve our objectives (communicate proactively, build public trust, and speak with one voice).

1. Strengthen the connection between Council Members and the community

Enhance transparency, visibility, and public understanding of the Council's work through clear, accessible, and relatable communication.

- a. Provide clear and accessible information about legislation, decisions, and Council priorities.
- b. Highlight Council Members' involvement in community events and civic activities.
- c. Publicize engagement opportunities with sufficient lead time to encourage meaningful participation.
- d. Deliver timely, coordinated communication about emerging issues.
- e. Use communication channels to help residents get to know Council Members and understand their roles and work.

2. Utilize communication channels consistently

Ensure predictable, professional, and unified communication across all City Council platforms.

- a. Maintain and continuously improve City Council webpages with relevant, clear, and up-to-date information.
- b. Publish consistently across digital channels using a communications calendar and shared messaging standards.
- c. Provide timely and professional responses to community inquiries.
- d. Leverage external media and community outlets to broaden reach and reinforce key messages.
- e. Coordinate internal communications to maintain consistent messaging across staff and Council Members.

3. Prioritize meaningful public engagement opportunities

Foster authentic two-way communication by expanding and supporting opportunities for community members to engage with the Council.

- a. Keep Council Members and the public informed of all existing public engagement opportunities across the City.
- b. Pursue diverse in-person and digital opportunities to support ongoing dialogue with community members.
- c. Ensure public engagement activities are accessible, equitable, and inclusive.
- d. Support Council Members with the information and preparation needed for effective engagement.

4. Strengthen organizational communication capacity

Build systems, tools, and shared practices that enable effective, consistent communication across the Council organization.

- a. Develop and optimize internal workflows that streamline communication production, coordination, and approval.
- b. Provide ongoing support and training to Council Members and staff on communication best practices.
- c. Maintain a consistent approach to voice, tone, and messaging when communicating on behalf of the City Council.
- d. Equip Council Members with communication tools and guidance to help them share their voices and share accurate information that reinforces approved City and City Council messages.

City Council Strategic Communications and Community Engagement Plan as a living document

The City Council may amend this document by formal vote.