

Topic: *Parkland Communicator* Newsletter

Introduction:

This Administrative Report is intended to provide Governance and Priorities Committee with more detail regarding the history of the *Parkland Communicator* Newsletter, identify how information is obtained for inclusion in the monthly publication, and help answer any questions Committee may have.

Facts (Background Information):

In January 2002, Parkland County retained a consultant to conduct an independent review of the county's communications plans, processes, and activities, and to develop a long-term communications strategy. The review and plan were conducted and developed in conjunction with an overall Customer Needs Survey of County residents and businesses. The report included a number of recommendations and strategies, including creation of a newsletter as a communications tool to share County information with residents.

Communications has been tasked with the responsibility of coordinating the newsletter, as follows:

- Research and work collaboratively with all County departments to compile content for newsletters.
- Write, edit, oversee the design and manage the production of the newsletters within the set timelines and budget.
- Meet regularly with Management to review significant initiatives occurring in each department.
- Distribute approved newsletters.

Newsletter Production and Budget

When first initiated, the *Parkland Communicator* was published twice a year as a 12-page magazine and was mailed to each resident through subscription (addressed) mail. In 2003, a survey was conducted regarding the publication content and frequency. Many who responded suggested that it would be beneficial to receive the newsletter more often; however, it was not until 2008 that the newsletter went from being a twice-yearly publication to a bi-monthly newsletter.

In order to work within the existing budget, the newsletter went from 12-pages to four, and was sent through unaddressed ad mail rather than subscription mail.

In 2009, Communications pursued contract pricing for annual printing of the newsletter and, because of cost-savings, was able to further increase the frequency of the newsletter to a monthly publication.

The current cost to produce the four-page newsletter is approximately \$1,100 per month. Distribution through unaddressed ad mail is \$0.11 per issue and averages \$1,000 per month.

In addition to the regular newsletter, Communications works with Agriculture Services to produce a special edition 4-page insert focused on agriculture and environment twice per year. Given the significant amount of information, the November 2012 edition was a double issue that focused on sustainability and environmental information, projects, and initiatives.

In 2009, the newsletter was also offered electronically as an e-newsletter. As of October 2012, there were 397 subscribers to the electronic version of the newsletter.

We will also direct mail copies to people who do not receive the newsletter via unaddressed ad mail. Currently, there are approximately 150 people who receive through direct mail.

Resident Response to Newsletter

In 2010, Parkland County retained a consultant to conduct a public relations audit to determine the effectiveness of County communications. The *Parkland Communicator* was discussed as part of the audit and resident survey. When asked for the preferred methods of receiving information, letters from the County were identified as being the most preferred method, with the *Communicator* identified second.

In 2011, a second survey was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of recommendations of communications initiatives since the 2010 audit. The *Communicator* was again chosen as the second-preferred method of communication.

Audit Recommendations

The 2010 Communications Audit included recommendations for the newsletter, including redesigning the newsletter for consistency with corporate branding and incorporating opportunities for two-way communication.

The template for the newsletter was updated as part of the 2012 re-branding initiative and was prepared by a professional graphic designer, who also developed templates for all of the County's external communications tools to ensure consistency in look and feel.

Two-way communication has been limited due to the lack of mechanisms for managing that type of communication. Communications has experimented with one-question surveys as part of the e-newsletter, but response has been limited.

Content Development

Right from the outset, the purpose of the *Communicator* was to share information with residents about County projects and initiatives. This was validated in the resident surveys, where residents confirmed the *Communicator* was a preferred way to receive information about the County.

As popularity and awareness of the *Communicator* increased, so did requests by outside groups and organizations to have their information included in the newsletter. With the newsletter reduced to four pages, this was of particular concern given the limited space in which to share County information and already having to reduce the content to ensure maximum information in a smaller space.

In 2008, this concern was raised with the Chief Administrative Officer, who confirmed "... the *Parkland Communicator* is Council's communication forum with their residents. To change that direction by including advertisements or focus on outside groups or agencies was never the intent."

Each month, Communications puts out a call to staff to contribute information/articles for inclusion in the *Communicator*. We rely on the expertise and knowledge of each of the departments about initiatives and projects that should be shared with residents. The frequency and increased overall duties in Communications means greater reliance on departments to submit information. This has had limited success as departments have been extremely busy and opportunities to share information in the *Communicator* are missed.

To reduce the burden on the departments and ensure that information is shared with the public on a timely basis, Communications will be working with all departments in development of individual annual communications plans that outline the type of content that should be shared with the public monthly. This

will assist in pre-planning each edition of the *Communicator*, reducing the burden on staff to come up with content, and ensuring that each issue of the newsletter has timely and relevant information.

Analysis:

The *Parkland Communicator* is working to meet Council's Strategic Goals as a respected communications tool to which residents look to receive information on County projects, programs, and initiatives. The *Communicator*, in its current format and distribution methods, is produced within the budget allocated. Increasing the size and/or distribution methods will require a corresponding increase to the Communications budget.

Alternatives:

1. Committee may recommend increasing the size of the newsletter to include other information, including that from outside groups and agencies.
2. Committee may recommend changing distribution from unaddressed ad mail back to subscription mail.
3. Committee may make other recommendations regarding the content, frequency, and distribution of the newsletter.

Conclusion/Summary:

Administration supports continuation of the *Parkland Communicator* newsletter as a four-page monthly publication that focuses on County projects, services, and initiatives. The size of the newsletter is easy for residents to review and often directs people to the County website or other sources for further details and information as required.

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