

Douglas County, Nevada
**COMMUNICATIONS
ASSESSMENT
SUMMARY**

July 2020

Unofficial



PREPARED BY  **RAD**
Strategies INC.



Photo credit: Vivian Powers

OVERVIEW

The Board of County Commissioners on November 21, 2020 in coordination with the County Manager's Office and initiated by Community Relations Manager, and Public Information Officer Melissa Blosser, requested/authorized a comprehensive assessment of Douglas County Communications Division and operations.

The goal of the assessment is to help the county build consensus around the county's communications strategy and to identify the resources needed to meet the communications objectives for increased opportunity.

The outcomes addressed included:

- **Current activities:** Review effectiveness of current programs, initiatives and activities
- **Current outputs:** Evaluation of the materials provided to determine consistency in messaging including opinions, opportunities and concerns
- **Future activities and outputs:** Recommendations to enhance communications outreach and continue to operate at the highest level possible

The outcome of this report focuses on several areas for consideration to enhance communications externally, primarily, as well as internally, secondarily, in an effort to enhance the level of communication for all stakeholder groups. The recommendations are further developed in this review.

Measurement of some of the efforts identified are evaluated on a subjective basis, due in part to the limited measurements inherent with public relations functions themselves. However, using the data from the survey and third-party resources, the recommendations are based on industry best practices, current trends in government communication programs, and aligned with the priority position of Douglas County government.

Disclosure: The survey started in December 2019 and was completed by March 6, 2020 therefore the results and data collected are pre-pandemic. However, the recommendations remain valid and notes have been added where accommodations or considerations should be made in relation to the current pandemic environment and COVID-19 changes.

The Communications Team

Douglas County Communications Team currently consists of:

- Communications Manager/Public Information Officer (Melissa Blosser)
- Community Relations Intern (Bailey Gumm)

The following are responsibilities of the communication team:

- **External Communications:** Plan, develop, implement and evaluate timely and accurate communications strategies to provide information to and gather feedback from external audiences.
- **Research and Evaluation:** Conduct public opinion research and other activities to gather accurate data and evaluate public attitudes about the County in general as well as implement ongoing evaluations of communication programs or initiatives.
- **Digital Communications/Photography/Video:** Plan, develop, implement and evaluate digital communications strategies including the County's websites, social media accounts, photography, video, graphics and email marketing and communication.
- **Special Events:** Plan and implement, or provide support for, all activities and events hosted by the County.
- **Media Relations:**
 - Maintain relationships with key contacts at local media outlets and provide them with timely, newsworthy information on happenings within individual schools and the County overall.
 - Monitor, track and record all media coverage.
 - Serve as the County spokesperson, or provide guidance and training to the appropriate County staff member to serve in this role.
- **Brand Consistency:** Monitor brand usage to ensure consistency throughout the County.
- **County Support:** Serve as a support and resource for County Boards, Groups, Elected Officials and the Board of County Commissioners.
- **Community Engagement:** Plan, develop, implement and evaluate strategies to involve the community in decision-making and planning for the future of County.
- **Community Relations:** Serve as a liaison and build relationships with community organizations that support the goals of the County.
- **Crisis Communications:** Serve as universal hub for emergency communications in times of crisis or emergencies.

The following outlines what the department does or produces on behalf of the county:

Print

- County Newsletter
- Press Releases

Digital

- County website
- Social media
- Facebook (County and DCSO)
- Instagram (DCSO)
- Twitter (County, DCSO)
- Nextdoor (County)
- YouTube (County and DCSO)
- County Report a Concern APP
- Online surveys

Internal

- Email (Emergency Notifications)
- **Special Events**
- Press, publicity, campaign development, photography, video
- Special email updates to employees regarding employee relations or emergency communications

Media Relations

- Press releases
- Print/Online media
- Television/Radio media - Interviews
- Digital media analytics (Facebook Insights, Google Analytics, etc.)

Emergency Communications

- Press Releases
- Internal External Updates
- Joint Information Center Activation
- Communication through websites, social media and traditional media
- Media Monitoring

HISTORY OF THE COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE

The communications office is currently led by Melissa Blosser, Public Information Officer and Community Relations Manager, who has held the position since 2014. At the time, her primary responsibility was for public information and to support the communications efforts of the County Manager's office. In short order, it became apparent that her skills would support the county in many other ways including community relations functions including media relations, public relations, stakeholder relations, social media management, digital media content creation, emergency communication support for the County and Public Safety and functions such as branding and website management. The county invested in her training through her master's degree, management training and other education courses.

Ms. Blosser, in seeking additional support, initiated a part-time intern position, which at the time was unpaid. While beneficial, the short timeframe of intern positions requires ongoing training with each new intern and a lack of consistency and follow-through that is often the undesired result of the limited and inconsistent hours. Approximately a year and a half ago, responsibilities increased for the department with the added function of community outreach, social media management and emergency support, as needed.

As demands of the office continued to grow, the position was moved to a paid part-time intern and then to a full-time intern role earlier this year due to the increased restraints evident during the early stages of the pandemic. Unfortunately, due to the intern classification, that position is not designed to serve as a backup for the manager. There is a strong need to reclassify that position to full-time and invest in the training to support the department and the county.

It is our opinion this has provided an opportunity to align county messaging, allow experts to serve roles that they do best while being able to increase community awareness and support. It has also created a model for how other county departments could benefit from a concerted effort. However, with the increased responsibilities, it has also tapped the one-person office while demonstrating the need for increased support and cross-training for critical support, such as during a crisis. The lack of specialized PIO training and not having others adequately trained or with high level media experience to handle proves challenging for the department and the county. Currently Ms. Blosser is the only designated PIO, leaving the county open to a tremendous challenge if she was not available during an emergency situation. For such a critical function to the county residents and government, this leaves the county exposed on many levels.

Assessment Materials

The assessment included a review of the following as provided by the communication office:

- Job descriptions
- Brand Guidelines
- Social Media Policy
- Community and Public Information Policy and Procedures
- Department crisis communications plan
- Emergency Operations plan
- Economic Vitality Strategic Plan
- Demographic profiles
- Email survey results
- CASPER overview
- Department goals and priorities.
- Online Resources Douglas County Website –Digital Channels
- Social Media
- Third party county demographic information
- Media coverage
- Budget information.

The materials review focused on the effectiveness of the programs, what messages were communicated, if the intended audience was reached, marketing appeal and consistency with branding.



Photo credit: Juan Moralez

RESEARCH

Research conducted to support the communications audit came in the form of interviews, an external communications survey, internal communications survey, extensive secondary research, county demographic review, one-on-one interviews with county personnel and outside the county entities, and two in-person community outreach programs.

One-on-one interviews were used to openly discuss the role of the office, interactions with the department, opportunities to enhance the efforts, and evaluation of current communications. Interviews included: Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners, County Manager, Sheriff, Fire Chief, Community Development Director and the Communications Department. Insights from the one-on-one interviews are incorporated throughout the recommendations.

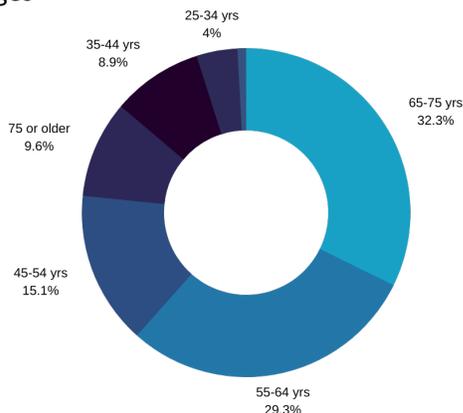
Additional one-on-one interviews were conducted with similar managers responsible for PIO and/or community relations for Churchill County, Carson City and the City of Reno.

A survey was distributed to two primary audience groups: internal and external. The goal was to assess the communications efforts of the county to further support any recommendations. Key findings from the surveys include the following; the full surveys are provided in the Appendix.

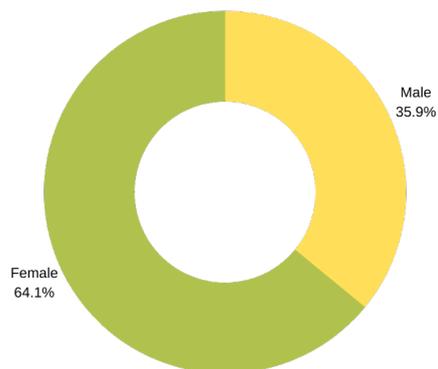
External Survey Summary of Key Findings

A total of 605 surveys were submitted, with an 81% completion rate. A few collectors were used and separate links were provided to track responses by distribution method: Social media – 269; website – 157; media – 139; Community Access Channel – 24; and eblast – 17. Based on an estimated 48,000 sample size, at a 95% confidence level, with a margin of error of +/-4, 593 surveys were required. With 605 completed, the results are statistically valid. The following are demographics related to the respondents.

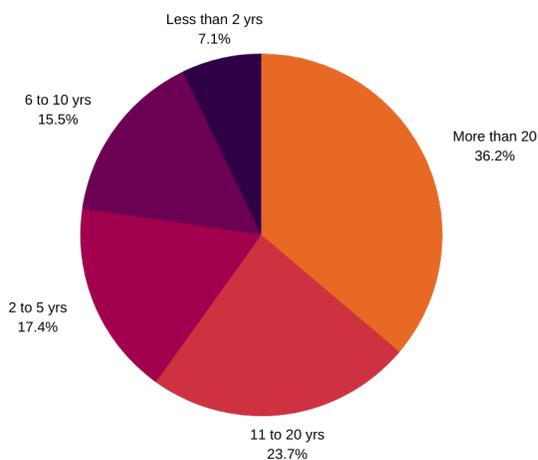
Ages



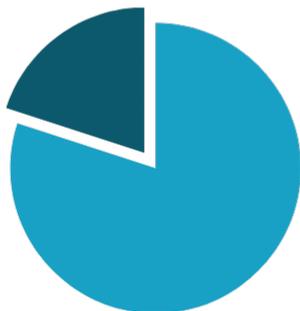
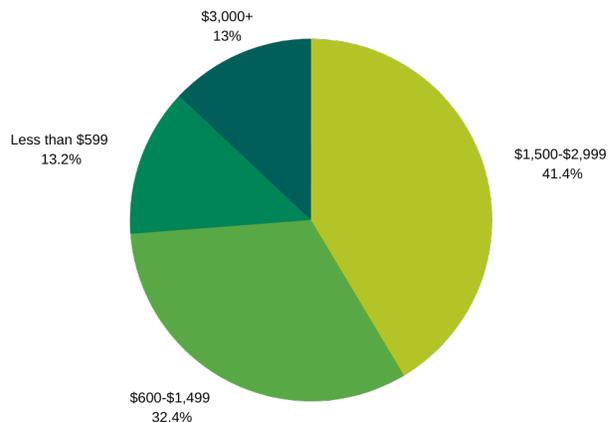
Male and Female



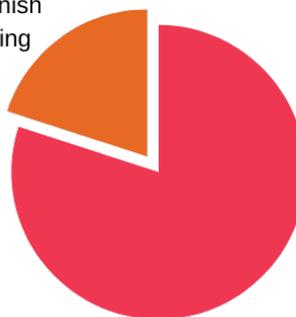
Years living in Douglas County



Monthly housing costs



8% Spanish Speaking



Survey Evaluation by Focus Area

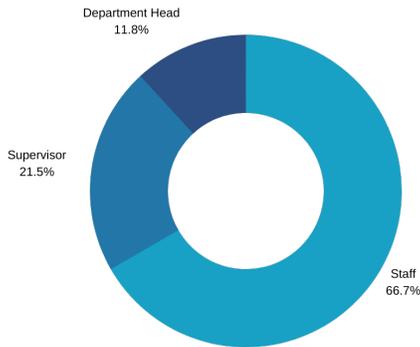
Focus Area	Survey Evaluation
<p>Most important communications tools</p> <p><i>Ranked as very important</i></p>	<p>In rank order: social media (39.20%, with another 41.64% indicating is somewhat important to important), local media (34.92%), email notice of meetings (33.98%), county website (23.19%), other email newsletter (28.40%), friends and neighbors (14.74%), neighborhood meeting (12.98%), talking to an elected official (19.42%), attend a commission meeting (14.82%), watch the community access channel (6.41%, with the highest percentage saying it's not important at all 39.86%)</p> <p><i>Residents appear to rely on a combination of social media and local media resources, mainly The Record Courier, and then go to the County website for more information.</i></p>
<p>Residents are interested in hearing more about</p> <p><i>Based on open selection of options</i></p>	<p>Top five include: Issues affecting my neighborhood (33.06%), events (21.32%), County Commission issues (18.18%), public safety (7.77%) and business or community issues (7.27%)</p> <p><i>As with most communities, residents are most concerned about issues that impact them close to home followed by opportunities to engage in their local community. Additional areas of interest are those issues related to the larger community, public safety and business or other community issues.</i></p>
<p>Improve communications</p> <p><i>Open ended questions</i></p>	<p><i>Answers primarily focused on email distributions, followed by using media outlets (print, TV and radio), social media and the county website.</i></p>
<p>Participation in the following</p> <p><i>Ranking based on participation levels</i></p>	<p>Over 67% never or once a year watch a public meeting, whereas 67% watched or read local news. Next highest is 37.67% that talked with neighbors.</p> <p><i>Points to the importance of a continual communication update and open lines of communication with the local media as a method to keep residents updated.</i></p>
<p>Perceptions of how the county operates</p> <p><i>Yes or no question</i></p>	<p>64.30% believe the county is employing the modern communication techniques, 63.47% believe the county desires the best for its residents, 54.50% believe everyone is treated equally, 52.73% believe the county acts in the best interest of its residents – however, nearly 50.91% believe the county is not honest and transparent and 54.55% don't believe the county communicates issues effectively.</p> <p><i>While a majority of residents believe we have the communication tools available, a majority do not believe we are communicating those issues in an honest and transparent manner.</i></p>
<p>Preference on communication with the county</p> <p><i>Ranking on a preference scale</i></p>	<p>A majority strongly prefer email communications (48.75%), followed by social media (36.62) or attending a meeting (15.54%, with 41.43 somewhat preferring).</p> <p><i>There is an opportunity to grow the database and provide more customized messaging, while continuing to post a variety of county updates and information via social media.</i></p> <p><i>Additional questions on where residents go for the latest information related to the sheriff's office, where they have received it and their preference, it aligns with the above with social media, local news and the website ranking in the top.</i></p>

<p>Where do residents go for information during an emergency</p> <p><i>Select top 3</i></p>	<p>Social media ranked the highest at 52.50%, local media such as The Record Courier ranked second with 45.36% and the third option was a reliance on neighbor or family member (call or text) at 35.18%. Close fourth and fifth rankings include the county website at 32.14% and a text message from the county at 31.43%.</p> <p><i>This aligns with a modern society with most finding out about something via social media, then going to a local media source to confirm details and learn more followed by hearing from those closest to us. For emergencies impacting the county on a larger scale, the residents know that the website will have information and they will be notified by text.</i></p> <p><i>Another question shows that overwhelmingly 53.57% watch out for their neighbors. A positive sign of an engaged community.</i></p>
<p>Feedback on the Community Access Channel</p> <p><i>Yes and no questions and a check box option</i></p>	<p>72.68% were not aware of the Community Access Channel. Of the 27.32% that indicated they were aware, 75% knew it was played back and could be viewed on the county website. Additionally, of those that knew about it, 36.60% indicated they never watched it with 15.69% watching it weekly. For those that are aware of the channel when asked about what they would like to see, many answers focused on more entertainment-based programming such as events, history, general news, etc.</p> <p><i>An opportunity exists to look at alternative methods to connect with the residents about the issues directly impacting them in an effort to create a more informed community. Partnering with The Record Courier, posting to social media and growing the email database would seem to be good resources to explore.</i></p>

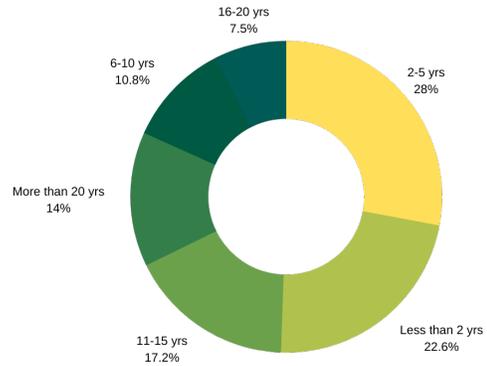
Internal Survey Summary of Key Findings

A total of 93 surveys were completed by the possible 663 county employees, equaling a 14% response rate with 100% of the answers completed.

Survey Respondents



Years of Employment



Due to the relatively high percentage of new employees, it aligns with the desire to be informed and lack of history as it relates to some of the county initiatives.

Focus Area	Survey Evaluation
How well informed are employees <i>Multiple choice answer</i>	56.99% read the email updates but only 29.03% feel informed. <i>Demonstrates the willingness of employees to read the information provided, but there is a need for more customized communications for the internal audience.</i>
Ease in finding information <i>Multiple choice answer</i>	52.69% find information easy to find, with another 43.01% having to search for it, only 4.30% don't know where to go to get information <i>Appears to be an opportunity to include a communication overview to employees perhaps as part of the new hire process or a video created just for employees help them be more effective.</i>
Most useful tools <i>Scale of preference</i>	97.85% noted internal emails as the most effective followed by 78.41% relying on the emailed newsletter, 77.01% using Esuite, 75.82% using the county website, 73.91% using the intranet, 73.86% referencing emergency alerts and 66.67% using social media. In a related question about reading the county email newsletter, 50.54% of employees said yes, with 35.48% saying sometimes and nearly 14% saying no. When asked about the frequency of receiving email updates from the county, 48.39% preferred weekly followed by 27.96% monthly, 20.43% every two weeks with little response (2% or less) preferring quarterly or daily). When ranking the communications received, emails were ranked highest at 53.76%, 40.45% relying on their supervisor, 40.23% on social media, 38.46% indicating internal newsletter and 29.67% referencing the website. <i>Results show highly connected and involved employees. The more customized the information ranks higher with an interested to be informed on a weekly or every other week basis.</i>

Preferred way to receive information	Ranked in order as email at 78,49% followed by website, from a supervisor, county social media channels, text message and Esuite.
<i>Rank in order of preference</i>	<i>Consistent preference toward customized email communications.</i>
How informed are residents	35.48% indicated they believe residents are informed based on what they read in the local media 35.48%, followed by neighbors and friends at 17.20%, county social media 15.05%, not very 11.83%, 6.45% feel they know more than the employee and only 1.08% from county elected officials.
<i>Multiple choice</i>	<i>Points to the importance of accurate and consistent information provided to the local media to inform residents and their neighbors and then frequent updates to social media.</i>
Awareness of the county's strategic direction	33.33% are moderately knowledgeable, 32.26% somewhat, 15.05% slightly knowledgeable, 10.75% highly informed and 8.60% not informed at all.
<i>Multiple choice</i>	<i>Opportunity to engage with employees at the county's discretion and interjected during early stages of employees start date.</i>



Photo credit: Chris Dickerson

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS

The following recommendations and action steps will support the county in focusing on the areas that will be most effective, establish long-term success and position it for future growth. The programs and initiatives suggested are designed to be more effective with time and resources, while requiring the communications office take an inward look at the activities that would allow the team to effectively take the county to the next level.

This is intended to provide the foundation for implementing the action items including the freedom to stay true to the department's functions and outcomes. While many of these recommendations are easy to implement as part of the overall function, the activities should not be implemented until resources (human and budgetary) are allocated to effectively maximize the desired activities and results. If there is not an increased level of resources allocated to this program, we recommend a cautious approach and a further evaluation as to the activities conducted by the department. Adding these to the current model will not yield the desired outcome.

To support the recommendations, the implementation can take place over phases, especially in consideration of the COVID-19 environment. The phases would be determined based on the priorities and desired timeframe for response, integration and adoption.

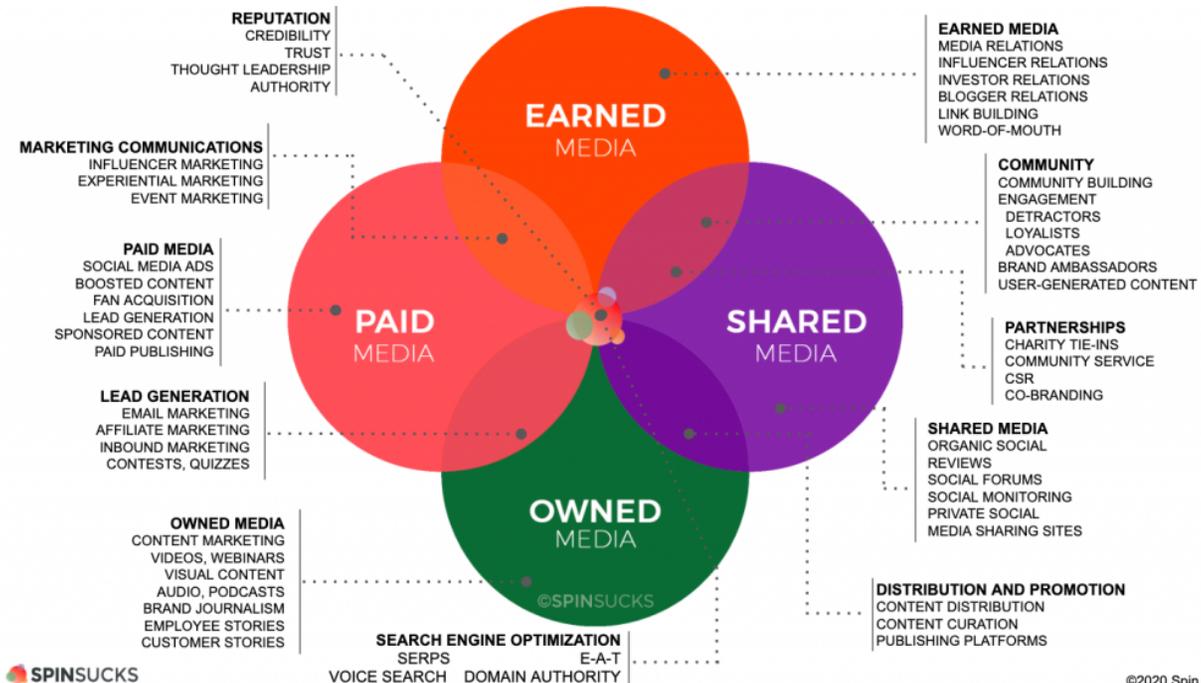
These recommendations are provided based on research and data, and they would need to be further developed within the communication office as well as with the County Manager and with full budgetary support.

The following recommendations include benefits, implementation and timeframe.

Note: Notes are included for recommendations that require further review or adjustments based on the current COVID-19 environment. The rationale, benefits and implementation strategy remains relevant. Dates in the timeline were based on a July 1, 2020 implementation plan.

Recommendation	Benefits	Implementation	Timeframe
<p>Develop a comprehensive strategic communication plan.</p> <p><i>A critical step in the entire process that will ensure all elements align with the county and adequately address requirements of the communications function and position.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aligns internal and external communications to ensure consistency of messaging and buy-in from key stakeholder groups Positions the county and defines roles and responsibilities for current leadership and if there are changes — allows the department to stay the course and focus on the county mission, vision and goals Ensures a well-informed hierarchy and supports the department and individual development Supports organizational transparency Proactively identifies of issues or challenges impacting the county 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include specific goals, objectives and strategies to align with the county Today's communication plan focuses on the PESO model* Develop key messages surrounding the plan with a focus on developing an external and internal announcement around the plan and its implementation — focus on why it's important, effectiveness, etc. Update other policies and procedures to reflect current communication program structure, response and activities Ensure all internal audiences that the department interacts with receives a verbal plan overview and a copy of the entire plan Demonstrate how internal audiences are part of the success of the plan 	<p>Complete plan by April 2020</p> <p>From May – October, review the plan with key departments and personnel</p>

* PESO model credit, Spin Sucks



Elements of a communications plan have changed over the years; however, the basic elements remain — with the goal to “build mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.”* The difference today is that communication plans are more robust and include new digital channels and other functions that support the storytelling position. Public relations and communications professionals have always been storytellers; now there are the outlets to get those stories out that do not strictly rely on journalists or media outlets. The focus is on convergence and integration.

* Credit PRSA

The following is the structure and key elements to include in the comprehensive strategic communication plan:

- Introduction and Summary: Overview of the strategic communication’s plan, the purpose and desired outcome.
- Goal(s): Define the goal of the strategic communication plan. For example, “Develop and implement a strategic communication program for the county designed to effectively reach the priority stakeholder groups internally and externally.”
- Objective(s): Objectives should be measurable and include a timeframe for implementation. For example, “Increase year-over-year engagement on the county’s Facebook page by 25%.”
- Research and Assessment: Include any research conducted, including key elements from this communication’s audit, along with a brief review of the priority areas that will be addressed in the plan.
- Target Audiences and Stakeholder Groups: Identify the target audiences and stakeholder groups internally and externally (?) and further by demographics. Based on that, identify key communication tools identified to reach those audiences.
- Strategies: Outline the components that will help in achieving the objectives. It’s what success will look like. For example, “Development of a consistent social media calendar aligned with areas identified by the target audience of interest.”
- Tactics: These are the nuts and bolts of the plan. It’s how it will happen. Using the example above for the social media calendar, the tactics would be: 1. Social media calendar to include a recommended daily post topic. 2. Social media posts to include an image to support the post. 3. Develop a consistent look and feel for posts designed to support the county brand.
- Evaluation: Include measurement as it relates to each of the strategies, either with supportive data, additional research or by business impact on a quarterly basis.

Recommendation	Benefits	Implementation	Timeframe
<p>Develop and assign an annual department budget.</p> <p><i>To remain effective and to ensure a high-functioning operation, a comprehensive department budget is a necessity.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures resources are available annually and not as an afterthought — communications for the county has proven to be too vital • Provides for department accountability • Allocates for ongoing priorities and those developed as part of the communications plan • Includes personnel, equipment, tools and educational opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Account for change in personnel status from half-time to a full-time position • Incorporate annual professional development allocation (see next recommendation) • Allocate for additional resources to support the department needs as an additional extension • Incorporate tools and resources required to manage the communications function and county brand including replacing, updating or adding additional equipment and resources • Budget to include: personnel; equipment; materials; supplies; creative, production and printing; paid advertising (traditional and social media); professional development; travel; software subscriptions; professional dues; services; external support 	<p>Complete by March 2020</p>

The following is a recommended budget and associated allocation. It includes staff, consideration for equipment and professional development. This is provided for comparison and planning purposes and is based on industry standards and is recommended for consideration based on the findings and to support the high-level operations of the department. Further development of a budget would need to take place to ensure it aligns with county priorities.

Budget Item	Estimated Allocation
Staff	
Salary – Manager	\$103,389
Salary – Specialist	\$62,599
Intern	\$30,000
Optional: Graphic Design	\$10,000
Optional: Communications Consultant Team (\$2000 x 12 months)	\$24,000
Equipment	
Camera, video equipment and repairs	\$2,000
iPhone replacement	\$1,200
Computer	\$2,500
Online creative program subscriptions, project tracking, etc.	\$2,000
Professional Development	
3CMA Membership	\$845
NIOA Membership	\$80
Conference Attendance – Manager (2 annually – national)	\$4,500
Conference Attendance – Specialist (1 annually – local)	\$1,000
FEMA Training	\$1,500
Local events and luncheons	\$1,000

Note: These are recommendations and would require classification by Human Resources in relation to salaries.

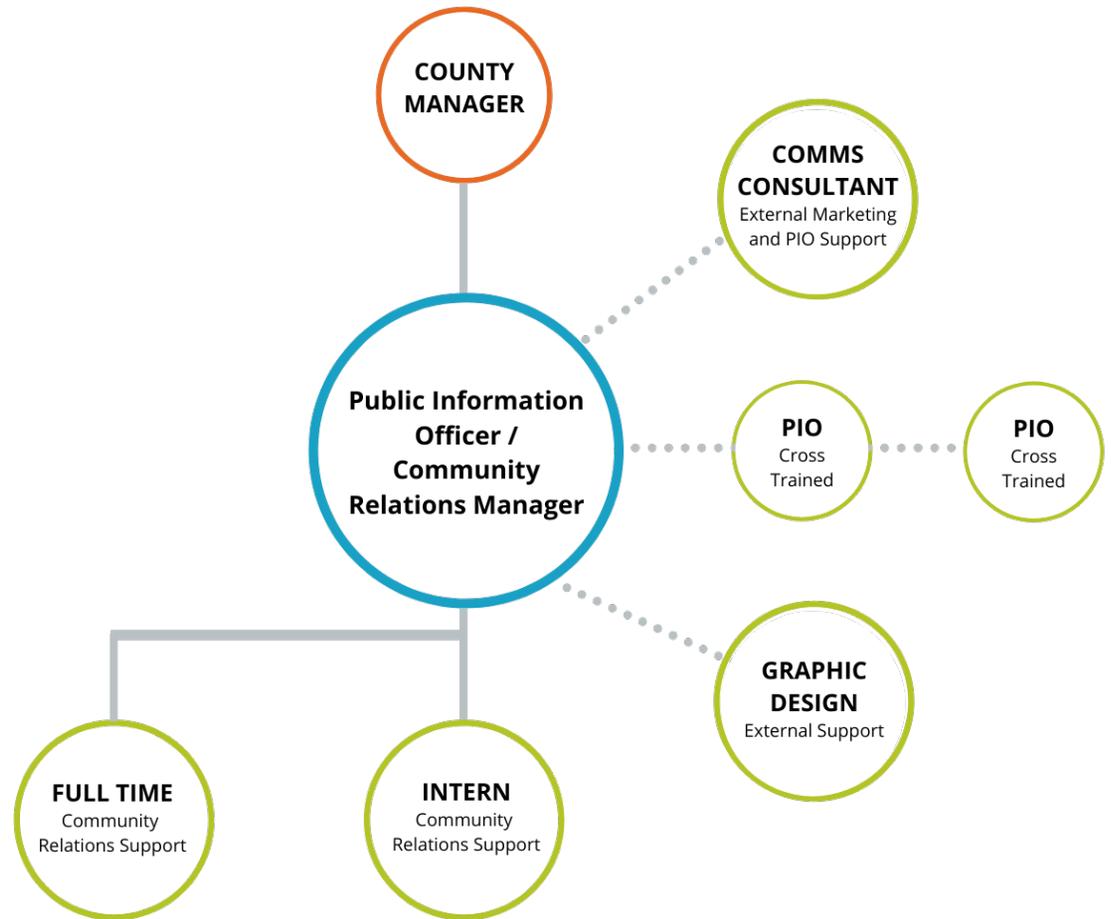
Recommendation	Benefits	Implementation	Timeframe
<p>Develop a personnel plan including frequently reviewed job descriptions and use of external resources, as needed.</p> <p><i>As addressed, the county is in a tremendous position currently with existing staff and the level of commitment to the greater good. To ensure personnel continue to operate at that level, having a vision for the current positions and future opportunities is a must. Currently, if the lead was out during the crisis, the county's response would be compromised due to the lack of cross-training and overall support.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although the job description for the department manager was recently updated, and due to the constant changing demands on the position, an annual review of the job description is a must With the addition of the new half-time support position this year, having an annual review will ensure that functions are aligned with qualifications for the position. It is important to note that in the Key Findings section, the recommendation is to make this position a full-time position in an effort to support current demands on the department The addition of a regular high-level consultant as an extension of the department will provide additional resources at a variety of levels from general support to crisis management involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review job description based on the new full-time position and the use of an external consulting team New full-time job description for the current half-time position Allocate budget to have on an ongoing basis or as needed external resources to support the department <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Graphic design - Communication consultant team <p><i>* Job descriptions included in Appendix for reference</i></p>	<p>Integrate as part of the 2020-21 budget</p> <p>Complete by June 2020</p>



<p>Develop a department organizational structure to support the increased responsibilities.</p> <p><i>Establish a department organizational chart to further define department priorities.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An organization chart will support individual assignments, allow for better prioritization of activities and establish clearly defined responsibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop organization structure with assigned responsibilities and oversight Incorporate cross-training and internal (or external) support structure Incorporate the use of external support and consultants 	<p>Complete by April 2020</p> <p><i>Recommended structure provided below</i></p>
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To the right is a draft organizational chart, based on the audit findings, as an enhanced structure designed to maximize department effectiveness without increasing the budget beyond another full-time staff member. In addition to the direct line for direct reports, dotted lines are added to allow for flexibility including cross-training for the PIO function; these are trained county staff that Ms. Blosser would continue to ensure are properly trained with regular reviews and planning sessions. The additional dotted lines are for graphic design (a function that is used as needed currently) and for a communications consultant (or firm) that would be available to support the team either on a regular or as-needed basis.

The combined resources allow for current job responsibilities to be met as well as those that are not being fulfilled due to resources. It also allows for a fluid expansion of roles and tasks as determined by the workload, projects or during a times of a crisis.



Recommendation	Benefits	Implementation	Timeframe
<p>Establish a plan for ongoing professional development.</p> <p><i>Within a rapidly changing environment, professional development is a necessity.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides advance knowledge to personnel Shows organizational commitment to the program's success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communications manager should be a member of a national professional society that provides for ongoing continuing education and access to resources Communications manager should attend at minimum one but ideally two professional development conferences or day workshops to remain focused on the bigger picture and to better respond to industry changes Support staff should be a member of a national professional society Support staff should attend one local or regional educational professional development program 	<p>Integrate as part of the 2020-21 budget</p>
<p>Comprehensive review of all current department tactics and activities.</p> <p><i>Using findings from the internal and external surveys on audience preferred methods of communication, focus on those that are most effective and adjust or possibility eliminate others.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow personnel to focus on tactics and activities that are highly effective versus those activities that "we've always done" Outputs will be focused on those that have a greater response and result Critical review of tactics and sunsetting those that are not effective, as well as replace with a more effective approach will lead to greater engagement Provides for increased job satisfaction — when you feel like you are making a difference, there is an inherent reward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct a review of all tactics implemented or used by the department. Assign a value to it based on priorities. Determine if sunsetting the program has immediate and long-term value Assign tactics to a schedule and calendar for monthly, quarterly and annual initiatives. Use the plan to further build relationships internally and trust externally. In March 2021, conduct another survey of the same audiences and evaluate for changes based on what has been implemented over the last year 	<p>During the 2020-21 fiscal year</p>
<p>Continue to take a lead as county spokesperson during crisis situations with cross-training for additional support.</p> <p><i>On an ongoing basis, the department serves as the main spokesperson for the county. Crisis response is a strength of the current department. There is an opportunity to continue to lead by developing an enhanced level of training, cross-training and support.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased leadership opportunities for the communications lead Assurance that the responsibility doesn't lie with one person — for standard communications or crisis communications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a local Crisis Communications Council – meet twice a year and review processes and procedures during a crisis and introduce additional support teams Cross-train up to two additional staff or support staff to step in during a crisis at the same level as the department lead Consider using outside expert consultants who know the community and key players and could either lead support or serve as a crisis lead, if needed Develop a professional development training for the crisis communications lead <p><i>During the height of the pandemic, the benefits of having a seasoned professional work with the Quad Counties was evident. However, it also limited the in-county response especially with competing priorities. It proved the value of having another county employee trained as a PIO.</i></p>	<p>During the 2020-21 fiscal year</p>

Recommendation	Benefits	Implementation	Timeframe
<p>Establish guidelines for internal audiences and provide support.</p> <p><i>Communications extend throughout the organization with the internal audiences also being the primary external audience – residents. This is also the greatest opportunity to tell the county’s positive story with one-voice initiatives.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency in messaging and responses at all levels of the organization • Communication office becomes the strategic administrator of change • One-voice messaging and no surprises • Provides a clear structure for how information is shared from the top down and outward • Increased knowledge of the communication office’s benefits to the larger picture • Incorporate a project tracking program to effectively manage priorities and assign tasks (similar to a workflow plan) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedures solidified for sharing of information • Revamp existing communications channels to focus on priority information and key initiatives • Educate directors/managers face-to-face and on an ongoing basis, as needed • Provide a regular report as part of internal meetings and to the County Commissioners as to the outreach initiatives as a way to demonstrate to the residents, “we hear you” <p><i>As was evident during COVID-19 communications is the need for streamlined communications messages shaped around policy decisions and focused on customer service.</i></p>	<p>During the 2020-21 fiscal year and ongoing</p>
<p>Develop a campaign toolkit for consistency in messaging and responsive action for county-led programs.</p> <p><i>To support the “one-voice” and to provide support for each department, having a draft plan that can easily be implemented by department and activity ensures key areas and audiences are included.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toolkits can be customized by areas of focus — community outreach campaign, educational campaign, brand campaign • Provides for a standardized approach to a variety of county needs, yet allows for customization • Allows for quicker and more efficient responses to issues and opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a variety of standardized toolkits but allow for customization based on the audience and initiative • Include in the toolkit tactics that will be implemented as part of the campaign (press releases, social posts, eblasts, video, other visuals, Q&As, outreach initiatives, etc.) 	<p>During the 2020-21 fiscal year and ongoing</p>
<p>Conduct a thorough brand integration and review.</p> <p><i>The county brand is more than just a logo. It’s the feeling people have and how the county supports residents in feeling connected. Every community has issues. This is designed to show a willingness to be involved, solve problems and not just listening to issues. It also ensures a consistent outreach effort tied to the county brand so that when issues due arise, there is a support network in place.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports further integration of marketing activities within the communications channels • Refines the brand and positioning — the big picture • Supports community-driven campaigns, such as #CVPride or similar resident-proud programs • Allows for advance identification of potential stakeholder messaging • Connects issues with the audiences and allows for a focus on any opportunities or challenges • Reinforces the need for the county to be more than just reactive but one poised for the future economically 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold a series of brand and issues assessment focus groups • Review and update brand standards and provide to key internal stakeholders • Keep a list of key issues to watch and get ahead of • Provide messaging and talking points to ensure a one-voice mentality • Incorporate a review of results as part of the 2021 survey 	<p>During the 2020-21 fiscal year and ongoing</p>

Recommendation	Benefits	Implementation	Timeframe
<p>Solve the problems of the residents by providing opportunities to share concerns and challenges.</p> <p><i>There's an opportunity to develop a cohesive network of contacts and level of engagement that ignites a passion for the local community to become involved and part of the process — because they know they will be heard. While the role of the communication office is broad, a program that provides clear access and the ability to listen, could change dramatically how the county is viewed in the eyes of the residents.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased confidence between the county and its residents Increased value of transparency in government Increased support of the residents of the community Increased awareness of county programs Opportunity to unify with one-voice messaging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hold a listening tour starting twice a year with the goal to conduct the sessions quarterly. Set it up casually and with county personal for one-on-one discussions with residents so they feel heard. Possibly use tables with signs on each by areas of interest and provide an overall topic for the session. Residents then can go to that table to discuss further. Advance preparation would be required. The listening portion of the opportunity needs to be emphasized. Continue to use other methods for residents to connect with the county including online and in social media Since a majority of residents rely on the local media, perhaps involve them in the process Report results to the Commissioners 	<p>Target to hold the first in fall 2020 and a second in spring 2021</p>
<p>Use multichannel communications to effectively reach stakeholder groups.</p> <p><i>As part of the strategic communications program, the focus should be on developing transparent, two-way outreach through a number of channels and output methods.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate messaging that's relevant and impactful to the target audience Utilize platforms that resonate with the target audiences more effectively Maximize opportunities on the website Videos are proven to be an effective way to reach audiences with an impactful and memorable manner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use video to communicate public service items, general updates, educational information as well as during a crisis — use video across all available platforms including online, website, social and email communications Integrate photography into everything and include with all media communications and online postings (website and social) Review data and analytics, adjust as needed 	<p>During the 2020-21 fiscal year and ongoing</p>
<p>Review digital strategies and streamline the approach for increased efficiency.</p> <p><i>One of the most critical areas as noted by the external and internal surveys, is it's vital that all digital platforms are backed by strong strategies and are supported with the latest technology to ensure efficient implementation.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistency and added diversity of messaging Ability to review what is working and identify areas of improvement based on review of digital platforms statistics and data Due to the reliance on social media as noted in the survey, ensuring there are adequate resources to continue to maximize those outlets would be a priority — it can't be viewed as an afterthought Use online tools and resources that support output development at the highest levels possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in equipment designed for the function and plan on updating every 3-5 years to keep on pace with technological developments and enhancements Conduct an eblast review and based on open rates, focus on those that are getting the reach and engagement Establish a social media content calendar Ensure proper staffing for social media posting and monitoring — it relies on more than just one or two people to keep up with the ability to maximize this primary resident outlet 	<p>During the 2020-21 fiscal year and ongoing</p>
<p>Create branding consistency.</p> <p><i>Reviewing the branding guidelines and monitoring for use will provide for enhanced awareness.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on integrating the brand in all aspects of the communications channels Because of limited time and resources, ensuring that all branding guidelines are followed isn't able to consistently take place. A lack of brand consistency leads to a disconnect in the communication channels. Consider using the creative developer to review all materials and provide recommendations for consistency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure all documents, internal and public facing, follow brand guidelines for logo usage, fonts, etc. Look at a brand refresh in regard to styling (this is not changing the logo but to enhance the awareness of Douglas County locally) 	<p>During the 2020-21 fiscal year and ongoing</p>



Photo credit: Juan Morales

CORE OUTCOMES

The following, overarching observations and recommendations are provided in an effort to guide the communications program going forward from a 30,000-foot perspective and are based on research conducted, communication industry best practices and first-hand practical experience.

As noted, these recommendations are pre-pandemic however, the overarching benefit of a solid, planned and strategic communications program remains relevant.

SUMMARIZED OUTCOMES

Timeframe for Implementation	Action
1 year	Develop a Comprehensive Strategic Communications Plan
1 – 2 years	Review tactics, adjust priorities
1 – 2 years	Review tactics, adjust priorities
1 – 3 years	Department Budget
1 – 3 years	Crisis communication cross-training and certification courses
1 – 3 years and ongoing	Budget for professional development and specific job training
2 years	Department toolkit
2 years	Brand integration and brand consistency
2 – 5 years	Internal communications plan
2 – 5 years	Multichannel communications integration and problem solving
2 – 5 years	Implementation of Strategic Communications Plan
3 – 5 years	Digital strategy and integration
Ongoing	Department organization functions and structure Add new position in next 1-2 years

Strategic communications are a management function and needs to have a seat at the table.

The communications manager position needs to be at the right hand to the county — from the County Manager to key departments — and have an open-door policy and included in all critical meetings or decisions. It's a management function. This is the first person most would call if there was a crisis, why not include during the initial planning phases? Yes, the communications person can post to Facebook the latest update and support in funneling requests from the website, but the value to the county is to rely on the expertise of that person in developing and leading the effort to a strong communications program at a much higher level. Additional staff and a support team can implement the tactical functions through the oversight of the lead position. The ability to move to this is evident based on the level of respect and support that Ms. Blosser currently has.

While understood at the root, a very critical role of the department is in delivering key messages about the Commissioners policy and vision to the residents of the county. The unification in messaging is vital and is supported by the research and even recent county responses. This department is the glue for the county and as such, messaging should be routed through the department prior to public dissemination.

Office needs a focused vision on the priorities for the communication program with consideration for the competing audiences and time demands.

There is no question that the department is responsive. During our interviews, Ms. Blosser's strong work ethic as well as her commitment to her profession and the county were never in question. People, both internal and external, know they can reach her day or night. The challenge with that is that they can reach her day and night — the demands of which can be taxing to her personally and to the effectiveness of the department. As is, communication efforts and competing demands have a way of consuming time and, as a result, the strategic function of the role is diminished and replaced with tactical functions. At times the offices is pulling in additional resources to assist with efforts, including the Assistant County Manager, which is not the most effective use of her time and expertise either. Think of multiple demands — one of providing high-level strategic council for a new county development that will impact thousands of residents versus an incident that requires immediate communication on behalf of the Sheriff, such as a temporary road closure. The undesired result is a reactive response to the road closure at the expense of the bigger picture.

An obvious solution is the development and adherence to a county communication plan that is focused on creating meaningful programs designed to engage with priority stakeholder audiences. It then requires a strategic vision aligned to the activities so as not to engage in a "drop everything" for the latest request. When priority is given to the urgent, the overarching goals can easily become an afterthought. It is understood that situations happen, however relying on and focusing on set goals will turn the ship over time to becoming more strategic.

Communication is an interesting word. And sometimes it's the last thing a large organization does. As a county government, communications do not lie with just one or two people. It is a function of the entire county to effectively communicate to the residents who rely on the organization as well as the internal audiences who are responsible for resident interaction. By having the communications office take on that responsibility it leads to an effective, focused and unified response.

Need for adequate staffing to meet the focused demands and to be responsive during times of crisis.

Even with the current staffing levels and increased responsibilities, it's evident that Ms. Blosser has done an impressive job of managing multiple requests and competing responsibilities. However, it's our opinion that the department is at its capacity, if not over it, and will not be able to keep up with the demands over the long-term without additional support. This was substantiated through the one-on-one interviews conducted with county personnel. Now is the time to make the change.

Need to remain transparent in an effort to gain and build trust with stakeholders.

An inherent outcome of a planned strategy is more transparency. Audiences are won over by honest and consistent communications. Providing regular community information is vital to gaining trust. In the surveys, residents and employees both expressed the desire to know more about issues, but also about their community in general. They want to know what's happening, history of the community, what the county is doing to increase their quality of life while looking to the future — basically, those items that reinforce their decision of why Douglas County is the place they want to continue to live in. Consistency is the first step in trust building. Develop a plan and implement it.

Communications need to be multichannel and maximized for effectiveness, especially based on county demographics.

Yes, a large percentage of the population is 54 plus. They are highly engaged and are active on social media in addition to reading The Record Courier (in print and online) and know to go to the county website for information. And while the population is not highly diverse in respect to age, nationality or even income, they want to connect. It's important to share information in a number of ways on a number of channels. For instance, in print, provide a link to learn more. Use more visual imagery, to show not tell, in print and online. For Facebook, integrate the use of video more. As you build Instagram, determine the focus of the account before starting. It's a visual sell and focusing on how to develop the look and feel of the account at the beginning will support audience engagement. What are the key messages, who are you targeting and then align with the distribution type — sometimes it will be the same, but most of the time, each should be customized per channel to be effective. In order to do this, the communications office will need to be adequately staffed and prepared.

It's time to ask the tough questions.

From an activity standpoint, what would happen if an initiative was eliminated? How are current initiatives being met?

More importantly from a crisis management standpoint: What would happen today if a large-scale crisis struck and Ms. Blosser was out of the state or even the country? Is there a backup? The current PIO role is to post to the website and keep it updated, post to social media and monitor for comments, communicate internally and to other state agencies, post to community blogs, manage the text notification system, etc. It's a full-time job during a crisis. Many times we heard that Ms. Blosser was at it for 24 hours or longer during the 2017 flood. That is not maintainable or responsible practice for a county government agency.

Asking these tough questions is hard, and hearing the answers is sometimes more difficult. However, taking an inward look now provides time to make modifications and changes in preparation for the next, "what if?"



SUMMARY

The county is at a turning point. The job role that originally started six years ago quickly evolved, especially with the increased responsibilities over the last year and half; however, the opportunity exists to craft this position and the department to become a significant driver of the county's communication and branding efforts.

The role of communications manager is much more than press releases and talking to the media. And while for some that role is very narrow, Douglas County has seen the benefits first hand of a comprehensive and integrated approach - from branding to communications, and from visual storytelling to digital communications.

While several core recommendations are included, the primary focus is to develop a communications plan. The plan will serve as the driver now and for the next year. The plan should be updated and reviewed regularly. Within the plan, the ability for the office to continue at the level currently taking place requires support and resources so as to continue to adapt and adjust as needed including cross-training a secondary PIO. Other key area identified during the pandemic is for a separate communications and marketing plan for internal audiences.

Overwhelmingly, Douglas County is well poised to increase its communication outreach locally - to internal and external audiences - gaining awareness, overcoming obstacles and garnering goodwill.



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