

# Strategic Communications Planning Report

PREPARED FOR THE  
CITY OF MYRTLE BEACH, SC

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## Introduction

This Strategic Communications Planning Report was prepared for the City of Myrtle Beach by contract per the terms of RFP 18-R0023 “Communications Consultant Services” issued March 16, 2018, and awarded to Gordon Hirsch, dba G2CS, LLC on May 14, 2018.

In its Scope of Work description, “Communications: An Essential Function of Government”, the City, among its top goals, focused on the importance of *messaging* in communications initiatives that:

- Emphasized its need to “develop and implement strategic communications initiatives that are consistent and that work to advance the City’s *key messages and objectives*.”
- Recognized “All elected officials, staff, residents, and businesses are, officially or unofficially, ambassadors for the City, and they help to define, shape, and communicate the City’s *messages* to various key audiences.”
- Stated “It is a shared responsibility that all City leaders and employees ... ensure that Myrtle Beach residents and businesses, as well as audiences outside of Myrtle Beach, receive the *right messages* to further communicate the City’s *key messages*, and to help spread the word about [their] importance to the City’s future.”

Having retained a consultant “to review the City’s current communications infrastructure, platforms, strategy, practices, and staffing” the Scope of Work further defines the City’s Objectives as “General, Situational, Internal,” as follows:

**General** (platforms):

1. Improve communications with residents and guests alike.
2. Develop a metric to evaluate how messages are perceived by the end-user and analyze the results of communication efforts.

**Situational** (strategy and practices):

1. Communicate more clearly and rapidly, especially during emerging situations.
2. Develop strategies to more effectively respond to negative social media attacks.
3. Develop protocol to stay ahead of social media.

**Internal** (infrastructure and staffing):

1. Improve internal communications throughout the organization.
2. Outline related training needs and opportunities.

The City of Myrtle Beach is to be commended for undertaking this communications evaluation process, and for the commitment, time, and resources that were made available for the duration of project research.

## Methodology

The project methodology involved more than 260 hours of time spent by the consultant with City management, staff, and Council Members between May 14, 2018 and August 15, 2018. Subjects explored included the City's current communications practices, communications budget(s), staffing, personnel, material resources, departmental strategies, media relations, technology tools, technology platforms, web site content and management, and social media activities. City Manager John Pederson and Director of Public Information Mark Kruea committed to personal involvement throughout the project, encouraging and facilitating participation by senior department heads and staff. For the duration of the project period, the consultant was copied on hundreds of emails involving public communications and response by the PIO, City Manager and senior staff. The consultant also was asked to contribute opinions regarding response to various live communications issues as they developed.

One-on-one meetings were held with all members of City Council, to explore council members' messaging philosophies, issues, and priorities. Topics discussed included goals Council had presented to the City Manager and Staff at the beginning of the 2018 budget process, including:

1. Downtown Revitalization
2. Public Safety
3. Economic Development
4. Maintenance of aging infrastructure and structures

Further, at the outset of the project, all City department heads received a written project worksheet, "Elements of a Strategic Communications Plan", for use in defining strategic communications messages at the department level. Departments were asked to complete the worksheet exercise with just one audience in mind: residents of the City of Myrtle Beach.

The Elements of a Strategic Communications Plan worksheets outlined a five-step plan for each department to consider:

1. Determine Goal(s)
2. Identify and Profile Audience(s)
3. Develop Message(s)
4. Select Communications Channels
5. Choose Activities and Materials.

A series of weekly meetings with each City department followed, to answer questions and discuss issues related to worksheet responses. The consultant also offered to meet independently with each department to further explore communications practices and challenges. Several departments, including Police, DRC, and HR/OD held follow up meetings with the consultant and their staff.

## Methodology (continued)

Completed worksheets were returned to the consultant by departments on or before Aug. 1. Worksheet responses were then entered in a spreadsheet for comparison and identification of common elements, communications messaging and values, and participants thoughts.

## Creating a Strategic Communications Plan

The exercise, Elements of a Strategic Communications Plan, has as its primary objective the development of communications Goals to be achieved by delivery of Key Messages to Target Audience(s) via specific Media Channels. Progress is then measured by metrics against a baseline survey of audience attitudes and opinions. Logical practice dictates:

- No strategic plan becomes actionable until its Goals and Key Messages have been identified and agreed upon.
- Target Audiences' initial attitudes/opinions should be established at a baseline level by survey, poll and/or focus groups.
- Establishment of baseline metrics may be undertaken after a strategic plan has been completed and is ready for implementation. Or, conversely, survey of public attitudes and opinions may precede development of a strategic plan, if the intent of such survey is to help determine Goals and messaging of the ensuing strategic plan.
- Progress metrics follow implementation of a strategic plan. Typically, surveys on an annual or other agreed upon time interval are employed over a duration of years. Each survey is compared to the original benchmark and preceding survey to measure changes in resident attitudes/opinions regarding the City's effectiveness in communicating its Key Messages toward attainment of its Goals.

To better understand the process and potential options, the following examples may serve to help practical understanding:

The City's current motto/tagline is "First in Service." The City may wish to know if its residents think the City is living up to expectations implied by its motto, and to address those findings. The City may undertake the project in multiple ways; here are two such examples:

- (1) The City knows or assumes from experience that residents are concerned about specific issues that do not appear to live up to its "First in Service" motto.
- The City wishes to create a strategic communications plan to address and educate residents regarding those issues.
- The City utilizes these known or assumed issues to develop its Goals and Key Messages to Target Audiences via specific Media Channels.
- A poll/survey is conducted to establish baseline attitudes/opinions of residents about those issues.

## Creating a Strategic Communications Plan (continued)

- Ongoing annual polls measure the City's effectiveness in educating residents to inform their attitudes/opinion on the issues.

(OR)

- (2) The City starts by conducting a survey to measure resident attitudes/opinions regarding its effectiveness in achieving "First In Service". Steps are taken to ensure known or assumed issues are included in the survey.
- Working from survey results, the City creates a strategic communications plan with Goals derived from survey findings.
- Key Messages, Target Audiences and Media Channels derive from survey findings and demographics.
- Ongoing annual surveys measure the City's effectiveness in addressing resident issues.

Both approaches have relative strengths. Plan 1 begins immediately with a course of action, based on known or assumed issues. Surveys to establish a baseline and to measure progress derive from the plan of action. Plan 2 begins with a belief that issues should first be identified and confirmed through polling. The resulting identification of issues and a plan of action derive from polling.

For the action oriented, Plan 1 may be most appealing. For the scientifically inclined, Plan 2 may be more favored. Regardless, for both plans, survey metrics measure progress achieved by first establishing a baseline and following with additional surveys to gauge progress by rate of change.

## Situation Analysis / The Community

The history of Myrtle Beach is brief by almost any standard. The community is barely 100 years old, incorporated 80 years ago, not even officially a city until 1957. Its growth and economy have been shaped largely by tourism and the people who founded its accommodation, entertainment, dining, real estate, golf and construction enterprises. The lack of economic diversity in business and industry is a state of normalcy for locals - and quite often a source of consternation to newcomers in search of employment outside the hospitality and tourism fields. Construction jobs ebb and flow with the economy in boom or bust decades-long cycles. National builders with little long-term interest in the community have replaced most local builders with ties to the area. Large national companies, manufacturing, and corporate headquarters of significant size or employment level are so few or so limited in their community presence as to be almost absent in civic affairs. Horry County School District is still the largest single employer. Founding families still control key vacant properties, unkempt and gaping in the City landscape, crucial to downtown redevelopment but relegated to shabby interim uses.

The City's estimated resident population is just over 32,000 but, on any given day, the actual number of people in residence ranges from more than 100,000 in winter months to over 300,000 in peak summer season. A realistic annual average estimate of all people in residence is likely 150,000 or more. No exact sources were found. The surrounding metropolitan area, which encompasses the Grand Strand's 60 miles of beaches, is home to about 450,000 permanent residents. The 2018 Census estimates rank Myrtle Beach as the second fastest-growing metropolitan area in the United States. U.S. News and World Report ranked it No. 1 for 2018. Somewhere between 14 million and 18 million visitors (depending on whose numbers you believe) stay and play in Myrtle Beach annually. Tourism generates about \$7 billion annually, including just under \$500 million in state and local taxes.

Myrtle Beach. Small town. Big money. Rapid growth. Old ways, new people. Retirees seeking security and stability, many uncertain in their appreciation for the value of tourism, while increasing numbers of young families arrive who must find work, raise families, and send children to schools. Tourism employing 83,000 people, many jobs still seasonal. Escalating housing and rental prices, homelessness on the rise, panhandling and blanket-wearing characters common along The Boulevard, throughout the central business district, at gas stations, the Post Office. Growing public safety fears, suspicion of strangers walking through neighborhoods where residents once left doors unlocked. Prostitution, drug dealers, a heroin and opioid epidemic, guns, gangs and shootings grabbing headlines with increasing frequency. Run down motels catering to criminals who come to prey on tourists and locals, offering cheap habitat for those who sell the drugs, run the prostitutes, defy police and degrade the streets. Police employment at record levels, video cameras piercing almost all public privacy - those same cameras solving crimes in hours or minutes that once took days or weeks to investigate.



## Situation Analysis / The Community (continued)

Ongoing reports of ocean water tainted with unhealthy bacteria, DHEC swimming advisories becoming staple television news fodder – often badly and inaccurately reported. Viral shooting videos, fake news, social media critics flush with keyboard courage openly slamming the City and the Chamber of Commerce -- and raising legitimate questions about spending of millions of sales tax dollars on destination marketing. Mistrust and misinformation building among more recent residents, in the Market Commons (the City's largest voting precinct) and among other recent residents. Discontent in that mass of unincorporated neighborhoods called Carolina Forest, not in the City limits but a place where many residents feel a reasonable "right" to criticize City leaders over decisions that "affect them" – and to make demands for special accommodations such as parking at the beach, "the reason I moved here."

Myrtle Beach itself is a linear collection of neighborhoods with no defined community center. Downtown, a focal point of most local communities, is primarily for tourists. Sometimes it feels that almost everything is for tourists - restaurants, entertainment districts, retail shopping centers. Which as more people arrive to live here and work here raises an increasingly asked question: What about us? Good question. What's to keep more helicopter tour operators, for example, from noisily flying over our homes every five minutes? Once upon a time, East of Kings Highway was "Theirs" and West of Kings Highway was "Ours." No more.

Who serves the needs of the City's 33,000 residents, its 150,000 average daily population, its 300,000+ tourists per week (10 times the resident population in Summer). Who cleans up the beaches and picks up the trash? Who reconciles the needs and wants of the community for tourists and locals alike? Who is responsible for keeping the peace, making the City safe for everyone, everywhere, every day. Operating our parks, keeping sewers flowing, fixing sidewalks and pot holes, pruning trees that overhang streets, offering resident recreation programs and services to thousands, conducting softball tournament, controlling storm water and flooding, enforcing building codes and setting standards for all residential and commercial development, managing record numbers of building permits and myriad accompanying inspections, picking up after a hurricane, administering a \$200 million annual budget, being good stewards of taxpayer funds?

In most cases, it all starts with the City of Myrtle Beach, a local government of about 1,000 employees enlisted in the daily responsibility of serving our community, however that may change each day. And how is the City defined? That depends. If you're a tourist visiting the vacation destination "Myrtle Beach" you may know (or care) little about where the 12 miles of Myrtle Beach start or stop within the 60 miles of the Grand Strand, or the geographic boundaries of the 15 distinct communities and municipalities that lie between Little River and Georgetown. Have a question before you arrive? Have a complaint after leaving? Call or email the City of Myrtle and they will answer.

## Situation Analysis / The Community (continued)

As people say these days, it's complicated. It's a big job, wide open to criticism from all comers, whether they live here full-time, part-time, or are just passing through.

In many ways Myrtle Beach is still a one-horse town with a relatively small and quiet resident population and a relatively large and booming tourism industry. But the elephant in the room is rarely a topic of open public discussion: Myrtle Beach is an aging tourism destination with a decaying core and big-city problems that will require big-city spending to sustain even temporary solutions, much less repair them.

Nobody is to blame. This is a natural aging process, which occurs in almost every city. And, as we also know from the experience of other cities, the remedy is a downtown revitalization process, which will require decades to undertake. Crime is just a symptom of the larger problem.

And yet there is no vision for the future of Myrtle Beach, no organized discussion of goals or objectives, no process for government, residents, and business to work together on a plan for our future. Call the first 100 years "Myrtle Beach 1.0". Call our next hundred years "Myrtle Beach 2.0". What will it be like? Would we want our children and grandchildren to live and work here? Would we invite our friends and family to vacation here?

## Situation Analysis / The News Media & Education

The 24-hour news cycle is a voracious beast. It requires breathless content, and more breathless content, and more, and more, to wage the battle for advertisers and audience. It's not built to be informative, nor suited to educating people about anything. It's "Breaking!" It's today's "First Alert!" It's Infotainment. And the competition can be fierce, especially in such a relatively small seasonal television market like Myrtle Beach, where there just isn't enough local advertising money -- or news -- to go around. This is one of those instances where too much competition is not necessarily a good thing.

The competitive pursuit of ever more "content" results mostly in reporting of those things which happen everywhere, in big cities and small towns, such as holdups and car crashes and traffic congestion and FIRST ALERT WEATHER- even of BREAKING reports that turn out to be suicides or tragic domestic violence, once treated (even by the media) with deference and respect. More and more, "news" is video of virtually anything out of the ordinary, regardless of its importance. In fact, the definition of news today might be "Anything, anywhere accompanied by video that makes people say: Wow! You don't see that every day." Even national network newscasts regularly include video of truck wrecks or explosions anywhere, or nowhere. Gone are the days when news had to be of national importance to be reported nationally. Or of local importance to be reported locally.

Lacking adequate news of substance, and viewers of patience, newscasts that require more and more content necessarily end up filled with more items of declining significance, to be told at an ever-faster pace in ever-shorter bits and clips, all fit for shrinking attention spans. Thus, the ever-present stream of crime and accident reports might average 5-15 seconds per "Story", "Special Reports" 30-60 seconds, and "Investigative Reports" 60 seconds or more. Hardly enough time to inform much less educate anyone about issues so complex as a decaying downtown, the causes and consequences of homelessness, or an epidemic of opiate overdoses and deaths.

News about government and issues facing communities almost always is complicated, and often boring, to all but those who may be directly impacted in any real or perceived fashion. Hardly the stuff that audience ratings are built on. Rarely can important issues be presented fairly, much less explained thoroughly, in under a minute. Today's news formats are more suited to infotainment. And not just broadcast news. There is little remaining difference between local daily newspapers and broadcast media. Both compete in the same 24-hour news cycle in the same abbreviated fashion.

## Situation Analysis / The News Media & Education (continued)

There is a potential bright spot taking shape in community journalism. Weekly newspapers have been steadily rising to fill the void left by traditional daily newspapers. These community-based papers increasingly are home to more experienced and professional journalists, reporting about where they live with a broader perspective and the time to tell complex stories fairly, in an informative and even educational context. They deserve our support.

## Situation Analysis / News & Social Media

Of greater significance and importance is the rise of Social Media as a primary, even dominant, purveyor of world, national and local news. “I saw it on Facebook, it must be true” is a fun statement, good for a chuckle among friends. And yet how many people really do see false, “fake”, or outright misinformation on Facebook daily -- and do believe it, and do “share” it, and do influence the opinions of others? According to Pew Research Center, two-thirds of U.S. adults get news from social media, including more than half of all Americans 50 or over. Overall, Facebook leads every other social media site as a source of news, and two-thirds of Americans use Facebook.

And Facebook, which blithely streams news it did not create and does not accept responsibility for, to billions of people each day, only now is learning (the hard way), some of the responsibilities that come with being a purveyor of news. That it really does matter if news is true or not, that some news originates from sources of greater credibility than others, that bloggers are not the equals of national newspapers that have published for centuries, and that self-proclaimed providers of self-serving news are not the equivalent of professional journalists who have studied the issues and reported on them for decades. It is learning, too, that the consequences of irresponsible dissemination of news are real enough to affect the outcome of presidential campaigns, or to be the work of foreign powers.

And what are we learning at home? The same lessons. That a single Facebook user representing him- or herself as a news organization can damage a major tourism destination’s reputation and cause real harm to a community. That one person with a hit list can influence local elections, casting unsubstantiated doubt on the credibility of public servants, and paralyzing with inanity those who would rebut the nuts.

Dissent and criticism of government is a cornerstone of American Democracy. It is to be encouraged as an essential element of informed civil discourse in any civilized government. There’s nothing new here in regard to our rights of free speech. What is new is the opportunity for almost anyone to qualify as a “news organization” with a Google or a Facebook, and thereby gain access to the same mass audiences as mainstream media. By gaining inclusion in a “news feed” as a “news organization”, almost anyone can be granted the greater credibility and greater influence formerly available only to legitimate news media outlets, without having to meet the reporting or fairness standards of ethical journalism. How does one become a news organization recognized by a Google or Facebook? Just follow their directions and design your web site or page to meet those standards. Like most everything else these Internet “services” provide, oversight of content is all about algorithms and automation. Human review and intervention are rare, resulting only from persistent user complaints.

## Project Findings / Communications Policy

In meetings, interviews and discussion with individual City Council members, the City Manager, City Department heads, and senior staff, over a 12-week period, all parties expressed sincere interest in communicating more effectively with residents, with each other, and with City employees. Of particular importance, voiced often, were concerns and frustrations about:

- A growing belief that the City was not “leading” or “driving the narrative” in public debate about priority issues such as public safety, downtown revitalization, water quality, future plans for the Super Block, strained infrastructure and, in general, best use of taxpayer monies. To the contrary, many said, too much time was being expended in reactionary response to media reporting and public criticisms of the City and its performance. As a result, the City had been placed in a highly defensive posture and, it was feared, public trust was eroding for lack of effective response.
- Many expressed confusion about being “under attack” by social media critics who publicly and regularly accused City officials (and, by implication, City staff) of unproven and unspecified allegations of serious or even criminal wrongdoing, including malfeasance, incompetence, conspiracy, crooked or “crony” behavior, even personal enrichment through theft or misdirection of public money –though those same critics never offered any suggestion of proof or empirical evidence of such allegations, and despite the fact that no actual investigations, criminal charges or prosecutions had occurred which might support such accusations.
- The question of how to respond to these unfounded but pervasive criticisms was problematic to most involved. How does a public official or employee say “I am not a crook” without sounding like those in the past who have turned out to be crooks? This Catch-22 was particularly difficult to comprehend among city staff with a lifetime of service (and accomplishment) to the community, many of whom truly work and act in the spirit of humility consistent with a calling to the role of “public servant.”
- Past attempts, in the current and previous administrations, to address public and social media criticism had run the gamut of possibilities. At times, the PIO had been instructed to “engage”, meaning he had responded directly and factually to the issues of the day. At other times, the PIO had been directed not to engage, based on the longstanding PR premise that a fire needs fuel to burn; if you don’t fuel the discussion, it will eventually burn out. Over time, those strategies, though effective in some cases, did not appear to be working to best effect. In fact, absent any official response, some criticisms of the City seemed to be gaining audience and influence.

## Project Findings / Communications Policy (continued)

In sum, this study found no authoritative central leadership or organizational policy guidance in the area of public communications. City Council is the elected and ultimate authority of all City policy but no policy yet exists which would provide guidance to staff. In the absence of policy direction from City Council, the City Manager and PIO, the Police Department and Fire Department, have responded largely in a situational manner to events as they arise, also without benefit of a written interdepartmental communications policy. While the PIO has expressed that he operates under a clear communications strategy, arrived at after years of personal leadership on the job, those policy ideas have yet to be codified, shared or reviewed by his peers. And, in all fairness, expression of the PIO's communications policy must first be premised on clear policy governing the roles of City Council and the City Manager in managing external communications decisions.

## Recommendations

If the City of Myrtle Beach were a private-sector business with a \$200 million annual budget, the recommendations of this report would be focused largely on hiring of a marketing and public relations agency, at a six-figure annual budget, to tackle the job of repairing, repositioning and restoring the City's brand (which is outdated, tarnished, and in serious need of overhaul, but that's another conversation entirely).

Instead, believing that residents and taxpayers rightfully would object to another such expenditure of public funds for "advertising", the recommendations which follow focus almost entirely on increasing the role of City government in communications leadership by encouraging the City to do a better job of explaining its actions and educating its citizens about issues we all face and must solve together.

Throughout the project process, City Council Members and City staff expressed clearly, in varying ways, their desire that the City become more proactive in public education of residents with the goal of improving understanding of local government and its actions, thereby reducing the need to be driven by reactive engagement with its critics. The underlying premise being that an informed citizenry will make more informed decisions, based on a better understanding of the City's goals, actions and proposed solutions to community challenges. Repeated use of previously mentioned terms such as "driving the narrative" were further explained in meetings and conversation as a need to "get out in front of the issues" with fair, unbiased, factual, information that contributes to informed public discussion.

Also regularly expressed was concern – and in some cases resignation - with the lack of resident participation in local government. For example, it was widely acknowledged that most residents had never attended a City Council meeting and probably never would - unless or until some important personal or business-related issue might come before Council. Further, it seemed widely accepted, overall, that so long as trash is picked up, sewers flow, streets are paved, taxes are reasonable, and police are not required for normal personal safety, most people have little need or want to become involved in City government. Perhaps rightly so. Taxpayers can and should expect basic government services to operate smoothly with or without their personal involvement.

But what of the rest, the actions of local government which shape communities and their priorities? How can interested residents become more involved with the establishment of short-term and long-term public policy? And how should that involvement be honestly informed by the City, without the taint or appearance of undue political influence, manipulation, or propagandizing?



## Recommendations (continued)

Following are recommendations the City of Myrtle Beach can use to improve its public communication practices to define and achieve its goals through honest, proactive public education which encourages resident engagement in a constructive fashion.

### 1. ENVISION THE FUTURE OF MYRTLE BEACH

There is an immediate need for creation of a very open and public conversation about the future of Myrtle Beach. The public already is engaged in a virtual discussion about what Myrtle Beach should not be: It should not be unsafe, or home to violent crime, or to drug dealers or prostitution or gangs or shootings. Myrtle Beach should not be unfairly tainted as a tourism destination whose beautiful beaches and oceanfront are contaminated with unsafe levels of bacteria in ocean water. Myrtle Beach should not be a community whose future is in doubt, for its failure to revitalize and redevelop its ageing downtown and central tourism district.

All of which begs answers to the questions: What should we be? Where is Myrtle Beach headed? What does our future hold? And who is in charge of doing something about it?

A leadership opportunity exists for the City Council to initiate a community-wide process that imagines the future of Myrtle Beach, where no such defined vision exists today, and no such positive, constructive conversation is occurring. Ideally, that visioning process should be comprised of representatives of the City, its business community, and residents – as well as contiguous, unincorporated areas of the City commonly referred to as “donut holes”. Residents of other surrounding and unincorporated communities directly or even indirectly impacted by the City’s actions, such as Carolina Forest, also should have direct input in the process.

By initiating an inclusive visioning process, the City undertakes the strategic and positive role of moderating constructive discussion about our collective future. The City invites and welcomes participation of all stakeholders, especially its critics. The City opens the process of debating and establishing long-term community goals and objectives. And perhaps most important to breaking the cycle of reactionary response to suspicion and mistrust, the City leads the process of taking debate about its future out of the virtual world and into the real world, where real people can meet in real places and have realistic conversations amongst themselves, no keyboards required.

For the process to work, criticism of the past and present must be condoned, even encouraged. Our Should-Nots are a very realistic place to start before launching into our Why-Nots? And our Why Nots? require realistic approaches to building our next 100

## Recommendations (continued)

years. For that vision to evolve, the City should state boldly its honest intentions and its honest predicament, which might best be expressed as a simple request for help. City government can't be the sole decider of how Myrtle Beach grows or evolves, for lack of public involvement. It should want, need, and encourage everyone to openly engage in this important exploration of our City's future.

### 2. SURVEY COMMUNITY ATTITUDES & OPINIONS ON THE ISSUES

The City Council should direct City staff to contract with an accredited public opinion research company to survey attitudes and opinions of City residents and businesses. The survey would focus on how residents feel about current issues and the importance they attach to those issues. Steps also should be undertaken to ensure that issues of known or assumed public importance are considered in survey development, for example (in no specific order):

- The effectiveness of City Council as the leader and final authority in determination of City policy;
- Crime and public safety, its effect on residents and tourism alike;
- Downtown revitalization and the role of the DRC, now and in the future;
- Super Block redevelopment (and public opinion as it relates to the role of government in acquiring and bundling private property for redevelopment purposes);
- The City's commitment to transparency and open government.
- Concerns about rapid growth and infrastructure support;
- The future role of tourism in a community that, in the last three decades, has become a major retirement destination, and now is becoming a home for younger families seeking improved quality of life;
- Balancing "wants" and "needs" in the prioritization of future public spending.

As discussed on Pages 3-4 of this report, 'Creating a Strategic Communications Plan, "No strategic plan becomes actionable until its Goals and Key Messages have been identified and agreed upon." Multiple approaches may be taken to identifying consensus Goals and Key Messages (Examples were previously offered.) A visioning process, accompanied by establishment of a baseline survey, can provide a starting point for discussion and debate about future goals and priorities.

## Recommendations (continued)

### 3. COMMIT TO ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE PUBLIC EDUCATION & ENGAGEMENT

We assume far too much about the average resident's understanding of the workings of local government. We do too little to actively inform and educate the public about issues facing our community. Then we profess surprise that people are not informed, or wonder how they could come to believe in shadowy conspiracy theories alleging Good Ole Boy corruption.

The City Council should establish, for benefit of the public and direction to City Staff, clear policy regarding the City's commitment to public education that is designed to enhance understanding of local government and local knowledge of current issues. If Council expects City staff to do more to "drive the narrative" through public education initiatives, Council should be willing to set policy and address the budget and resources necessary to advance those education initiatives.

For example, the following scenarios have been observed, resulting in the accompanying recommendations:

- The City's primary web site offers a comprehensive overview of City government by department, with concise descriptions and contact information for each department, with a wealth of informative content. Similarly, the City's PIO is a highly responsive and informative source of information for residents seeking answers to specific questions. These are essential sources of passive and responsive information, for people who want to know more – for people who take the personal initiative to become more informed. However, these sources are not designed to actively inform residents about current or emerging issues. If Council wishes the City to actively inform residents in an educational manner, it should ask the City Administrator to restructure the role of the PIO to be both a source of public information and an active publisher of educational content relevant to the City's goals and challenges. Such advance educational matter, usually in the form of staff opinion and recommendation, is regularly used to educate Council Members before debate on major issues. An advocate of active public education within the City could prepare the same information for communication to City residents, for the purpose of facilitating public understanding and encouraging public engagement in the governmental process. Further, to demonstrate and elevate the City's commitment to public education, the existing Public Information Department might be repositioned as the Department of Public Information and Education. Hiring of a Public Education facilitator within the revised department

## Recommendations (continued)

would likely be required, unless the City is able to release the current PIO and staff from responsibility for management of events such as Military Appreciation Days, or the PIO's technical role in managing broadcasts of Council Meetings, or its ongoing organizational role with the Senior Advisory Board. In fact, much of the work which falls to the PIO might be handled by others, or by Council Members -- such as representing the City at community events or the handling of daily complaints and resident questions about City services, or response to visitor questions forwarded to the City by the Chamber of Commerce.

- The PIO is an aggressive advocate for and defender of accuracy in the reporting of traditional local media such as newspapers and television stations. As local reporters and editors can attest, the PIO responds quickly and thoroughly to questions asked in advance of story publication or broadcast. If an inaccuracy in a story is published or broadcast, or the story is misleading, the media outlet will hear from the PIO and will be asked to correct its reporting. However, the same is not necessarily true when incorrect or misleading information is published or shared on social media, which raises the vexing questions: Are social media and other new media of sufficient public influence to deserve official response or correction by local government? How can or should the City Council establish policy in regard to this evolving conundrum, as experienced daily by professional management and communications staff? And, most importantly, should the City fear social media critics to such an extent that the City balks at the prospect of any response, for fear of feeding the fire and making matters worse? And, conversely, how can silence based on fear serve to educate public understanding of anything, or to set the record straight? These are not easy questions, as experience has shown. The City Manager, PIO and staff should rightfully expect policy guidance from City Council in setting and maintaining reasonable standards.

Therefore, the following recommendation is offered to Council for consideration and adoption as a resolution – or at the very least, as a starting point for further debate on the subject of what constitutes appropriate response to social and other new media content.

1. Social media commentary, bloggers, and news-like web sites are major influences in the shaping of public knowledge and opinion.

## Recommendations (continued)

2. The City of Myrtle Beach believes that response to incorrect or misleading information published online is necessary and appropriate, just as correction or clarification of inaccuracies always have merited response when published or broadcast by traditional news media outlets.
3. Therefore, it is the policy of the City of Myrtle Beach to educate and correct, to the best of its ability, factually incorrect or misleading information published online about the City and its actions of record.
4. The City's response to any incorrect or misleading information should be limited to a factual response sufficient to inform people of the City's record, offered with respect and without further argument or commentary.
5. All such response should be attributed to the City of Myrtle Beach. It is not recommended that individual staff or management personnel respond personally to sources of incorrect information or to others who may respond to such statements.
6. City Council Members, as elected officials, are free to respond to social media commentary about themselves or the City as they deem appropriate. City Council Members also may request that City staff factually address inaccuracies or misrepresentations about the City.
7. The City's primary Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, or other new media accounts are the appropriate places to publish factual corrections so that all residents may see the response and be informed by it. If necessary, the City's response can then be shared or reposted to the original source or group where the incorrect information was first published.

In practical terms, these policy recommendations might be implemented as illustrated in the following (simple and not-so-simple) examples:

A user commented on Facebook yesterday that golf carts are legal to drive anywhere in the City of Myrtle beach so long as the

## Recommendations (continued)

driver is less than five miles from home. This is not always so. Because multiple jurisdictions are involved in setting the rules of legal golf cart usage throughout the City, other restrictions can apply. To make sure you know the law and drive safely, [click here](#) before heading out on our streets in a golf cart!

**Thank you,**

**City of Myrtle Beach**

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The following comment was posted on Facebook yesterday:

*"I just moved to Myrtle Beach and love it so much. The beaches are gorgeous. People are so friendly! There are so many great restaurants, shopping and entertainments. Too bad the Good Ole Boys at City Hall are so corrupt ☹️."*

The City of Myrtle Beach welcomes you! But we respectfully take exception to any suggestion of corrupt government. Our City strives to perform at the highest levels of openness, integrity and ethical behavior at all times. In the history of our City, no elected official or city manager has ever even been accused of illegal "corruption," much less arrested, charged, tried or convicted, as our judicial system provides for. We encourage anyone with information regarding acts of local government corruption to contact the S.C. Attorney General's office or the State Law Enforcement Division, which investigate and prosecute such crimes. For anyone who suspects a Good Ole Boy conspiracy which extends to the State of South Carolina, we encourage you to contact federal authorities such as the FBI or U.S. Department of Justice. For those who might suspect federal government involvement in a Deep State conspiracy which includes the FBI and extends to a Deep City conspiracy in Myrtle Beach, you may wish to contact the White House.

**Thank you,**

**City of Myrtle Beach**

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## Recommendations (continued)

### 4. TAKE PRACTICAL STEPS TOWARD ACHIEVING EDUCATIONAL GOALS

The process of committing to public education about government and community issues is supported by the primary goals stated in the RFP for this project, as noted on P. 1 of this report. Central to that commitment are the City's statements that:

*“All elected officials, staff, residents, and businesses are, officially or unofficially, ambassadors for the City, and they help to define, shape, and communicate the City’s messages to various key audiences.”*

[and]

*“It is a shared responsibility that all City leaders and employees ... ensure that Myrtle Beach residents and businesses, as well as audiences outside of Myrtle Beach, receive the right messages to further communicate the City’s key messages, and to help spread the word about [their] importance to the City’s future.”*

Accordingly, following are recommendations of practical steps the City can take to develop its own “Ambassadors for the City.”

- Create an internal Public Education Committee, and/or Public Education Advisory Board which includes resident participants. Charge the panel with identification of public education issues, action steps to be taken, and tracking of public education initiatives. Create, update, and archive background chronologies on issues, goals associated with those issues, and actions of record by the City. Communicate and educate residents (and new residents) regarding background on all issues as they progress or advance.
- Offer management and staff training in media relations and public speaking to all departments. Put more names and faces in front of the public. Rely less on “official” spokespeople. Personalize the City’s role in community service at every opportunity. Identify City staffers who are willing and able to represent the City in public. Invest in their abilities. Recognize and reward people who engage in public education and public speaking.
- Make public communications and education a management requirement. Include the ability to advance public communication and education in management job

## Recommendations (continued)

descriptions. Evaluate and recognize performance. Make public communication accomplishments a priority in career advancement. Recruit and hire people who share the City's commitment to public education.

- Create a Speakers' Bureau of City managers and staff. Promote the expertise of these people. Make them available to civic and social clubs for speaking engagements. Create a calendar of public speaking events and get feedback from audiences at every opportunity.
- Create an "Experts Directory" and promote it for use by news media and the community. The City employs many highly educated and accomplished people who are experts in their respective fields. Some of these people are called on to share their expert experience with other cities and local governments. Offer these experts to the news media as educational resources, as well.
- Cultivate community involvement. Create an Information Welcome Package for new residents. Use the Welcome Package to introduce the City, explain its services, and invite people to get involved. Offer Myrtle Beach 101 classes online and in person.
- Use social media to report on speaking or expert engagements involving City Staff. Broadcast video of and recap the speaker's text message. Promote the speaker's availability to other audiences. Edit video segments and re-publish them online in the context of the public issues addressed. Livestream when appropriate.
- Take credit for the City's collective and individual accomplishments. Report awards and honors earned. Report and profile recipients of professional recognitions. Use the City's new annual report of departmental accomplishments as a list of stories to be expanded on individually through traditional and new media.
- Promote meetings and meeting agendas to the public, encouraging public interest and involvement by emphasizing the topics and issues to be addressed, not just the fact that a meeting will occur.



## Recommendations (continued)

### 5. CENTRALIZE MESSAGING SO WE CAN KEEP UP WITH IT

The City, to its credit, uses a broad spectrum of traditional and new media to communicate its messages to various target audiences, but there is no central place where those messages are aggregated for convenient access by the general public. For example, the PIO, in addition to managing traditional news media relationships, utilizes Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and other new media accounts to deliver messages it manages for the City and for departments which have no designated PIO. The Police Department uses its PIO and its own Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts to deliver its messages to its audience. The Fire Departments uses its PIO and new media accounts to deliver its messages, the DRC uses its social media coordinator and new media accounts.

Similarly, the PIO manages the City's primary web site, while Police, Fire, DRC and (soon) Public Works, operate additional web sites which they control without central oversight.

The average resident, wishing to scan or just remain generally informed about the City, has no single place online to conveniently do so. In fact, the current fragmented approach to departmental messaging requires that, to be broadly informed, a determined resident must actively follow the Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or other new media accounts of each department and their various web sites.

It is highly recommended that the City explore ways to consolidate its departmental messages, events, and public education initiatives, in a manner that allows residents to visit a central web site or to follow a central stream of media posts. A City "dashboard" of communications streams, for example, may be a step in the right direction.

### 6. GO BEYOND TRANSPARENCY AND COMPLIANCE WITH FOIA

Again, to its credit, the City of Myrtle Beach practices high compliance with South Carolina Freedom of Information Act law and requirements. The PIO does an exemplary job of ensuring that required advance notice of meetings and agenda items are issued according to the law. In the rare event that a meeting or agenda item is omitted from such advance notice, the City advises all in attendance of the problem and does not proceed with the meeting and/or agenda item until it can be properly advertised in advance. Further, the PIO's response to almost daily requests for public records by

## Recommendations (continued)

traditional news media and by the public, are completed with courtesy, diligence and professionalism.

Further, in meetings and conversation with senior staff, it was regularly volunteered that “we have nothing to hide” and that full compliance with FOIA was accepted as both necessary and proper for the daily ethical operation of local government. The City Attorney acts as both an advocate for FOIA compliance and as an authority on the law’s requirements, open to lively and informed argument regarding the law’s spirit and intent, particularly as it relates to the need for executive sessions and exclusions from public disclosure, as defined by law.

City Council’s knowledge of and commitment to FOIA compliance also was well demonstrated, except perhaps in regard to communications among Council members between public meetings. To be clear and fair, no private meetings of a Council quorum (four or more members) were contemplated, but the practice of meeting in groups of three or less to avoid reaching a quorum seemed well accepted -- and, in fact, is allowed by law. But to meet multiple times in two or more small groups comprised of different members, to discuss or review the same issue in private, may be perceived as a tactic to avoid reaching a quorum, thereby circumventing open public meetings and discussion.

The recommendation in this matter is that, while meetings of Council members in small groups that do not comprise a quorum may be allowed by law, to do so is not always in complete keeping with the spirit of our state’s “sunshine law”, which is based on the expectation that all public business should be conducted in the light of day. Council might be better served to reinstate a former City practice of holding quarterly “shirt-sleeve” working sessions to discuss and debate issues publicly, attended by a quorum of Council members, with proper advance public notice as required by FOIA.

### 7. TAKE GREATER RESPONSIBILITY FOR TAXPAYER SPENDING -- AND SAY SO

The City should communicate its expectation of the highest ethical and professional standards of accountability and effectiveness from the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce in its expenditure of taxpayer funds for destination marketing purposes. Council has taken steps in that direction but more can be done. The City should communicate clearly to the Chamber and to the public that it is responsible for acting as a watchdog over the Chamber’s spending. The Chamber, in turn, should report clearly to the City and to the public how taxpayer funds are used, in greater detail and with greater ease of transparency than has occurred in the past. Further, the City should require the

## Recommendations (continued)

Chamber to meet or exceed established marketing industry criteria for measuring and reporting the Chamber's effectiveness in attracting visitors to Myrtle Beach (versus to the Grand Strand). City Council should accept full responsibility for hearing taxpayer concerns about expenditure of these "advertising dollars" versus other unmet needs of the community. If changes to state legislation are required to meet the City's revised funding priorities, City Council should request such changes of our legislative delegation.

### 8. FILL THE VIDEO GAP IN CITY COMMUNICATIONS CAPABILITIES

Cisco Systems, Inc., the largest networking company in the world, offers this view of the future of video on the Internet by 2021:

- Globally, IP video traffic will be 82 percent of all consumer Internet traffic, up from 73 percent in 2016.
- It would take an individual more than 5 million years to watch the amount of video that will cross global IP networks each month. Every second, a million minutes of video content will cross the network.
- Live Internet video will grow 15-fold from 2016 to 2021.

Clearly, any organization that wishes to communicate effectively with current and future audiences must invest in and advance its video messaging and production capabilities.

The City of Myrtle Beach, to its credit, has offered video broadcasts of Council Meetings for many years via cable TV and, most recently, has acquired the capability to live-stream Council Meetings on the Internet.

The next step requires City Council to confirm its commitment to video education through a budget allocation aimed at the acquisition of video production equipment and studio space or, alternately, to hire outsource video studio and production assistance. Myrtle Beach has many such providers of accomplishment in this field.

### 9. PREPARE TO PAY FAR MORE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGING

Just as video requires investment to engage current and future audiences, so too will Social Media messaging. For years, Facebook has been delivering less and less content to

## Recommendations (continued)

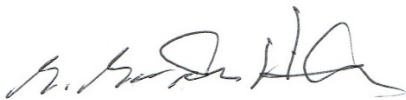
“followers” of Facebook page operated by government and business in particular. To reach larger audiences, operators of government and business FB pages must engage in “boosting” of paid messages to target audiences. At present, the City has little or no budget for boosting of its messages. As a result, only a small percentage of the City’s FB followers ever see or share most messages the City posts. Twitter does not throttle delivery of messages between users but, as a result, the torrent of content results in less visibility and engagement by users. Add to that the fact that only 23 percent of Americans have Twitter accounts in the first place, and it becomes clear that advanced social media messaging strategies are required to reach and engage larger audiences.

For greatest cost efficiency in delivery of key messages to larger audiences, use of strategic social media outsource services also is recommended. Here, too, the Myrtle Beach business community has several accomplished providers.

## In Conclusion

I would like to thank the City Council and City Staff for the opportunity to work together on this exploration of our community’s communications challenges. In getting to know many of you for the first time, and in getting to know others better, my personal longstanding belief in your collective commitment to service above self was reinforced and elevated. For all that you do - and do so well - we all should be more grateful.

Sincerely,



Gordon Hirsch