



## **City of Myrtle Beach Communications Policy Proposal**

### **1. ENVISION THE FUTURE OF MYRTLE BEACH**

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. And perhaps most importantly, the City leads the process of taking debate 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.

**Yes, it's time to establish a new shared vision for the city.**

It's been 20 years since the last visioning process (*It's Time*). That process was intense, but successful, resulting in much of what we have today: underground utilities, less overt signage, more tree protection, stronger neighborhoods and improved zoning regulations for both residential and commercial areas. A great deal has changed in 20 years, including City Council. We also have thousands of new residents from all parts of the country, along with new housing growth, new neighborhoods, new business areas and new businesses. It's time for a new visioning process to carry us forward 10-20 years.

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

City Council should direct 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. The visioning process, accompanied by establishment of this baseline survey, can provide a starting point for education and debate about the City's goals and priorities.

**No, let the visioning process accomplish this task.**

The visioning process will identify those issues and objectives that are important. A survey of attitudes and opinions is likely to result in more negative feedback, rather than positive. It also could affect the success of the visioning process by polarizing the topics to be considered. It's not an either/or proposition, though. Such a survey will give a snapshot of public opinion at the moment, but it's just a poll. A survey by itself won't help build consensus or provide direction, as the visioning process would.

### **3. COMMIT TO ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE PUBLIC EDUCATION**

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. 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.

**Yes, we are actively providing issue-based information.**

As the math teacher said, "show your work." The enhanced City Council agenda accomplishes some of that, but education and transparency require showing, not just telling. As for responding to all social media critics who post wrong or misleading information, three thoughts: consider the source, consider the audience and consider the numbers. Traditional news media want to get it right; social media commenters may not be interested in accuracy. By responding every time, do you give them credibility where none is deserved? We recommend a case-by-case approach.

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

*"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."*

To achieve these goals, a new culture of active communications must start with City government and spread to residents and businesses. Ambassadors for the community don't grow on trees. They are identified, educated, trained and nurtured with support and encouragement over time.

**Yes, everyone is a communicator; we can use more voices.**

Multiple voices from the city send the message that we, as a staff, are competent, approachable, knowledgeable, responsive and friendly. We'd like to see a few more senior staff members step up and welcome media interviews on behalf of the city. That said, not everyone can do it well; for most people, it is an acquired skill, and we can help those who want to learn how to do it better. Key positions occasionally need to be able and willing to interact with the news media, but not everyone needs or wants to speak with a reporter.

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

The average resident, wishing to remain generally informed about the City, has no central informative place to visit or follow. 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 departments, and their various web sites.

## **No. Times have changed, and so has communication.**

The idea of everyone going to one place for all of their information is outdated. Gone are the days of getting all of your information from the daily newspaper or one of three TV networks. This is as impractical as putting AT&T back together. People are diverse; their interests are diverse. They get their information in a variety of ways, often aligned with their interests. You'd spend all of your time pointing people to the one source and lose much of your communication effort in the process. Even if you create it, few people would use it. The Police Department's audience is different than the Fire Department's or Recreation's audience. Even City Council information appeals to a particular group. Mixing them all together in one place is not a workable idea.

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

Overall, the City gets high marks for FOIA compliance and transparency. But, while meetings of Council members in small groups that do not comprise a quorum may be allowed by FOIA, to do so may not be in keeping with the spirit of the law, which is based on the expectation that all public business should be conducted in the light of day. Council (and the public) would be better served to hold quarterly "shirt-sleeve" working sessions to discuss and debate issues publicly, attended by a quorum with proper public notice.

### **Agreed. City Council acts as a body, not as individuals.**

City Council's real ability to set policy, make decisions, enact ordinances and generally serve the public is vested in a quorum of the body. To be most productive, conversations by Council members about city issues should occur in that forum, where each will learn the others' points of view and develop a working relationship. Council could hold one three-hour workshop a month on an off meeting day (the first Thursday?) to tackle larger policy issues and other non-agenda items that need discussing as a group. This would be more informative for the public, which would have the benefit of hearing and participating in these conversations.

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

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 of taxpayer funds. The Chamber should report clearly how taxpayer funds are used, in greater detail and with greater ease of transparency. Further, the City should require the Chamber to meet or exceed established industry criteria for measuring its effectiveness in attracting visitors to Myrtle Beach. City Council should accept full responsibility for hearing and addressing taxpayer concerns about expenditure of these "advertising dollars."

**Agreed, although this is already underway.**

The city has a good working relationship with the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce. Both have heard the critics who want more information about where and how publicly-generated dollars are spent on advertising. This increased detail is forthcoming soon. Beyond the mere numbers, though, the city and the Chamber can better explain how the process of advertising works and share that with the public.

## **8. FILL THE VIDEO GAP IN CITY COMMUNICATIONS ABILITY**

Globally, video traffic comprises more than 73 percent of all consumer Internet traffic. YouTube is the second largest search engine on the Internet. Clearly, any organization that wishes to communicate effectively must invest in and advance its video messaging and production capabilities. City Council should 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 assistance.

**Agreed, although “more” requires more resources.**

Some combination of the two options (buy equipment or outsource production) may be best. For \$10,000 to \$15,000 we can purchase computer and video gear comparable to a small production company for training or educational videos for both internal and external audiences. It also could be used for weekly “talk shows” with staff and Council. However, video production eats time; this would require one additional staff person. Larger projects should be scripted and then outsourced to one of the local companies.

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

For years, Facebook has been delivering less and less content to “followers” of Facebook pages operated by government and business. To reach larger audiences, operators of government and business FB pages must engage in “boosting” of paid messages to target audiences. Eventually, Facebook says, all messaging will require payment. The City has little or no budget for paid social media messaging. As a result, only a small percentage of the City’s FB followers see most messages.

**Yes, in principle, but this is not as simple as it appears.**

Facebook is constantly changing the rules and shrinking the available reach of posts, especially for commercial users. As a government non-profit, we fall somewhere in between. Facebook’s political sensitivity this year means that every post we try to boost is initially denied as “political content.” We appeal. Beyond boosting, though, the first question is “Who’s the audience?” Typically, we are trying to reach a local audience with a local message. Our page is open; the news media watch it; we are more successful than our peers at getting the message out organically. Major messages will need a boost.

## RECOMMENDATIONS...

- Begin a comprehensive visioning process in early 2019. This will take 12 to 18 months to complete and will involve the whole community. The process itself will build consensus, and the result will be a shared vision for the future of Myrtle Beach.
- Look for additional ways to improve public understanding of city issues. Just as we have expanded the City Council agenda, perhaps we can expand the Planning Commission and Community Appearance Board agendas. (Put them on TV?) Give more advance public notice by having agendas ready earlier.
- We are remarkably open as governments go, but we can strive for more transparency in our actions. Have conversations about potentially difficult subjects before the fact, not after the decision has been made. As the math teacher said, “Show your work.” Don’t just provide the final answer.
- Seek more city voices to tell the city’s story. Not every staff person needs to be capable of speaking to a reporter, but a few more department heads and division directors should be able and willing to tackle an interview or two.
- Eliminate workshops before the regular City Council meetings. Much of the discussion on agenda items occurs at the workshops, which is not obvious to the public watching the meetings. The same agenda is discussed twice in one day. Eliminating the workshops will free Council’s time for other matters and conversations.
- Consider a once-a-month, three-hour workshop on non-agenda items. City Council acts as a body and needs to work together as a body. Hold conversations about city issues in an official setting and capacity.
- Formalize ongoing discussions with the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber is prepared to provide a detailed itemization of expenditures of advertising dollars received from public entities. An explanation of the advertising process will aid in understanding those expenditures.
- Consider holding a regular “New Residents Meeting” at different locations in the community. We provide information for new residents, but perhaps an informal “welcome to Myrtle Beach” would be beneficial for all. The Chamber and business community may wish to participate.
- Purchase video equipment for in-house production (\$10,000 to \$15,000) to expand video capabilities. Production could include a regular talk show featuring staff and/or Council members. NOTE: This will require one additional staff person. Video production requires large amounts of time.

- If specific video needs are known, budget for outside production resources. City staff can write the script and line up the participants and locations, but a professional production company can save time and produce a better product.
- Provide some additional funding for social media boosting among all departments with active Facebook pages. Currently, the PIO budget includes \$2,000 for boosting. As a beginning, \$5,000 to \$10,000 would be sufficient for all departments' use.
- Take a case-by-case approach to responding to social media critics. Consider the source, the audience and the numbers. Responding to "all" misstatements and false allegations will require additional resources and may not be possible in many cases. Some pages and groups are closed. As a government page, the city page cannot comment directly onto an individual's page.
- We communicate well now, but if "more" is the goal, it will require additional resources. Here is a range of options beyond the status quo:
  - Purchasing video equipment – \$10,000 to \$15,000 (one time) plus one additional staff person
  - Hiring outside video production – \$10,000 to \$20,000 (annually), depending on scope of projects
  - Creating an education library on city topics – one additional staff person
  - Responding to all social media misstatements and falsehoods – two additional staff persons
  - Providing additional publication and design costs – \$5,000 to \$10,000 (annually)
  - Funding for additional Facebook boosting – \$5,000 (annually)