

Town of Cary Standard Procedure 105

Effective March 18, 2002. Supersedes: June 1, 1998

PURPOSE

- To provide accurate information in a timely and professional manner;
- To present information in a manner that is consistent with Council's policies and philosophies;
- To reduce the incidents of conflicting information being disseminated by the organization;
- To ensure that Council and staff are aware of any communications issues;
- To manage issues before they become problematic;
- To ensure consistent, comprehensive, and equitable distribution of Town information on a regional scale.

PROCEDURE

General

- The Town Manager, Assistant Town Manager, and the Public Information Officer (PIO) are the only Town staff authorized to initiate contact or to direct others to initiate contact with the media.
- Town staff will complete basic media relations training from the PIO before responding to inquiries from the media.
- The PIO will be notified when a reporter or other member of the media is on Town property. Notification should fall to the staff member meeting with the media representative. However, any staff member who sees live trucks operating on Town property should always call the PIO.
- All persons involved in speaking to the media on a particular issue will actively coordinate with each other during the response period to ensure accuracy and consistency in message delivery.
- Staff will avoid offering personal opinion or answering any questions outside their immediate scope, even if as non-experts they believe they know the correct answer. Errors in reporting will be brought to the immediate attention of the PIO who will determine the appropriate steps necessary in correcting the errors.
- Staff will make every effort to have the PIO present at all person-to-person interviews in order to (1) evaluate the effectiveness of staff; (2) evaluate the interaction with media; (3) offer assistance to staff and media where necessary.
- News conferences will be planned in advance and coordinated by the PIO.

Materials Distribution

- The PIO will determine the standard format for printed materials distributed by the Town to the media, including but not limited to news releases, media advisories, public service announcements, and fact sheets.
- All news releases and media advisories will be approved by the Town Manager or Assistant Town Manager and issued by the PIO; public service announcements may be issued at the division level with a copy to the PIO without prior approval from the Manager.
- The PIO will maintain a comprehensive media fax list which will be utilized throughout Town government.

The Town of Cary is committed to maintaining positive, effective, and mutually beneficial relationships with the media. To this end and as part of its comprehensive communications effort, the Town undertakes many initiatives targeting media relations, including providing basic media relations training for all staff who interact with the media, surveying the media annually to evaluate the organization's media relations efforts, and producing resources such as this guide.

Town of Cary

Media Relations Quick Reference Guide

A resource for staff who are responding to media requests for interviews and information

- All news releases, media advisories, and public service announcements will be distributed using the comprehensive media fax list, and confirmation sheets will be kept on all distributions.
- The PIO will be listed as a contact person on all releases, including public service announcements.
- Council and staff will be copied on all news releases.
- All news releases, media advisories, and public service announcements will be added to the website by the Manager's Office as part of the distribution process.
- When media request materials for use in stories focusing on other local governments, Town staff will forward a copy of those requested materials to the appropriate person in that local government as a courtesy.

Issue Assessment

- A distinction will be made between routine communications—for example: traffic reports, class/meeting schedules, weather advisories—and significant communications—issues that involve existing or potential threats to public safety/welfare/property or issues that may affect the Town's image/citizen confidence in their government. Routine and significant communications issues may or may not involve the media.
- An assessment tool will be available to aid staff in determining the nature of an issue.
- The PIO will be notified of all media contacts, routine or significant.
- Staff will forward significant issues to the Manager, Assistant Manager, or PIO to manage.
- Routine issues may be handled by appropriate personnel within each division without prior contact with the PIO.

ISSUE ASSESSMENT TOOL

Answering YES to any of the following suggests that the communications issue may be significant, not routine, and should, therefore involve the Manager's Office:

1. Is the issue a threat, existing or potential, to life, health, or property?
2. Could the issue likely be interpreted to negatively affect public confidence in or opinion of Town government or Town Council?
3. Is the issue of particular interest to the general public?
4. Are there legal ramifications, existing or potential, raised by the issue?
5. Has more than one member of the media contacted you regarding the same issue?
6. Has someone threatened to go to the media about the issue?
7. Is there unusual or inappropriate interest by a person or a small group of people about a seemingly routine issue?
8. Would you be worried if you wake up and find yourself quoted about the issue in the morning paper?

September 2001



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PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Ask what the discussion topic/questions will be so that you can:

1. make sure you're the most appropriate person to talk on the subject; and,
2. get all the facts together before the interview to meet the reporter's needs.

Schedule the interview such that its timing will:

1. meet the reporter's deadline; and,
2. give you enough time to prepare; and,
3. give you enough time to complete the interview without feeling rushed.

Select a quiet place for the interview where you and the reporter won't be distracted.

In preparing for the interview, be sure to:

1. talk to everyone possibly involved in the situation; and,
2. be sure you know the Town's position on the issue(s); and,
3. anticipate the reporter's questions by being able to answer all of the following about the interview topic:

- Who did it, was/is affected by it, knew about it, is the spokesperson...
- What happened, is going on, should we think...
- Where did it happen, is it going, was it found, were they seen...
- When did it happen, will it happen again, will it go into effect, will we know more...
- Why is it important, is it happening, was the action taken...
- How can it be stopped, can it be started, can it be changed, should we react...
- How much time did it take, money did it cost, pain did it cause...
- How often did it go on, will it be reviewed, is it a problem...
- How long before something is done about it, did it last, will it be a problem...

Write down your facts, especially numbers — dollars, dates, participants...

Consider preparing a Fact Sheet or other materials to give to the reporter.

Keep your mind — TV vs. Newspaper — in mind when developing visuals such as photographs, maps, or graphics.

HANDLING THE INTERVIEW

- Double-check that you're the appropriate person to participate in the interview by again asking the reporter questions about the interview before it begins.
- Give out your business card.
- Assume that EVERYTHING you say and do is "on the record".
- Avoid talking "off the top of your head" by taking a deep breath before you speak to formulate your thoughts.
- Look at the reporter, not at the camera.
- Answer questions in complete sentences.
- Begin "Yes" "No" answers with the "yes" or "no" first; be definitive in your tone. Then follow with your explanation or elaboration, if necessary.
- Be natural; be yourself.
- Speak in a natural manner; avoid jargon. Remember: you're talking to your friends and family via the reporter.
- You're speaking on behalf of the entire organization, so use "we" instead of "I".
- When you finish answering the question, be quiet. Don't say more than you need to.
- Go over any materials in person that you give to the reporter.
- Go over the answers you gave in the interview to make sure the reporter has it right.
- Ask when the interview will run; don't ask for a copy.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- Notify all affected staff of the interview outcome/content, including the PIO.
- Watch/Read/Listen to the interview to:
 1. evaluate the accuracy of the story; and,
 2. evaluate the tone of the story; and,
 3. evaluate your performance.
- Call/Email the reporter with your thanks, positive observations.
- Contact the PIO about any mistakes. The PIO will guide any negative comments back to the reporter, including requests for corrections.

ONGOING

- Follow Standard Procedure for governing boards contacts.
- Do not participate in interviews unless you have completed basic media relations training.
- Do not participate in press calls.
- If you are unable to meet a reporter's need for information or an interview, be sure that someone else in the organization does, such as the Public Information Officer.

Town of Cary

Public Information Office • PO Box 8005 Cary, NC 27512-8005 •
919.460.4951 • www.townofcary.org