

Transparency and Communication in Government: The Key to Earning Constituents' Trust

by Kevin L. Smith



As our team from the City of Winter Springs prepared to deliver a presentation on “Public Integrity and Transparency in Government” at the Florida League of Cities 84th Annual Conference this past August, we were worried. We knew that conference attendees had plenty of other options for spending their afternoon, including several other valuable presentations. Would anyone show up to hear a presentation about transparency, a buzzword that has been bandied about so regularly that it has almost become a cliché? And if they did show up, would they bother to stay?

As it turned out, the room was packed by the time we began and stayed full until the entire presentation was finished. Our team was gratified to see such a widespread interest in a principle that is so important to us in Winter Springs. Transparency is a key component of our city’s strategic plan, and it’s a value that we embrace. I’d like to share with you what we have learned so far in our efforts to make the workings of government in the City of Winter Springs as transparent as possible.

We Embrace Transparency as a Core Value

A little over a year ago, the Winter Springs City Commission identified five basic values that guide all of our actions and reflect what we expect from our employees and elected officials. The commissioners’ vision, described in our strategic plan, was clear: “to create a vibrant and sustainable high quality community by producing results that matter most to our customers through transparency, outstanding customer service, fiscal responsibility, excellence, and teamwork.”

It’s no accident that transparency was the first of our stated values. Without it, all of our other values are compromised. Our residents deserve transparency and our entire commission insists on it, adopting standards that go beyond what Florida statutes require. As a practical matter, the commission translated its commitment to transparency into two specific goals:

- Improve communication, both externally with our citizens and internally amongst our commission, manager and staff.
- Improve transparency in all aspects of city government.

Having these goals clearly defined gave us a context for creating and adopting several specific communications initiatives. We have continued many of our traditional communications approaches, expanding and improving them to fit in with our new paradigm. But we also actively sought new communications tools, stepping outside of the traditional and taking advantage of a new, innovation-enabled set of tools.

Low-Tech Improvements

Reviewing our existing processes provided a number of opportunities to make significant improvements at little or no cost. For example:

Use meetings to improve communications. Public input is encouraged at any and all commission meetings, including workshops and special meetings. Whenever we can, we allow for public input – even when a meeting’s scheduled public-input period has already closed. This type of input is the most traditional way for residents to communicate with us, but we know that many residents find it forbidding.

We try to make public input as easy as possible.

In addition to our commission meetings, there are a number of other opportunities for public, face-to-face interaction. We regularly promote town-hall meetings that are less formal (and less intimidating), as well as visioning workshops for our residents and our businesses, and even a weekly “Coffee with Citizens” event sponsored by one of our commissioners. Also, commissioners or city staff can often be found at homeowner-association meetings throughout the city.

Place a city booth at special events. Throughout the year, there are a number of special events that Winter Springs sponsors. We have adopted the practice of staffing a booth at all of these events, providing another avenue of access to our commissioners and city staff. These events provide opportunities to effectively disseminate information to attendees about the city and, depending on the event, specific city services.

Provide user-friendly documents. With an eye toward providing our residents with information that is both useful and accessible, we have redesigned the format of the printed agenda items we provide. There are six easy-to-identify sections that comprise the standard format, including two that are particularly worth noting. Each agenda item includes a “Fiscal Impact” section that includes not only the item’s funding source but also its impact on property taxes, its impact on other city services, and any other associated costs. We also include a “Communications” section, designed to ensure that the item has been sufficiently disclosed

Continued on page 15. ▶

to residents. Our new format ensures that our commissioners (and, by extension, our residents) have the information they need to make good decisions.

Citizens Advisory Committee. Our police department conducts a monthly meeting for community leaders in the city, including representatives from all of the city's homeowner associations. These meetings are open to all residents and are designed to foster cooperation between the police department and the community. Not only have these meetings improved communications, they have also helped reduce crime through increased resident involvement.

Innovation and Technology

While redesigning our existing communications processes has yielded worthwhile, low-cost improvements, we believe that the opportunities created by technology-driven innovation are enormous. Some of the ways we are currently using technology to meet our communications and transparency goals are:

eAlerts and eCitizen systems.

These two parallel e-mail notification systems allow residents to sign up to receive notifications in a variety of categories. Each resident can choose to receive real-time notifications in any or all of these categories:

- Boil Water Alerts
- Criminal Alert/Police Bulletin
- Gas Leak Alerts
- Hazardous Waste Spills
- Health Risk Alerts
- Hurricane and Tornado Information
- Major Traffic Alerts
- Missing Persons and Children Alerts
- Scam and Fraud Alerts
- Bomb Threat Alerts
- Sexual Predators Living in the City
- City News, Information and Newsletters
- Job Openings
- Press Releases
- Special Events and Concerts
- City Commission Meeting Notifications and Reminders

Podcasts. Podcasts are a low-cost means of distributing content that residents can listen to rather than read. We have titled our podcast “The Winter Springs Connection: News You Can Use.” Each episode consists of an interview with someone at City Hall covering a specific topic. In one podcast, our city engineer might provide an update on various construction projects that are in process; in another, our police chief might describe a safety or crime-prevention initiative. We believe that podcasts help personalize the city as they connect a name, a face and a voice with each project or department. Our podcasts can be streamed from our Web site, or residents can subscribe to them on iTunes.

Online checkbook. In today's economic environment, residents are more concerned than ever about how every level of government is spending their money. We're providing the means for our residents to see where literally every cent is going. Our online checkbook allows residents to see each check that is issued by the city. We also provide easy access to a variety of financial reports and budget documents. In many ways, this initiative exemplifies our commitment to transparency.

Easy access to documents online. In addition to making our financial information available online, we are in the process of making sure that as many city documents as possible are available and easily accessible on our Web site.

Implementation Principles for Success

These are just a few of the ways in which the City of Winter Springs strives to fulfill our commission's mandate for transparency, but they represent just the first steps of a journey that we expect will be ongoing for quite some time. If your city chooses to embark on a similar journey (and based on our experience, we would certainly encourage you to do so), here are a few additional principles for success that we have discovered along the way:

Top-down commitment. Transparency and communication happen when everyone in a leadership position makes a commitment. Recently,

our police department embarked on a campaign called “Lock It Or Lose It,” designed to raise awareness about making sure that cars and houses are locked at night. Part of the campaign consisted of knocking on doors to distribute brochures. One homeowner told the officer at his front door, “Please tell the chief thanks for allowing you guys to do this.” The uniformed officer replied, “Actually, sir, I am the chief.” That's a top-down commitment and a great demonstration of leading by example.

Redundant communications.

There is no single means of communication that is most effective in every situation. Your city's communications efforts will be more successful if you communicate as much information as possible through as many different media as possible. For example, much of the information in our podcasts is available in various online documents. Some residents will prefer listening, some will prefer reading. We're not bothered by the redundancy and don't consider it wasteful. Rather, it's an investment in providing everyone in the city with the information they need in the most convenient format possible.

Remember that it's a process, not an event. Information technology and the communications innovation that it enables are targets that are moving rapidly and will continue to do so well into the foreseeable future. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter represent an entirely new frontier, one that we're just beginning to explore. Even as your city's commitment to transparency remains unwavering, its methods and techniques will need to evolve constantly.

Interestingly enough, a recent Gallup poll reveals that Americans place more trust and confidence in their local government than in any other level of government or governmental institution. In Winter Springs, we believe that communication and transparency are the keys to maintaining that trust and earning the confidence that our residents have in what we're doing for them.

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