



## **PUBLIC COMMUNICATION**

### **I. PURPOSE**

To establish guidelines for public communication between City officials, employees, citizens, news media representatives and others requiring information concerning City issues, programs, projects, services and activities.

### **II. SCOPE**

This policy applies to all City officials and employees.

### **III. POLICY**

It is the policy of the City of Georgetown to encourage positive communication and to ensure the exchange of accurate, timely information among City officials, City employees, citizens, media representatives and others interested in City issues, policies, operations and services.

### **IV. PHILOSOPHY**

The City of Georgetown has an open government philosophy which requires all employees to provide consistent, accurate and timely information to its citizens communicating with them individually, in groups, or through public news media. To advance this goal, the City maintains a proactive, well-coordinated, but decentralized communication and media policy to the maximum extent possible. Individual employees may participate in this process directly or by actively seeking assistance of other employees, as appropriate.

### **V. RESPONDING TO MEDIA INQUIRIES AND OTHER INQUIRIES**

- A. **All employees** are authorized, but are not obligated, to speak directly with members of the media or the public. Employees should limit their discussion of city operations to those areas where they have specific knowledge, referring other requests to the appropriate person or supervisor. Speculation or personal opinions shall be avoided. The Police and Fire departments shall have designated public information officers who will serve as department spokespersons, Other City departments may choose to identify an employee who serves as the media spokesperson or point-of-contact for media inquiries.



- B. Employees should provide **readily available information** to the media or the public—this includes information such as City staff names, titles, and City phone numbers; public meeting dates, locations, and agendas; City ordinances; information on City websites; and other information prepared for public distribution.
- C. Media requests or other requests that involve matters of policy, goals, strategy, judgment, controversial issues, or other information that is **not readily available** should be directed to an identified department spokesperson, department head, Division Director, the Public Communications Director, or the City Manager.
- D. Timeliness
  - 1. Due to media organization deadlines, City employees should make every attempt to respond to inquiries promptly. Ask reporters about their story deadline and then do your best to honor it.
  - 2. Other inquiries should be answered as soon as possible and in most cases, within one business day.
- E. Media Contact Notification
  - 1. All employees shall report any communication with media organizations to their appropriate chain-of-command, including their Division head, as well as the Public Communications Director and the City Manager. (Routine communication such as police reports, monthly tax revenue reports, or pet adoption information is excepted.) Employees should send an e-mail or phone message that includes:
    - a. the **name** of the reporter,
    - b. the **media organization**,
    - c. the **date** and **time** of the contact,
    - d. the **subject** of the inquiry, and
    - e. a **summary** of the response.
  - 2. This Media Contact Notification should be sent immediately, if possible, and always within the same day.

## VI. PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

- A. The Public Communications Director is the City’s official spokesperson who provides information to the news media and the public about City events,



initiatives, and services.

- B. The Public Communications Director is on-call 24 hours-a-day to answer questions, respond to developing situations, and offer assistance as needed.
- C. The Public Communications Director is available to all employees for advice, consultation, and assistance in media relations. Upon request, the Public Communications Director can be present for any arranged interviews with reporters.
- D. When the Public Communications Director is unavailable to serve as the City's spokesperson, the City Manager will designate an alternative spokesperson.
- E. The Police and Fire Departments and their respective PIOs will work with the City PIO in responding to critical public safety events. (See sec. VIII, A-C below.)

## VII. NEWS RELEASES

- A. City Divisions are encouraged to issue news releases that notify the media of newsworthy events and promote City initiatives.
- B. Information to be included in the release should be provided to the Public Communications Director well in advance of the event or initiative. The nature of the event should be discussed with the Public Communications Director in advance so that appropriate news organizations can be targeted effectively.
- C. News releases will typically include information on an event, including the date, time, and location. A news release about a program typically includes relevant background, cost, and the major groups or departments involved. A contact name, phone number, and email is typically provided on a news release.
- D. All news releases shall be submitted to the City Manager, Division Director and the Public Communications Director for review before issuance.

## VIII. INTERNAL NOTIFICATION FOR CRITICAL EVENTS

- A. When critical events occur, notification of the City Manager, Public Communications Director, and relevant Division Directors is important for several reasons:



Providing information to the public via the news media can protect the public from harm in public safety emergencies.

Providing advance information about controversial issues and other issues that have attracted intense media attention can prevent the spread of misinformation and false rumors.

Distribution of one or more news releases as an event unfolds helps to ensure that consistent and accurate information is released to all news media.

Providing regular and consistent information to news media during and after critical events builds credibility with media organizations and the public.

B. The City Manager, City Public Communications Director, and relevant Fire, Police, or GUS chain-of-command should be **notified immediately** (at any time of the day or night) via cell phone, pager, or home number of **urgent public safety-related events**, such as:

- Storms, tornadoes, flooding, or other natural forces that result in significant injuries, fatalities, property damage, or major power outages.
- An impending urgent threat (e.g., tornado, flood, explosion, etc.) that could endanger the public.
- Significant fires, explosions, hazardous spills, gas leaks, airplane crashes, or other events that could endanger public safety.
- Violent incidents such as shootings or attacks.
- Violent incidents involving a City employee or elected City official.
- Emergency bans or restrictions on water usage due to major accidents, fires, or unforeseen events.
- Other events that present an urgent threat to public safety.

C. Where appropriate, the City Manager, City Attorney, Public Communications Director, Division Director or appropriate Division chain-of-command should be **notified immediately during business hours** and in some cases on evenings and weekends of other critical events such as:

- Significant water main breaks, wastewater line breaks, or power outages.
- Road closures due to vehicle crashes, hazardous spills, flooding, or storms, especially on I-35.
- Controversial statements, debates, or accusations that occur in meetings of advisory boards or commissions.
- Any litigation filed or threatened or decisions rendered involving the City.
- Other developing events that are controversial or otherwise newsworthy



where proactive communication can affect news coverage.

- D. In addition to emergency or developing events, City Council members, the City Manager, Division Director, and Public Communications Director should be notified **well in advance**—at the least, one week prior if possible—of planned events such as:
- Construction or repair projects that affect traffic flow or parking.
  - Meetings of advisory boards and commissions should be reported before noon on the Friday before the meeting. Agendas and packets should be sent to the City Secretary at the same time that they are sent to board or commission members.
  - Groundbreaking ceremonies, ribbon cutting events, major bid openings, open houses, major conventions, or seminars involving the City (typically, such events are planned several weeks in advance due to scheduling concerns).
  - Effective dates of major new ordinances or regulations.
  - Hiring of a new Division or Department head or other key position.
  - Awards or recognition given to any City department or employee.
  - Other information that the public should know about.
- E. A monthly progress report (i.e., brief e-mail) about major construction projects like new roads, facilities, or plants; major renovations; and capital improvements should be sent to the City Manager, City Public Communications Director, and relevant Division Director. Major project milestones such as the release of concept plans, openings, ribbon cutting events, etc. are especially important to publicize in advance. Division Directors shall designate an individual to provide progress reports for each project.

## IX. REVIEW OF PRINTED MATERIALS AND ONLINE CONTENT

- A. To ensure clarity, consistency, and professional appearance, all public City publications should be submitted to the Public Communications Department for review prior to publication. This includes annual reports, brochures, website information, and other printed materials for the public.
- B. Routine reports to other agencies, the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR), the Annual Operating Plan Element (budget), and routine updates to web page content (e.g., best-seller lists on the library web site, the event listings on the visitgeorgetown.com calendar, job postings) are exempt from this review process.

## X. CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION



Certain information should not be released to the news media or the public. Confidential information includes, but is not limited to:

- Medical records
- Certain personnel records (including disciplinary actions)
- Pending employee discipline investigations
- Proceedings of executive sessions of City Council
- Draft correspondence
- Records pertaining to pending litigation where the City is a party
- Legal opinions of City attorneys
- Certain law enforcement records

## XI. OPEN RECORDS REQUESTS

- A. Responses to records requests shall be made in compliance with the provisions of federal and state law and the Texas Public Information Act, including those that pertain to timeliness.
- B. A copy of any request from media organizations and citizens should be promptly forwarded to the Public Communications Department, the City Manager, and the City Secretary. The City Manager and the City Secretary will then contact the affected departments and the City Attorney as to what information is available, what needs to be reviewed, and what will require a legal opinion. The City Secretary's Office will also keep a complete log of all Open Record Requests, including the date received, nature of the request, requestor's name, which department(s) it was sent to, who is responding, and when the response was sent to the requestor.
- C. Routine requests for law enforcement records, municipal court records, or planning and development records can be handled directly by the Police Department, Municipal Court office, and Planning and Development Services Division, respectively. Requests that are complicated, involve controversial issues, or entail large numbers of records should be sent to the Public Communications Director.

## XII. EMERGENCY OPERATIONS PLAN

- A. In the event of a declared emergency or crisis, the City Manager shall designate a formal media area and official spokesperson for providing information.
- B. The official spokesperson will work closely with the Emergency Management



Coordinator to gather and authorize the release of all information in such an emergency.

- C. Employees are encouraged to direct all reporters and media personnel to the officially designated spokesperson, as described in the Emergency Operations Plan.
- D. The Public Communications Director and relevant Division Directors shall be available to assist media personnel in the Emergency Operations Center.
- E. Refer to Annex I of the City's Emergency Operations Plan for more details about providing information to the news media in emergency situations.

### XIII. VIOLATIONS OF POLICY

Employees in violation of this policy may be subjected to appropriate disciplinary action, including termination.