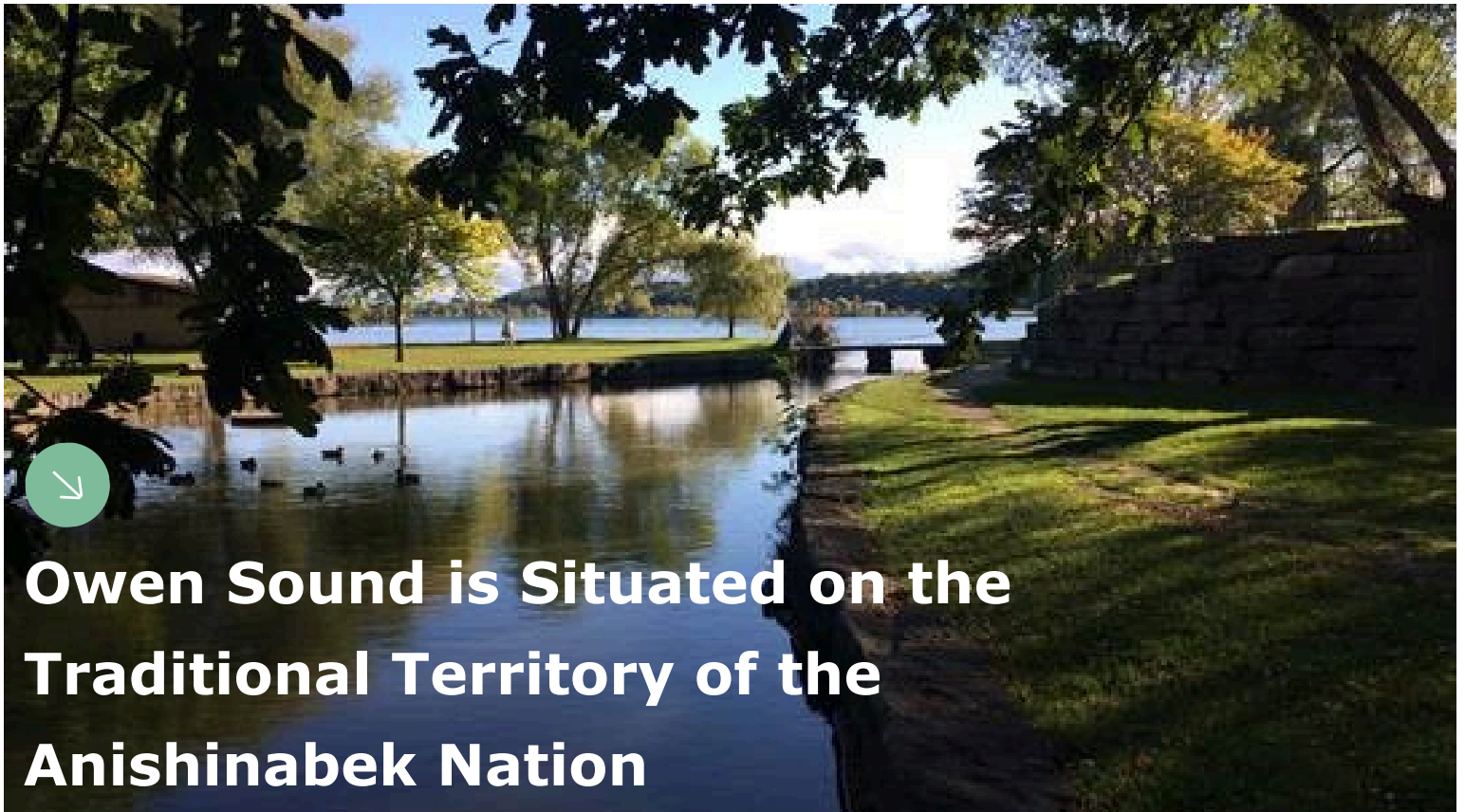


# External Communications Strategy

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### **Owen Sound is Situated on the Traditional Territory of the Anishinabek Nation**

The City acknowledges with respect, the history, spirituality, and culture of the Anishinaabe people who consist of The People of the Three Fires known as Ojibway, Odawa, and Bodéwadmi Nations on whose traditional territories we gather and whose ancestors signed Treaties with our ancestors. We recognize also, the Metis and Inuit, whose ancestors shared this land and these waters. May we all, as Treaty People, live with respect on this land, and live in peace and friendship with all its diverse peoples.

This External Communications Strategy is the result of meaningful engagement and collaboration across the community and the organization. We extend appreciation to residents, Council and Committee members, and staff who contributed their time, insights, and feedback to help shape this plan. The many perspectives were instrumental in identifying priorities, opportunities, and practical approaches that reflect the community's needs and support clear, transparent, and effective communication moving forward.

# Welcome to Owen Sound

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## Grey County's Largest Urban Centre

Owen Sound is a community of more than 22,000 full-time residents located on the southern shore of Georgian Bay, at the foot of the Bruce Peninsula and within the Niagara Escarpment. Known as the “Scenic City,” Owen Sound is characterized by its expansive harbour, parks and trails, its historic downtown, and a strong connection to arts, sports, and natural heritage. As the largest urban centre in Grey County, Owen Sound serves as a regional hub for government services, healthcare, education, and economic activity.

Owen Sound's population reflects a diverse mix of long-time residents, families, seniors, students, and newcomers drawn by employment opportunities, lifestyle, and natural surroundings. As a regional service centre with both urban and rural influences, the community includes residents who engage digitally as well as those who rely more heavily on traditional, offline communication methods. This diversity requires a balanced, inclusive communications approach that recognizes varying access to technology, differing preferences for how information is received, and the need for clear, accessible messaging across multiple channels.

# Mayor's Message

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This External Communications Strategy is an important step forward for the City of Owen Sound. Methods of communication are constantly evolving with more options available, and also more challenges to share our message with our citizens and to listen to their concerns.

Timely, consistent, clear and concise messaging with local government is a must to inform and build trust. By improving how we connect with residents, businesses, and community partners, we are reinforcing our commitment to openness, accountability, and service.

This strategy is another positive step that will guide City communications into the future.



Ian Boddy

Mayor of Owen Sound





## Why a Communications Strategy?

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Council approved the Community Engagement Policy in 2023. Within the spectrum of engagement referenced in the Policy, “Inform” is one component in which the municipality promises to keep the public informed. “Consult” is also often used in municipal communications, as its goal is to obtain public feedback on analyses, alternatives, and/or decisions, as appropriate. In order to best ‘Inform’ and ‘Consult’ with residents, a strategic approach to communications is beneficial.

The City of Owen Sound does not currently have an External Communications Strategy or documented goals for informing an overall external communications.

The absence of a formal strategy or plan leads to reactive communication, which may result in inconsistent information shared with the community.



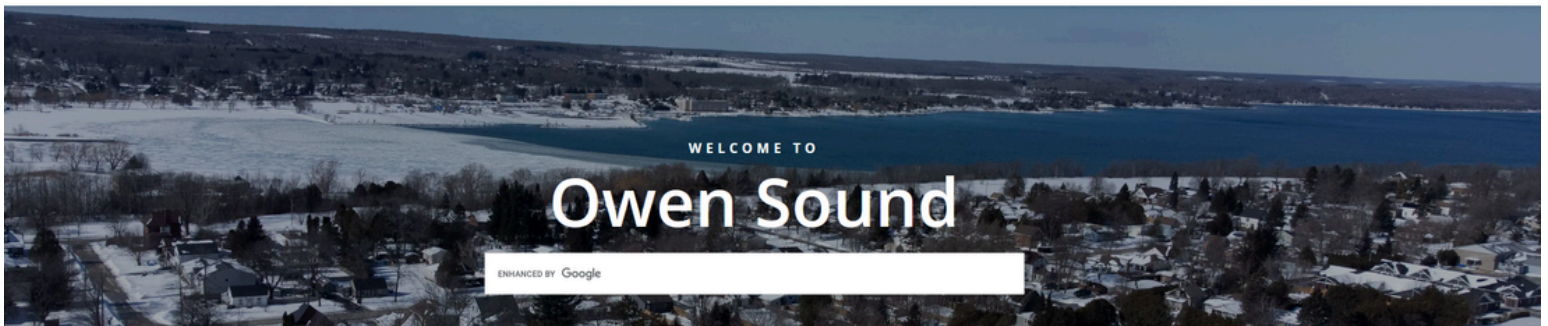
# What this Strategy Addresses

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The External Communications Strategy will help guide consistency, transparency, effectiveness, and timeliness, ensuring that the communications activities of the City of Owen Sound are coordinated, well-managed, and meet the needs of the municipality and its residents.

The Strategy focuses on the City of Owen Sound's corporate communications as a whole, communicating about the organization's core programs and services, projects, and initiatives. It does not include specific marketing plans or communications guidelines for services that currently operate under separate boards, such as the Owen Sound Police Service, Owen Sound and North Grey Union Public Library, and the Owen Sound River District.



'Corporate communications' are intended to share information, build trust, and maintain transparency between the municipality and its collaborators (residents, businesses, community groups, regional partners, etc). This can include tactics such as media releases, responding to media inquiries, social media updates for community awareness, public engagement campaigns, issue management, etc. The goal is to ensure residents are informed. Corporate communications capture what the community needs to know.

Similar but different, 'marketing plans' are used to promote the municipality and attract people, investment, and visitors. This can include tactics such as promotional items, social media advertisement campaigns, posters, and radio ads. The goal is to drive growth or attendance, increase revenue, and enhance the City's brand identity. Marketing promotions capture what we want people to know or feel about the City.



The purpose of this Strategy is to be a guiding document that sets strategic direction around how the City shares information with residents, businesses, community groups, media, and other collaborators.

This Strategy is combining what's desired, based on feedback from residents, Councillors, and staff, with what's achievable and realistic with current resources.

The focus is not on the generation of new assets, positions or budget items. The Strategy focuses on investing in current channels, centralizing communications, empowering staff, and aligning communication best practices with existing City policies to help ensure the City of Owen Sound delivers clear, accessible, and relevant information to all stakeholders.

# Communications Division

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The Communications Division, a part of the City Manager's Office, currently is responsible for:



## Internal & External Support

Internal specialist who helps plan and implement external and internal communication efforts on behalf of all City departments (Corporate Services, Community Services, Public Works and Engineering, Fire Department, Council, and City Manager's Office).



## Public Engagement

Create and implement communication campaigns to regularly inform and consult the public. Support all City departments with public engagement efforts, including surveys, project pages and in-person sessions, to ensure consistent, high-quality deliverables.



## Core Competencies

Day-to-day communication activities include:

- Development and Execution of Communications Plans
- Issues Management and Crisis Communications
- Media Relations and Inquiries
- Development and Execution of Public Engagement Plans for Projects and Core Services
- Website and Digital Form Management
- Advertising and Promotional Material
- Graphic Design
- Social Media Management
- City Brand Standards and Guidelines



## Accessibility of Communications



The City of Owen Sound is committed to building an inclusive community, ensuring that all municipal communications and engagement efforts are accessible to everyone, and that programs and services are delivered in ways that respect the dignity and independence of all individuals.

The City's Communications Division actively promotes accessibility across all communication materials through ongoing staff training, proactive monitoring, and regular evaluation and review, helping ensure content is clear, inclusive, and usable by all audiences.

The City supports the goals of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and follows established policies and practices that uphold the core principles of Dignity, Independence, Integration, and Equal Opportunity.

# Alignment with the Vision 2050 Strategic Plan

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This External Communications Strategy represents the City's first coordinated, organization-wide approach to how we share information with and how we listen to our community. Effective communication is fundamental to good local government; it shapes how residents understand City programs and services, how they engage with municipal decision-making, and how trust is built over time.

The Strategy aligns with the City's Strategic Plan and supports the priority of Fostering Mutually Beneficial and Respectful Relationships. This priority recognizes that strong relationships are not one-way; they are established, reconciled, and continually nurtured through open, timely, and transparent communication that results in mutual benefit, trust, and shared understanding between the municipality and the community it serves.

## Fostering Mutually Beneficial and Respectful Relationships



# Goal of the External Communications Strategy



At its core, this Strategy is focused on building trust and increasing engagement with the City by providing a reliable, credible source of information. Residents should feel confident turning to the City first for accurate, clear, and timely information about municipal programs, services, projects, and decisions. It is the municipality's responsibility to provide residents with clear, easy ways to understand decisions made at Council meetings and program or service information that affects them. Equally important, this Strategy emphasizes creating meaningful opportunities for residents to provide feedback, ask questions, and feel heard.



The value of this goal is that trust is the foundation of successful relationships, including between municipalities and residents. To have trust means that residents will look to City communications for clarity, answers, and information they are seeking. It also means that City staff will ensure that information is provided in a timely manner and is accurate, current, and reliable.

## Objectives and Directions

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The objectives and recommendations outlined in this Strategy are designed to ensure consistent and transparent communication, providing residents with reliable, trustworthy information. This approach supports the development of strong relationships between residents and municipal officials and staff, fostering a shared sense of responsibility and collaboration. Rather than an “us versus them” dynamic, the focus is on recognizing that we are all part of the Owen Sound community, working together to share both responsibilities and resources. The City is committed to fostering open, two-way communication with residents. Our approach ensures that both outgoing and incoming messages are handled professionally, consistently, and transparently.

The main objectives or themes were developed based on feedback gathered in the process of building this Strategy. These highlight the areas where the City can make meaningful and influential changes to improve communication efforts.



# Strategy Objectives

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## #1: Proactive, Consistent, and Expected Communications

Set clear expectations for communication tactics, timeliness, and consistency to help residents anticipate upcoming information and decisions. Share open and transparent information and decision-making to help eliminate perceptions of selective information sharing or a 'closed-door' feeling for residents.



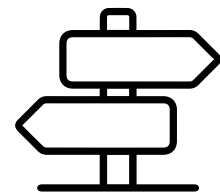
## #2: Improve Two-Way Communications

Clarify the methods and standards for direct interactions with residents, staff, and Council members, and strengthen two-way communication to help residents know they've been heard.

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## #3: Improve Information Access

Simplify navigation and provide clear directions so residents know where to go to access the information they need.



## #4: Utilize Additional Communications Channels

Expand communication channels to deliver consistent messages, with increased emphasis on offline methods.

# Objective #1: Proactive, Consistent, and Expected Communications



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## Direction:

Set clear expectations for communication tactics, timeliness, and consistency to help residents anticipate upcoming information and decisions. Share open and transparent information and decision-making to help eliminate perceptions of selective information sharing or a 'closed-door' feeling for residents.

---

## Recommendations:

1. Provide regular, consistent updates of what happens at Council and Committee meetings with the public.
2. Actively promote and prioritize City-managed and direct communication channels. *Including, but not limited to, online news subscriptions, OurCity registration, tax and water inserts.*
3. Initiate a regular newsletter to provide a summary of City news and information.
4. Expand the City of Owen Sound Brand Style Guide to provide a wider reach of brand consistency.
5. Develop and implement Social Media Guidelines.

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## Measures of Success:

Success will be measured by improved resident perception of transparency, consistent delivery of proactive communications, and steady growth in direct City communication channels.

Core indicators include:

- Improved resident perception of transparency and feeling informed on City decisions and initiatives.
- Proactive communications delivered as planned.
- Growth in direct communication channel subscriptions or registrations.

## **Objective #2:** Improve Two-Way Communications

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### **Direction:**

Clarify the methods and standards for direct interactions with residents, staff, and Council members, and strengthen two-way communication to help residents know they've been heard.

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### **Recommendations:**

6. Standardize and direct residents on how they can best reach City Council members.
  7. Establish consistency in how residents can best reach City staff.
  8. Ensure community engagement feedback loops are closed.
- 

### **Measures of Success:**

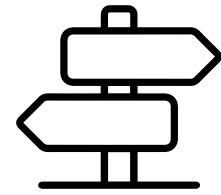
Success of this objective will be measured by increased clarity and accessibility of contact methods, and consistent closure of community engagement feedback loops through public reporting of outcomes.

Core indicators include:

- Improved public understanding of how to contact Council and staff.
- Consistent closure of engagement feedback loops.

## **Objective #3:** Improve Information Access

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### **Direction:**

Simplify navigation and provide clear directions so residents know where to go to access the information they need.

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### **Recommendations:**

9. Audit website navigation/layout regularly, and change as needed.
  10. Ensure consistently accessible and inclusive communications.
  11. Offer clear calendars on the City website to promote community events, and also highlight City-run events such as public meetings, open houses, hazardous waste days, etc.
  12. Clarify and communicate the roles and responsibilities of different levels of government.
  13. Explore the opportunity to expand the use of 211 local services for day-to-day enquiries.
- 

### **Measures of Success:**

Success of this objective will be measured by residents more easily finding the information they need, understanding access to City services and events, and clear, inclusive communication across channels.

Core indicators include:

- Delivery and access of updated online information.
- Fewer recurring common information requests.

## **Objective #4:** Utilize Additional Communications Channels

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### **Direction:**

Expand communication channels to deliver consistent messages, with increased emphasis on offline methods.

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### **Recommendations:**

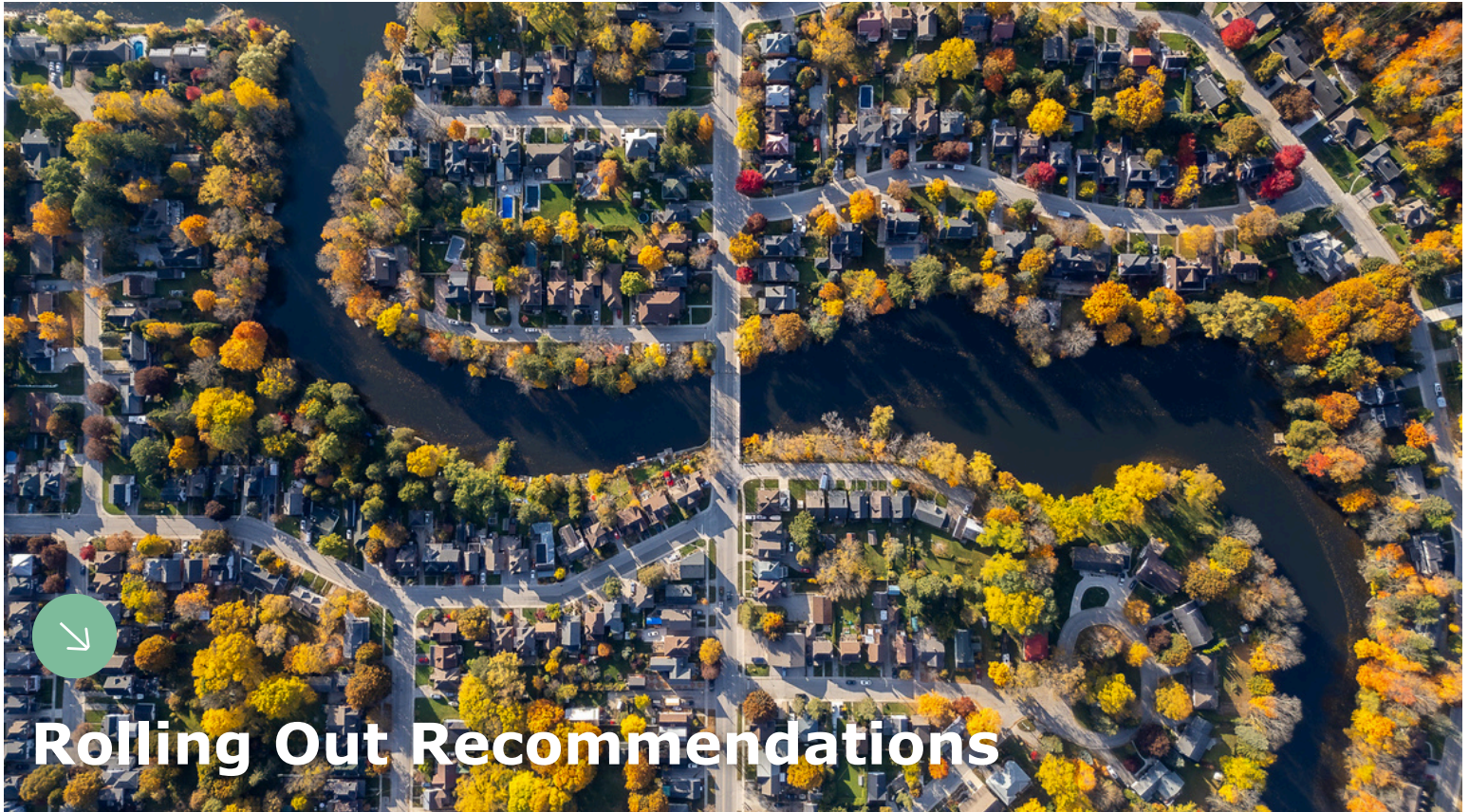
14. Identify new and existing communications tools that can expand consistent message reach.
  15. Build standard guidelines for what types of communications should take which channels, including what resources are required.
  16. Leverage existing and build new partnerships and networks to share City communications, particularly through in-person events.
  17. Promote easy access to the online Report-A-Concern form across City facilities.
- 

### **Measures of Success:**

Success will be measured by an increase in the broad use of mixed communication channels (online and offline), with residents receiving consistent, accessible information.

Core indicators include:

- Increase in the number and diversity of channels used and their collective audience reach.
- Continued yearly growth in use of Report-A-Concern form.



The City's External Communications Strategy will be rolled out in phases over a three-year period to ensure a realistic and achievable change management approach.

While the tactics are presented year by year, the City recognizes the need for flexibility in implementing the plan, and some changes may be required as this Strategy moves forward.

Throughout all phases, emphasis will be placed on maintaining progress without adding excessive workload. By phasing initiatives and focusing resources, we will make effective communication part of the organization's standard.

Implementation has aimed to use a balanced mix of recommendations, taking into account the varying effort and resource requirements for each. This approach allows us to advance all objectives simultaneously.

Implementation of recommendations will be led by the Communications Department, with support and collaboration from other staff and departments as appropriate.

# Implementation Phases

## Year One: 2026-2027

| Recommendation to be Implemented   | Objective Supported                                   |
|--|---|
| Provide regular, consistent updates of what happens at Council and Committee meetings with the public.   | #1 Proactive, Consistent, and Expected Communications |
| Actively promote and prioritize City-managed and direct communication channels. Including, but not limited to, online news subscriptions, OurCity registration, tax and water inserts. | #1 Proactive, Consistent, and Expected Communications |
| Initiate a regular newsletter to provide a summary of City news and information.   | #1 Proactive, Consistent, and Expected Communications |
| Ensure community engagement feedback loops are closed.   | #2 Improve Two-Way Communications                     |
| Promote easy access to the online Report-A-Concern form across City facilities.  | #4 Utilize Additional Communications Channels         |

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# Implementation Phases

## Year Two: 2027-2028

| Recommendation to be Implemented   | Objective Supported                                   |
|--|---|
| Expand the City of Owen Sound Brand Style Guide to provide a wider reach of brand consistency.   | #1 Proactive, Consistent, and Expected Communications |
| Develop and implement Social Media Guidelines.   | #1 Proactive, Consistent, and Expected Communications |
| Standardize and direct residents on how they can best reach City Council members.  | #2 Improve Two-Way Communications                     |
| Audit website navigation/layout regularly and change as needed.  | #3 Improve Information Access                         |
| Ensure consistently accessible and inclusive communications.   | #3 Improve Information Access                         |
| Offer clear calendars on the City website to promote community events, and also highlight City-run events such as public meetings, open houses, hazardous waste days, etc. | #3 Improve Information Access                         |



# Implementation Phases

## Year Three: 2028-2029

| Recommendation to be Implemented   | Objective Supported                           |
|--|---|
| Establish consistency in how residents can best reach City staff.  | #2 Improve Two-Way Communications             |
| Clarify and communicate the roles and responsibilities of different levels of government.                                      | #3 Improve Information Access                 |
| Explore the opportunity to expand the use of 211 local services for day-to-day enquiries.                                      | #3 Improve Information Access                 |
| Identify new and existing communications tools that can expand consistent message reach.                                       | #4 Utilize Additional Communications Channels |
| Build standard guidelines for what types of communications should take which channels, including what resources are required.  | #4 Utilize Additional Communications Channels |
| Leverage existing and build new partnerships and networks to share City communications, particularly through in-person events. | #4 Utilize Additional Communications Channels |



## Measuring Success

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While each objective and its associated recommendations include specific measures of success, the overarching impact of the City's External Communications Strategy will be assessed against its ultimate goal: **building and increasing public trust through clear, accessible, and consistent communications**. Individual metrics, such as website usability, channel reach, and engagement, provide insights into progress on specific actions, but this Strategy's overall effectiveness will be reflected in residents' confidence in City information, understanding of services, and perception that the City is transparent, responsive, and reliable in its communications.

Success will be measured not only by reach or visibility of future communications, but by public confidence. Progress toward this goal will be evaluated through the 2027 Citizen Satisfaction Survey, with trust in municipal communications serving as a key indicator of effectiveness. By strengthening how we communicate and engage, this Strategy aims to support informed residents, respectful dialogue, and a stronger relationship between the City and the community, now and into the future.

Yearly reports to Committee will outline progress on this Strategy's recommendations, including successes and challenges.

## Financial Considerations

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This External Communications Strategy has been developed with no additional budget allocation. The recommendations identified focus on maximizing existing tools, platforms, and staff capacity, and prioritizing communication methods that can be implemented without incurring new costs.

Definitions that may be helpful within the context of the City of Owen Sound's External Communications Strategy.

## **Campaigns**

- Planned efforts to share information or messages with people. In communications, a campaign uses different tools, such as posters, social media, or events, to help people learn about something, understand it better, or take action.

## **City-owned Communication Tools**

- This includes online or offline methods of communication that the City of Owen Sound has control and ownership of the platform (for example, OwenSound.ca website, digital screens in facilities, etc.) This does not include third-party communication channels, such as social media and radio, over which the City does not have full control of what is shared and when and where, etc.

## **Corporate Communications**

- Information on behalf of the organization of the City of Owen Sound that may be helpful or useful to most or all stakeholders (staff, Council members, residents, etc.) This can include topics such as, but not limited to, service disruptions, new or changes to programming, etc.

## **Engagement Efforts**

- Ways the City talks with residents and listens to their ideas and concerns. This can include, but is not limited to, surveys, feedback through the online engagement platform, or in-person events. These efforts help people participate in decisions and ensure the City's programs and plans meet the community's needs.

## **Fostering Mutually Beneficial and Respectful Relationships**

- A theme of the City's Vision 2050 Long-Term Strategic Plan, Fostering Mutually Beneficial and Respectful Relationships, is defined as establishing, reconciling and continually nurturing relationships that result in mutual benefit, trust, and shared understanding.
- By 2050, Owen Sound will build bridges of mutual respect and trust across multiple stakeholder groups to collaboratively advance productive democratic processes and to develop a more relational, front-line presence.

## **Internal Specialist**

- A person who knows a lot about a certain topic and helps others by giving advice, solving problems, and sharing their expertise. In this case, 'internal' means a City of Owen Sound staff member.

## **Issues Management**

- How the City monitors ongoing issues or emerging trends that could affect the community, and over which the City has some influence. It involves tracking concerns, planning, and sharing clear information so the City is able to keep residents informed.

## **Media Releases**

- An official announcement or written article from the City that tells the public and local news media outlets about important events, programs, or updates. It explains what is happening, who is involved, and when and where it will take place.
- Current City of Owen Sound Media Releases are available to residents directly at [OwenSound.ca/News](http://OwenSound.ca/News) or by subscribing via email to City news updates at [OwenSound.ca/Subscribe](http://OwenSound.ca/Subscribe).

## **Municipality**

- A municipality is a local government that takes care of a city, town, or community. It helps run everyday services like roads, water, parks, and community programs, and makes decisions to support the people who live there.

## **Public Engagement**

- The process of involving residents and visitors in the decision-making processes of issues that affect them.

## **Transparency**

- Transparency is openly sharing information publicly in a clear, accurate, and timely way. It means explaining decisions, actions, and policies so people understand how and why the City operates. By being transparent, the City builds trust, encourages accountability, and helps residents feel informed and engaged in their community.

## **Trust**

- Trust is when residents believe the City is honest, reliable, and works in their best interest, based on clear, open, and consistent communication.

# Connect With Us



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