

TITLE VI

PUBLIC AND MEDIA RELATIONS

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CHAPTER 6.02

GENERAL PROVISIONS

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6.02.010 Identifying the Public. The "public" involves everyone in the community -- groups or individuals -- organized or unorganized. The public includes the taxpayer, voter, political party member, merchant, fisherman, parent, educator, consumer, student, etc. When making decisions or taking any form of action, officials need to know how the public will be affected. Citizens deserve to know what their government officials are doing and how it will impact their community. The public that will be affected by a government action needs to be identified, recognized and listened to and making the effort to do this is the first step to fostering good public relations.

6.02.020 Philosophy. Establishing and maintaining sound relationships with the citizens, elected and appointed officials and the media is the essence of good public relations. Records deal with many members of the public on a regular basis -- including other governmental agencies and officials, civic leaders, the area chamber of commerce, the local school district and other educators, city service consumers, voters, business owners, contractors, licensees -- all types of citizens.

To develop good public relations, you must be genuinely committed to presenting yourself and your municipality in a professional manner at all times. This means being responsive to the needs of the individual or agency you're working with, without losing sight of the fact you are an official representative of your city government. Your first allegiance should always be to your municipality. It's a good idea to give advance thought to the message you're sending out and how the message may be received. What will the message convey? Is it ambiguous or is it clear? Will the message reflect positively on your city? The old saying, "think before you speak," should always be applied.

Recorders need to always remember the importance of good public relations. Sometimes, that requires us to be something of a psychologist -- to be mindful of other viewpoints; something of a financial expert -- to be able to translate figures to others; a sociologist -- to be attuned to changing trends; a paralegal -- always aware of potential lawsuits; and, most of all, a dedicated public servant who reflects a professional image of their municipality. Developing good written and oral communications skills is an essential part of cultivating good public relations.

6.02.030 Communication Policies and Programs. Local government deals with a full spectrum of issues, and to effectively deal with a wide array of situations, formal policies governing the dissemination of public information should be developed and adopted. As the person primarily responsible for city records, the City Recorder is often put in charge of administering and enforcing such public information policies and programs. Communication policy guidelines can also be developed to address citizen input on the most common issues facing local government. In order for public participation to be effective, cities must not only solicit public opinion, but they must also give the public sufficient facts to formulate a reasoned position. A good communication program requires "identifying" who needs the information and how that information can most easily be conveyed.

When developing a communication program, remember these important thoughts:

- The process of communications begins with determining public opinion. This requires defining who the affected public is and providing various methods through which the affected citizens may participate in the process and convey their opinions.
- An effective communication program requires careful organization and planning, and includes a written policy statement or set of guidelines, that assigns staff responsibility and provides training in public relations.
- A city government cannot expect to have a good public image (or a Recorder to have a professional image) if it fails to assist the media or to provide information about city functions and problems.
- Periodic evaluation of the communication program will help keep the city's effort on target and determine whether the goals and objectives of the program are being met.

6.02.040 Helpful Hints. Whether working with the public or the media, it is always important to be as organized and prepared as possible. The more knowledgeable you are on the topic of discussion, the better you can present the information being requested. It's also important to be receptive to the level of knowledge the individual you're working with possesses. If you're working with another government official, chances are they're going to understand "government language." But, if you're working with a common citizen, use "common language" -- language the person can understand. Remember -- you are there to serve everyone in your community -- regardless of their position, status, and level of knowledge or need. We are all public servants and therefore, we should always convey our desire to help. There are many times that it's better not to give a personal opinion -- however, there are times when it is acceptable -- common sense should tell you when it's appropriate. But you should always make it clear that you are giving "your personal opinion" when you do so.

It is absolutely essential to be kind, polite and professional at all times. Never use crude or rude language. Even if the individual you are working with becomes rude or obnoxious -- remember you are representing your local government. One way to keep this in mind is to "pretend" that all your conversations and discussions with the public are being tape recorded and could be replayed on the local radio or television station. Would you be comfortable with what you've said -- if so, you know the value of good public relations -- if not, maybe you need to work a little harder in this area. Always remember -- everything you say can be reflected back on your city and on your personal position with the city -- and your presentation may determine how the citizens of your community view the effectiveness of their local government and their opinion of you as a professional representative of that government.

CHAPTER 6.04

WORKING WITH THE PUBLIC

Sections:

6.04.010	The "Art" of Working with the Public
6.04.020	Getting Citizens Involved
6.04.030	Public Hearings
6.04.040	Citizen Advisory Committees
6.04.050	Neighborhood Associations
6.04.060	Public Opinion Surveys
6.04.070	Volunteer Programs

6.04.010 The "Art" of Working with the Public. The "art" of working with members of the public, especially in difficult situations, is an area in which all city employees need training, but it becomes particularly critical for certain key personnel who are so often in direct contact with the public -- for instance, the City Recorder. Remember, the Recorder is considered to be the "hub of the local government wheel" -- that puts us right in the middle! We are often the person the citizens come to first -- especially with complaints. Many times, we may be the only person at city hall that the citizen deals with. How we handle the citizen may determine that citizen's opinion -- whether favorable or one of condemnation -- toward all city programs, activities and employees! Generally, attentively listening to these citizens and offering a simple explanation of what the city must consider in rendering a decision, is the first step. If people understand the relevant facts, are treated courteously and given every consideration that the circumstances will allow, the integrity of the process, the City Recorder's position and the entire city government will be protected -- and maybe even enhanced.

6.04.020 Getting Citizens Involved. There are two very important tasks local government officials must accomplish when trying to get citizens involved. First, they must determine what the citizen's opinion is, and secondly, they must make sure that citizens have sufficient information with which to form intelligent opinions. For these tasks to be carried out successfully, cities need an active public information program and must provide opportunities for citizens to get involved and actively participate in their local government process. Recorders play a major role in these two tasks as we are often the city's "public information officer" and we typically issue the public notices which encourage citizen participation.

The proverbial "two-way street" is important in achieving effective citizen participation in city government. Success depends on both the attitudes and interests of the citizens, and of the city officials. Sometimes it's hard to get citizens involved, but they need to know that their efforts and concerns are recognized and considered in the decision-making process. This "two-way street system" can be provided through public hearings, advisory committees, neighborhood associations, volunteer programs and public opinion polls and surveys.

6.04.030 Public Hearings. Public hearings are the most traditional way of encouraging citizens to be a part of the city government process. These hearings are supposed to be held specifically to give citizens an opportunity to voice their opinions on a matter to be decided upon. Effort should be taken to make public hearings as effective as possible. The following are a few suggestions that might increase the effectiveness of your public hearings:

- **Convenient Timing:** Public hearings should be scheduled at a time that is convenient for the public to attend -- usually in the early evening.
- **Adequate Facilities:** The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that meeting facilities are accessible to disabled persons, but we also need to make sure that the location of the facility is convenient (of course this is typically city hall), has good acoustics and adequate seating capacity. All open public meeting laws must be complied with at all meetings and public hearings.
- **Pre-hearing Conferences:** Some cities find that on very controversial matters (except for quasi-judicial hearings), a pre-hearing conference with the primary proponents and opponents on the issue can be beneficial and save time during the public hearing. If this process is used, it is highly recommended that staff persons be involved, as opposed to elected officials, to ensure compliance with the open meetings law and to preserve impartiality required for quasi-judicial hearings.
- **Opening Statement:** The presiding officer (typically the Mayor or City Attorney) should open the public hearing, then make a statement clearly describing the matter to be discussed and the process under which the hearing will be conducted.
- **Procedural Rules:** Many Councils have established and adopted formal procedural rules to be followed in all public hearings. The rules may include time limits for each speaker, written registration (including name, address and telephone number) of each speaker, the order in which testimony will be heard and the process for closing the hearing.
- **Staff Assistance:** It is common for staff members to give a report outlining the facts about the issue, and sometimes to offer a recommendation on the decision, prior to the Council hearing public testimony. Staff members may also be called upon during or after public testimony to answer questions raised during the public comment time; however, during the public comment period, staff should not offer any statements or comments unless requested to do so by the governing body.
- **Closing Statements:** After the hearing has been closed, and a decision made (if applicable at the time), the Mayor should advise the public of the action that will be taken following the hearing and describe how and when the public can expect such action to be taken.

6.04.040 Citizen Advisory Committees. Citizen Advisory Committees (or Commissions or Boards, Task Forces, Ad Hoc Committees, as they may be called) can be very helpful in the local government process. These groups can be selected to meet on a regular basis (usually once or twice a month) and to act in an advisory capacity to Council on matters involving a specific aspect of local government (for example: Public Works Commission, Public Safety Commission, Downtown Development Committee, etc.); or they can be selected to serve for a shorter, specified period to conduct an in-depth study on one particular issue, for example, the development of a ten-year parks master plan. Such boards and committees have been found to improve communication between the public and local government, and often between competing groups of citizens. They also tend to serve as a sounding board for proposed city action before such matters are brought before Council for a final decision.

The typical advisory committee/board/commission is generally created by ordinance or resolution and appointed by the Mayor and/or City Council to fulfill a designated term (for example: two years to the Public Works Commission). The order establishing the committee also usually outlines the committee's duties and responsibilities and defines the number of citizens to serve on the committee.

Councilors are sometimes designated as the chair to preside over the meetings of such committees, but are more often appointed as regular members or ex-officio non-voting members of the committee; they are usually also considered the committee's liaison to Council.

Most advisory committees are voluntary and are not compensated for their time. Staff members are often assigned to provide technical assistance and administrative support to the committee -- as well as to provide continuity and direction for the committee. It is important to remember that these advisory committees and boards are subject to the open public meetings law and Recorders should make sure that the committees are aware of these requirements.

6.04.050 Neighborhood Associations. Private neighborhood associations are formed by citizens to work on matters involving traffic, transportation, social services, housing, zoning, land use, law enforcement, recreational facilities and other matters that affect their neighborhoods. These types of associations usually only exist in medium-to-large sized cities. Some are viewed as being of benefit to the local governing body, while some, unfortunately, are viewed as being an "interference to the process."

There is considerable disagreement as to whether cities should formally recognize and/or sponsor such private associations. Some believe these organizations promote citizen participation and improved neighborhood planning. Others argue that these groups tend to project and stimulate a lack of trust in the local government process and often stifle community cooperation and strong Council leadership.

6.04.060 Public Opinion Surveys. A very common method to expand public participation is through public opinion surveys. This can be done in many ways, but each survey should have a very clear goal. Cities can use surveys for such things as determining how its citizens feel about a proposed new service or facility, or the effectiveness of an existing service or program. Some cities conduct their own surveys, but many hire professional polling or survey organizations to guarantee reliable and unbiased results.

6.04.070 Volunteer Programs. An excellent illustration of the "two-way street" of citizen participation can be seen through the use of volunteers in local government. Unpaid elected and appointed officials (the Mayor, Council, various Board/Commission Members) are the chief volunteers of the city -- but there are many, many ways in which volunteers can be utilized -- from fire fighting to planting flowers. Volunteers are typically the type of people who naturally feel a sense of community pride and sincerely want to serve their community. Their efforts warrant sincere recognition and appreciation, especially when existing staff levels, and/or funds available, are insufficient to carry out certain city programs that the entire community benefits from in one way or another.

The economic benefits of volunteerism are obvious, but there are a few pitfalls that need to be avoided. Difficulties can be avoided if a few guidelines are developed for your city's volunteer programs. An example of such guidelines would be:

- Be careful to review the background of your volunteers;
- Clearly define the volunteers' functions and provide the necessary training and orientation they need;

- Always assign a staff person to "oversee" your volunteers and have them periodically "check-in" on the volunteers to answer any questions they may have and just to let them know they're appreciated. A staff person should also keep a volunteer roster, which establishes a list of volunteer names, personal information, and locations/hours worked;
- When appropriate, set project time limits and establish work schedules in advance;
- Always check with your city attorney regarding possible liability in connection with proposed volunteer efforts;
- Implement a volunteer appreciation program; present them with certificates of appreciation during a Council meeting so their efforts are known in the community;
- Check with the personnel officer regarding fringe benefit costs and other possible liabilities relating to the volunteer program. Some cities may decide to include their volunteers in their workman's comp coverage. Insurance companies may have certain requirements for this type of coverage.

CHAPTER 6.06

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Sections:

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6.06.030	Deadlines and Reporting Procedures
6.06.040	Interviews
6.06.050	Personal Media
6.06.060	Council Meeting Coverage

6.06.010 Establishing a Good Relationship. Establishing a good working relationship with the media -- especially reporters from the local newspaper, radio stations and television stations -- is critical. Good media relations are essential, not only in the city's effort to communicate with the public, but also in the ability of city government to carry out its basic functions and responsibilities. Regardless of community size, the local media is probably the most useful communication tool available for informing the citizenry of community issues. The local media may carry general information from all city departments, along with keeping citizens apprised of the next meeting of the Council or other city boards or commissions; upcoming elections; special ballot issues; public hearings and more. City Recorders are often considered the "public relations/media relations officer" of the city and as such, Recorders should work diligently to develop a cooperative, business relationship, based on mutual respect and understanding, with local media representatives.

6.06.020 Credibility Creates a Reliable Spokesperson. It is important to establish credibility, not only with the general public, but also with reporters and other media personnel who must be dealt with regularly. City Recorders, as mentioned above, are often considered the city's media spokesperson. As such, we function as a coordinator who puts media representatives in contact with the appropriate public officials or employees, notifies reporters of meetings, supplies background information, writes news releases and oversees city media communications in general. Having an "open door policy" to the media establishes the rapport required for a good relationship. As the city's media spokesperson, you need to be available to the media at all times (within reason of course) -- especially in times of a crisis or an emergency situation. Timely reporting enhances the public image of government operations and helps establish your credibility with the media. Once you've proved your credibility with the local media, you will be considered a trusted and reliable source for accurate and timely information.

6.06.030 Deadlines and Reporting Procedures. As Recorders, we're all well aware of how important deadlines are -- especially those we must deal with on a regular basis -- for example, our agenda deadline. It's important to remember reporters must adhere to very strict deadlines as well. We all know everybody wants the news "hot off the press," this makes receiving information on time vital to a reporter. Equally important as meeting the media's deadline is the accuracy of the information given. If you're not sure you have an accurate answer to a question or all the vital details of a given situation or development, be up-front about it. Tell the media representative you'll get back to them with the complete answer or "the rest of the story" -- then, keep your word and get back to the reporter as soon as you've gathered all the necessary facts.

It's important to be aware of and accommodate the different procedures and requirements of various media. Newspapers have different schedules and deadlines, depending whether they are published

daily, weekly, monthly, in the morning or in the evening. Radio station coverage usually consists of brief, up-to-the-minute news. Many stations depend entirely on telephone interviews, news releases or faxed information, but some assign reporters to cover city government to get in-depth coverage. Because of its ability to provide immediate coverage, radio is especially helpful during emergency situations. Television presents unusual demands and opportunities. It conveys images, actions and emotions -- a complete visual story. Being in front of a camera can sometimes totally change the "atmosphere" or "tone" of a meeting or public presentation. Cable television can be an excellent way to better inform residents and publicize upcoming meetings and special events. A number of communities have found numerous ways to use cable TV to improve communication between government and citizenry.

6.06.040 Interviews. Interviews with media representatives can be an unnerving experience even for those who are usually comfortable with public speaking. Fear of being unable to answer a question, of being tripped up or stumbling over words, or just the idea of speaking into a microphone or in front of a camera -- all of these can be intimidating to even the most experienced public speaker. City Recorders are becoming increasingly more involved in the public relations aspect of local government, so it's important that we sharpen our media interview skills.

The first step toward being professional and successful in an interview is to **BE PREPARED!** We suggest that before agreeing to an interview, you should:

- Find out where and when the interview would be held. If you're more comfortable with the surroundings, you'll probably be more relaxed during the interview.
- Find out whether the interview will be taped.
- Specify topics that are off limits or off the record. If a reporter asks you to comment "off the record," be very careful with your comments. How well you know the reporter should help you determine how "safe" it is to trust that what you say really will be kept "off the record." When in doubt, don't volunteer comments gratuitously -- and remember, it's not always appropriate to give your "personal opinion."
- If possible, ask for questions in advance.
- Brush up on the topic beforehand; collect pertinent facts and figures.
- If time allows, role-play the interview with a well informed partner who acts as "devil's advocate." Prepare for controversial questions and for being interrupted by the interviewer - - which can make you lose your "train of thought." Try to resist interruption and work to get your message across.
- When at all possible, try to control the situation, rather than letting the media control the situation. Have your "agenda" ready beforehand (for example: those items that you want to discuss).

During an interview, try to relax -- don't panic. Realize that most of the time you know more about the subject than the interviewer. TV and radio exposure can help Recorders become more visible to the community for which they work. It's a chance to cast a professional reflection on our position in local government and on your city. We also suggest the following to ensure a successful interview:

- Listen carefully to each question and note the questioner's "body language." Pay attention to what is being said and what is implied.

- Do not try to second guess your interviewer. Answer the question as posed, or ask for clarification if you do not understand (for example: "I don't understand your question. Would you please rephrase it?").
- Insist on time to think through your answers; then respond when you're comfortable.
- Project the image of a knowledgeable and professional interviewee; do not allow hostile or leading questions to frustrate you into responding in kind.
- Keep your answers brief and simple. This helps you keep both the interviewer's and the audience's attention.
- Keep a conversational attitude and tone of voice. The interview should seem as natural as talking to a citizen on a street corner or carrying on a phone conversation.

6.06.050 Personal Media. Personal media includes speeches and presentations given by government officials -- such as City Recorders -- at civic affairs and service club meetings, personal contact through correspondence and conversations, appearances on radio or television discussion programs and publication of letters or articles in newspapers.

Personal appearances by government officials reduce the "impersonality" of government and expose officials to direct citizen feedback. Citizens often feel more comfortable expressing their views and opinions face-to-face at an informal meeting than they do at a formal hearing. Speeches and discussions can be flexible and geared to specific audiences.

Perhaps the greatest communication impact occurs when city officials and employees are engaged in daily city business -- just doing their jobs. This spans from how elected officials project themselves during a formal Council meeting to how friendly a utility department worker is to a citizen he comes in contact with while reading a water meter. A person performing functions of the government directly influences the city's "public image." If they're doing their job properly -- government officials and employees will be aware of how their actions can affect a citizen's perception of government. Again, as Recorders, we come into contact with our citizenry on a regular basis, so it is critical that we promote and protect a positive perception of local government while performing the daily functions of our office.

6.06.060 Council Meeting Coverage. Several cities schedule regular media meetings to cover every City Council meeting. Sometimes this is done in advance of the meeting, sometimes it's done the morning after the meetings -- and in some of the bigger cities -- it may be done both before and after each meeting. A staff person (very typically the City Recorder) is assigned to report on the matters presented to Council -- particularly those issues of major interest to the general public. In these cases, it is appropriate to prepare a media packet prior to meeting with the media representatives. The packet should provide background information, reinforce the facts and clarify the action taken, which should save time when reviewing the details with the media.

Most cities prepare and distribute media packets which contain most of the information (staff reports and memos, etc.) included in the Council packets (with the exception of executive session materials). This expedites dissemination of information for news coverage of the Council meetings.

In-house publications such as city newsletters, special reports, annual reports and bulletins provide another form of media for coverage of Council meetings and other aspects of local government. These publications can also be used as informative public relation tools.