

**CONNECT Communications & Technology
Working Group**

Thursday | March 31, 2022 | 10:30 am

[Via Zoom](#)



Municipal and Partner Attendees: Andrew Flynn, Mt Lebanon; Phyllis Anderson, Oakmont; Tim McLaughlin, Aspinwall; Alan Kugler, PA Futures; Brittany Reno, Sharpsburg; Krista Watt, Dormont; RJ Susko, McCandless; Stephen Beuter, Carnegie; Deneen Underwood, Carnegie; Vanessa McCarthy-Johnson, Homestead

CONNECT: Lydia Morin; Sarah Downing; JoEllen Marsh; Kelley Kelley

CALL TO ORDER AND INTRODUCTIONS – TIM MCLAUGHLIN, ASPINWALL

ATTENDEES SPOKE ABOUT THE STATE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY CURRENTLY IN THEIR MUNICIPALITIES

Dormont: Putting communications in long-term plans, integrating communications on a grander scale

Aspinwall: Making better use of staff time and find someone who has those skill sets, upgraded other policies so they had more time to devote to communications

Mt Lebanon: Government is a service provider in many respects. As residents change, we need to understand how [residents] want us to engage. Governments aren't communicating the services they are providing. Communications happens now, in a dispersed manner, it's difficult to find ways to channel that.

Mt Lebanon has a PIO, but they are not managing communications streams of the municipality or creating structures for better communications processes.

First step in Mt Lebanon is rebuilding the website. The PIO is proposing a new five-year roadmap of a communications plan.

Aspinwall: Communications and marketing is about organization and following through on a structure and a plan. In Aspinwall, asking people to prepare in advance and get on the agenda. Set up a structure and a process, and then holding them and yourself accountable.

Oakmont: Primary way to communicate is through newsletters. Have a large established community that is used to getting communications delivered to them. One electronic and two printed newsletters.

Hired a new code enforcement agent in Oakmont. The code enforcement agent was introduced to the borough in a newsletter, with an article about code enforcement. Also use a text alert system. Use LinkedIn sometimes.

Residents guide created for Oakmont. Guides available at post offices, local businesses, to be available to residents. [Residents guide attached to these minutes]

Aspinwall: At what frequency are the newsletters sent out?

Oakmont: Every month. Council hot ticket items are communicated through the newsletter. For example, articles on ordinances and glass recycling collection events. Articles are also on the website, newsletters get delivered electronically and physically.

Aspinwall: There is passive and active communication. We are pushing active communication. When residents come to borough office or call and ask questions, we need to get better at putting [this information] in a clear and easy to find place.

McCandless: We have a public information officer. His background is in journalism. Between the manager, manager assistant, etc., there is a strong feeling that we want things to sound more human and approachable. Sometimes in government, it's very rigid or formal. This leads to better interactions.

Our monthly McMail newsletter put out by the PIO. One challenge is there is no fully written communication plan. PIO is great at pushing out big news alerts. Social media is a challenge. Facebook makes sense to reach most residents. We don't have education or resources to play the algorithm as it pushes political content down the feed.

We want to tell residents about the wins in local government. Need more consistent communications. Challenges with adopting new platforms like Savvy Citizen. Would like to talk about Bang the Table, Engagement HQ more.

Looking at communications as public engagement, Bang the Table hosts news alerts, surveys, etc. If we do an activity, it needs to be tied to a policy decision. Content needs to be tied to a policy decision.

Carnegie: Website for most of our communications. Recently updated the navigation. Have a newsletter online, utilize Facebook and Instagram.

We have someone who helped out with Instagram, seems to bring in a lot of attention and a different crowd. We talked with the gazette that works with Crafton, they are interested in adding Carnegie to their circulation.

Making a welcome packet guide, hope to start that again (delayed by COVID).

Aspinwall: Let's share newsletters, formats. Our visioning session brought up that we are not in competition with each other. If there is a good format that someone is using, that helps people who are still working on those.

Carnegie: Looking to add some kind of program, like Savvy Citizen to our communications. Looking for recommendations.

Aspinwall: One goal is to look into these systems, give everyone a blueprint.

Sharpsburg: Got rid of our Savvy Citizen-type app. We are undergoing a leadership change. Have a majority new council who are focused on communications and looking for opportunities to ramp up communications. Asking citizens what they would want to see in a quarterly newsletter.

Getting into the Community rating system under FEMA, gives an opportunity to justify ramping up our communications.

Homestead: social media is important for transparency. We initiated a newsletter that is printed in-house. Have membership for MailChimp was good for a while, reinstating MailChimp and put it on the website to sign up for newsletter. Have an electronic board and use Robo Call to call the residents. It will tell people about meetings, trash pickup, etc.

Trying to build a communications plan, our Facebook page is tied to one of our council members. Make sure we are separating those things.

Revamped the website. Looking at transparency. Working with businesses to make a resident guide to put out information. Building a social media communications plan, trying to figure out how to move that forward.

Aspinwall: One note is to work on building a calendar. Commit to it and hold shareholders to commit to it. Look at other staff, neighborhood group, hold people accountable to a calendar to get content that you put out. Brand and look is a heavy lift for volunteer side of the job. Focus on volume and consistency for now.

Dormont: When we were talking about outcomes [of the RFP], what CONNECT can provide is the bigger picture, implementable plan. Take heavy lift off of communities without PIOs.

Aspinwall: We can share with each other; our messages can sound and look alike. Make government look and sound approachable.

CONNECT: Next steps – making a resolution to form this group.

Sarah Downing will go over (from the visioning session minutes) what CONNECT can do right now for a year, gearing up for a bigger ask for Pennsylvania to invest more in your data and communications and technology.

Findings from visioning session will be attached to these minutes

On a more meta level, CONNECT has to go through these exercises and have more robust communications.

One piece of the RFP is what do you need to see from CONNECT communications, and another piece is what can be provided to the members directly?

NEXT STEPS

ATTENDEES SHARED “WHAT ARE YOUR PRIORITIES AND WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN IN A YEAR?”

Dormont: We need plans. What CONNECT has will be different than what the municipalities use, but overall, **solid communications plan** that ties in what technology we can use to house data, how we can publish things out.

Oakmont: Would like to see a step-by-step guide. The beginning is the hardest part, how to start it. If this group could come in with **a guide and calendar**, it would be helpful, especially for new people coming on board.

Carnegie: Agree that a first step would be helpful. We have looked into Savvy Citizen, other options, it would help to know what the best option would be. Make sure it's user friendly and helpful for the community. **Make a top 3 or top 4 list of programs. Provide the research.**

CONNECT: is there interest in building a pilot program with a cohort into this RFP?

Sharpsburg: Was going to suggest this, for programs to give us a good deal (as a group)

McCandless: Savvy is regional and affordable. Our Bang the Table site is affordable compared to national solutions. It would be great for CONNECT to get enough interested municipalities for them to host a shared platforms and host projects for municipalities who can't buy in. Help with survey design, help municipalities learn to use the platform.

Dormont: We could afford more if we work together, maybe look at shared PIOs.

McCandless: Personally prefer shared platforms versus shared staff members. For example, in a crisis, who gets the PIO? However, I know not everyone feels that way about shared staff.

CONNECT could be a great platform for collective resources. It might be helpful to put together a guide on how do we talk to residents on a more human level?

Helping everyone as professionals and elected officials with techniques, etc.

Mt Lebanon: Everything we do needs to be packaged and communicated more effectively. Government does a lot of great work but not a lot of people see it.

How do I communicate with residents, whole community, etc. People need to see wins. CONNECT could do a shared platform, a fascinating approach to providing a resource.

We could conceptually have a PIO expert as a resource to ask. Almost the equivalent of a solicitor. Remember who the customer is, how they want to be communicated to. Having a body of people around a platform and generating concepts is a great opportunity to help government communicate. You communicate with business owners differently than residents, for example.

Newsletters is great but it's marketing. People want communication on core government services. People want to know someone is ON this problem that they have. This is an evolving process.

Aspinwall: I hear people talk about "platforms." Remember that social media is vehicles for content. Think "what is my internal strategy", then what are the vehicles of that content? Need strategies for video, audio, or written content. The end platforms will change.

Every two years, we have people coming in. If we do our job right, when a new elected comes in they get plugged in to the communications strategy. We need to make information readily available.

PA Futures: Key is starting with sharing. Look for a platform that can take us in the right direction, a platform we can learn from. For example, Lasor Fish could use data capabilities to accomplish this. All municipalities could be hosted within it, with CONNECT as an overall sponsor. It would hold minutes, agendas, ordinances, resolutions, etc. We should price it out and see what they say, need to think about how to handle the RFP.

CONNECT: We could do research on top products, then see who wants to demo this and prove that governments can share this.

Part of this year's RFP is researching platforms, finding out what they will offer us. When we have this, we can take report from consultants and give this to DCED saying we have interested communities who want to do this.

Aspinwall: We have bits and pieces; we need to put it together. We need major organization, everything we need to do already exists. If you are already communicating as a municipality

well, when this is done, your communications officer will have access to a lot of new things. Will save time.

NEXT STEPS

RESOLUTIONS AND RFP

CONNECT: Next step is to get that clay/draft together. Make a draft to get comments on. With our budget, we have enough foundation \$ to get some consultants on this. At the April EC, get support for RFP draft to send out in April. Have some representatives from this group talk it out with EC at the retreat. We can vote on RFP going out, funding the RFP with money we already have.

At the retreat, we will have a presentation on Resource X. Resource X has a cloud based, priority-based platform, has been engaged by the City of Pittsburgh.

Adjourn at 11:45 am

RESOURCES:

Carnegie Borough Magazine Fall 2021: <http://www.carnegieborough.com/documents/Fall21-Newsletter1-compressed.pdf>

Turtle Creek Borough Archive of Quarterly Newsletters:
<https://www.turtlecreekborough.us/index.php/residents/newsletter>

Mt Lebanon Magazine: <https://lebomag.com/>

McCandless Archive of Monthly Newsletter: <https://www.townofmccandless.org/news-publications/pages/mcmail%E2%84%A2-monthly-e-newsletter>

ATTACHED TO THESE MINUTES:

Borough of Oakmont Residents Guide

Chamber of Commerce Newsletter - Article from Phyllis J. Anderson,
Assistant Borough Manager in Oakmont, featured near the back of the April Edition