

## **Media Relations Training**

Location: Alberta

Topic(s): Managing Media Relationships, Talking to the Media

Please describe the situation.

The stretch of road between Highway 16 (runs east/west from Edmonton to BC border) and Westlock (north west of Edmonton about an hour) was formerly known as Secondary Highway 794 (Sec HWY), but due to a large increase in traffic it was eventually upgraded to Highway 44 in 1999. Traditionally the area was predominately a farming community. Between 1997 and 1998 there was a rapid influx of new development to the area, both commercial and residential. This resulted in large traffic volumes especially during peak hours. This included farming equipment, gravel trucks and passenger vehicles.

The Sec HWY was not designed to handle this volume of commuters and inevitably this stretch of road was responsible for causing many serious and life-threatening vehicular collisions, some unfortunately were fatal.

Residents and businesses in the area had made presentations to Council requesting the County lobby the Province to get the road designated to a Provincial Highway so that changes could be made to the road that would accommodate the increase in traffic making it safer for travel. Although Council was meeting regularly with the Province for the re-designation, it was a very slow and drawn out process and more vehicular collisions continued to occur.

What was the current political environment? What factors led to the situation? What were the events that unfolded in this particular scenario?

The Council was not media savvy; generally, they dealt with only local community reporters who were not overly intimidating. As a rural community, they had for the most part managed to stay under the radar of the larger urban media, especially live radio and television.

A recent onslaught of serious collisions occurring on the Sec HWY immediately generated outrage by the public. The frustration from residents was beginning to amplify with the most recent collision. This piqued the attention of the larger urban centre's media and now the story was no longer contained to just the local community paper. The larger newspapers, television and radio were interested in this small rural County and wanted to know what steps had been taken and what they plan on doing to expedite the process of getting the Sec HWY re-designated to a Provincial Highway.

**How did you respond to or address the situation?**

It was clear that this story would be frontpage news and be the headline story for awhile. It was necessary to prepare a statement for the media. Discussions were held and the key messages were developed. Statement and Media kits identifying the steps taken and the history of events were prepared.

Since it was a high-profile story, the newspapers, radio and television all wanted interviews. The phone calls were coming into the County office requesting comment from the Reeve. The Communications Specialist had suggested that it may be more efficient and effective to hold one media conference. The Reeve insisted that he would be more comfortable doing individual interviews, and so interviews were scheduled and the Reeve proceeded to conduct several one-on-one interviews. This process was very laborious and exhausting for the Reeve and as the interviews continued it was getting increasingly more difficult for him to stay on-point.

**What lessons did you learn from this scenario?**

More effort should have been made to persuade the Reeve to hold a single Media Conference. In the end it was clear that it would have been much less stressful on the Reeve and a better way to handle the media. The Reeve would have only had to give his statement once and answer questions at one sitting, thus ensuring that everyone received the same information at the same time.

**What advice would you give to someone going through a similar situation?**

Especially in a rural municipality, when the Council may not be very media savvy, it is a good idea to provide them with formal media training. This training will give them the much-needed skills required to handle the gravity of the pressing issue during a media interview and the sensibility of dealing with intimidating reporters. Don't wait for a media opportunity to arise where your Council is faced with a high-profile situation that requires them to be confident, concise and able to stay on-point.