

Managing Media During a Crisis

Location: Saskatchewan

Topic(s): Managing Media Relations, Talking to the Media, Social Media Use

Please describe the situation.

In 2016 the City of Prince Albert experienced a water crisis affecting all residents, businesses and visitors as well as surrounding communities who rely on our City water system. The presence of Hydrocarbons had been found in the North Saskatchewan River, immediate measures had to be undertaken, and it was critical that the public was notified. Media involvement became crucial to informing the public of the urgency of the situation while ensuring that all information was accurate and consistent. An Emergency Conservation Bylaw quickly came into effect and it was very important that the public be aware and obey the Bylaw to ensure the continued supply of safe water.

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

A Public Information Officer within the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) was appointed to implement our communications plan throughout the two months of the crisis. Having one individual oversee communications, prepare scripts for staff, draft the media releases and speaking notes for the City Manager and Mayor, record questions being received, monitor social media as well as be the contact for any other inquiries allowed for accurate information to be relayed consistently. The media were encouraged to attend daily press conferences wherein the City Manager would provide an update and answer any questions; a technical expert from the Public Works Department was also present to stand alongside the City Manager in the event more specific technical information was needed. To maintain separation between City operations and political involvement, the Mayor held a media scrum following each press conference to respond to any political inquiries but continued to refer regular questions to the City Manager. As per our EOC protocol, the City Manager provided Mayor and Council with all necessary information as it was received and was the sole liaison between the EOC and City Council.

How did you respond to or address the situation?

There was focus throughout the crisis of managing the information that was going out to the public. This was accomplished through the immediate formation of a Call Centre within City Hall, the creation of a dedicated website with current information and answers to Frequently Asked Questions and daily press conferences with the media. As this quickly became a national story, the City Manager set aside time each day to respond to phone messages received from various media outlets across Canada. Dedicated resources were assigned to our social media accounts with over 100,000 visits to our Facebook page within the first week of the crisis. As a result of the daily press conferences and our focus on keeping the public updated as regularly as possible through interactive media efforts, calls received by the call centre (which averaged 150 per day), dropped down to a handful after the first week.

What lessons did you learn from this scenario?

This is a great example of how involving the media and keeping them informed as an emergency situation evolves is absolutely critical. It shows transparency on behalf of the City and also helps to prevent the spread of misinformation which can often lead to panic and make an already difficult situation worse.

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

When challenging situations arise, the media can be your friend if you keep them informed with accurate and consistent information to share with their followers.