

# Improving communication

AMONG

CITIZENS AND  
GOVERNMENT



A report to the citizens of the region between Burbank and Dayton,  
from the Snake River to Milton-Freewater

Summer  
2013



## Community Council Study Committee

The 2012–2013 Study Committee met for 27 weeks (from Sept. 26, 2012, through May 1, 2013). The study management team developed the curriculum, which included 31 speakers and a town hall event that was open for public input. During the course of the study, 24 people served on the study committee. Fifteen participated in developing conclusions and recommendations.

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# Executive summary

This summary provides an overview of the study. You are encouraged to read the report in its entirety to understand the breadth of the topic and the links between each stage of the study process—from findings to conclusions to recommendations.

By definition, communication is an exchange of information. Misunderstandings and inefficiencies may arise when two-way communication is unclear or is absent. Effective communication between public servants and constituents is crucial to the delivery of public services and to the planning and execution of major community projects. Officials make decisions based upon their understanding of citizen needs and desires.

Open information flow between citizens and government removes impediments to action and results in responsiveness, transparency and accountability. Broad program support and citizen participation are key indicators of effective government communication.

The study committee, open to all residents of the region, framed its study with this question: “How can communication and cooperation among citizens and government entities help to ensure that regional and community challenges are identified, understood and addressed?”

Committee members met weekly to:

- ▶ Review the structure and function of local government entities with a focus on communication.
- ▶ Understand how citizen involvement influences government.
- ▶ Explore intra- and intergovernment communication streams and those between government and citizens.
- ▶ Identify effective communication techniques to empower both government and the public.

Because of the number of governmental entities located in Community Council’s target region—between Burbank and Dayton, from the Snake River to Milton-Freewater—the study committee decided to focus on communication at the state and local levels and not to include federal government in this study. Thirty-one speakers representing states, counties, municipalities, ports, schools, special districts, media, community and business organizations, and a think tank offered information for the committee’s consideration. Three presentations showcased effective citizen-government collaborations. One session was held “town hall” style with community members invited to share their experiences communicating with agencies and offering their ideas for improvement. Ten residents participated.

These presentations and additional supplemental resources provided much for discussion and reflection by the study committee.

The committee found that both citizens and government desire effective communication but that structural, cultural and financial barriers often hamper the fulfillment of that desire. The committee also determined that opportunities exist but communication fails when communication methods are ineffective, citizens do not take advantage of those opportunities and government communication is not citizen-friendly.

Government-citizen communication depends upon a shared

knowledge of process and fact. As George Bernard Shaw stated, “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

## STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

The study committee spent 16 weeks gathering information about the topic and 10 additional weeks analyzing the information gathered and developing by consensus recommendations for community action.

While developing recommendations, the study committee determined that a conundrum does exist. While we could call the mayor, email a county commissioner or knock on the door of a port office, there was no efficient or effective method to contact the other part of the government-citizen equation—the citizen.

We acknowledge this as problematic but believe that change within the various government entities to become more user-friendly is an opportunity to make citizen participation a more likely outcome of our recommendations.

It takes time and effort for citizens to gain knowledge of the facts, the processes of government and the language of government. But that will be repaid in a more effective communication of citizens’ needs and desires to those making the decisions—decisions that have very real impacts on the community.



# Conclusions

- ▶ Access to diverse communication options equals more opportunity.



- ▶ As agencies prepare budgets, leaders may choose to reduce expenses associated with communicating with the public, such as electronic and social media and the recording and distribution of public meeting records. This approach to budget balancing is short-sighted. Investing in projects such as televised council meetings could pay dividends over the long term.

- ▶ To gain knowledge of the facts, the processes of government and the language of government takes time and effort and will be repaid in a more effective communication of citizens' needs and desires to those making the decisions—decisions that have very real impacts on the community.



- ▶ Lack of staff training can impede effective communication. Government's transparency and accountability may suffer if staff (at all levels) cannot help constituents efficiently navigate layers of bureaucracy.

- ▶ Resources such as ombudsmen, citizen advocates and grass roots facilitators can be effective liaisons between government and the community, but they are not always available or are not budget priorities.

- ▶ Media plays two roles in citizen-government communication: facilitator of communication and government watchdog. While technology delivers a high volume of national and international news, coverage of state and local government is less than comprehensive. Media are private businesses, and operating margins dictate the number of print and broadcast reporters available to cover government. Local television broadcasts are not available to all area residents. The quality of citizen journalism varies. Accuracy and comprehensiveness suffer as a result.

- ▶ Government officials understand the importance of communication with their constituents and their counterparts in other entities and want to communicate, but many times unclear and poorly articulated practices and procedures make their efforts ineffective.

# Recommendations

- ▶ To improve accessibility for people trying to interact with government, agencies and officials should create opportunities for the public to understand government through a variety of formats: written materials, public education, meetings, etc.

- ▶ All government agencies should inventory their communication resources and move to maximize their use.



- ▶ Government and citizens share responsibility for increasing citizen involvement with government. Each governmental entity should identify and implement effective strategies for communicating with specific constituent groups; offer orientation and training for boards, committees and commissions; and annually hold town hall meetings in three to four community locations other than their dedicated meeting rooms. Citizens should be receptive to these opportunities and attend the meetings of those entities that affect their lives.

- ▶ Every agency should have a general information telephone number and someone responsible for answering calls to that number. All employees should be cross-trained to assist customers.

- ▶ The City of Walla Walla should become a stronger partner with Commitment to Community, either by financial support or staff commitment.

- ▶ Private media companies should publish more local news and accelerate their investigative coverage.



- ▶ A reputable, nonpartisan third party should prepare presentations of city and county budgets, formatted to be informative, instructional, bilingual and easily understandable by the public.

Note: Identifying and using opportunities to encourage citizen participation should be one component of implementing all of the study recommendations.

## A summary of what was heard

This summary represents information presented to the study committee. It is derived from published materials, statements made by resource people and a consensus of the committee's understanding of the opinions of the resource people.

Communication is an exchange of information. Misunderstandings and inefficiencies may arise when two-way communication is unclear or is absent.

Effective communication among public servants and constituents is crucial to the delivery of public services and to the planning and execution of major community projects. Officials make decisions based upon their understanding of citizens' needs and desires.

Open information flow between citizens and government removes impediments to action and results in responsiveness, transparency, and accountability. Broad program support and citizen participation are key indicators of effective government communication.

The purpose of this study was to find ways to improve communication and cooperation among citizens and government entities in order that regional and community challenges are identified, understood, and addressed.

provides a record of each contact and what was said or what actions have been taken.

Acting on behalf of the committee, a study committee member called the Washington state attorney general's office about the use of social media by local governments. He was referred to Tim Ford, whose title was ombudsman for the attorney general's office. The following excerpt is from the committee member's written summary of the telephone conversation. The accuracy of the summary was affirmed by Ford, and the summary was presented to the study committee for inclusion with the body of information gathered during the study:

"When I [committee member] stated the concerns that we were hearing, he [Ford] said he wasn't surprised, because there is a lot of misinformation floating around. He said he thought the best answer he could give me is that the Washington attorney general's office uses Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and many others as a means of communicating. In essence, he said the Public Records Act requires that governments make available written materials generated by the governmental unit for the purpose of conducting its business. So if the attorney general's office sends a message which it wants disseminated to the citizenry via Facebook, which it routinely does, it recognizes that an appropriate copy must be kept. This is viewed as no different, nor more onerous, than any other correspondence that is sent out by the agency. To the extent the message is forwarded to others, or there are comments, those are considered outside the Act for two reasons. First, they are being sent by third parties, not the agency itself.

### GOVERNMENT-TO-CITIZEN COMMUNICATION

The study committee invited government leaders at state, county and local levels to explain the role of communication in their interactions with citizens and other government entities.

#### STATE

Washington state Reps. Maureen Walsh and Terry Nealey, Oregon state Sen. David Nelson, and Washington state Sen. Mike Hewitt (in writing) offered insights into

effective constituent-legislator communication.

Legislators base their decisions on input from citizens in their district. All four of the legislators prefer direct communication with their constituents—telephone, email, texts. Telephone hotlines to legislators' offices are provided. Usually, staff will be the first point of contact. Legislators rely on staff to serve as gatekeepers—to determine the issue's level of importance, to do what they can to assist the constituent and to inform the legislator.

Electronic technology has made legislators' jobs "incredibly more busy, but also more effective." Email

Secondly, Facebook (and apparently the others as well) take the position that the messages are their proprietary property—it is ‘owned’ by Facebook, not the attorney general’s office. In short, the legal office for the state of Washington routinely uses social media in a variety of circumstances.”

A concise personal letter is also effective. One well-written letter signed by many people carries more weight than numerous individually signed form letters. The latter are often ignored because they are identical and because the medium of the form letter has been abused.

Legislators must be good listeners in order to discern and clarify issues. During the legislative session, they meet with constituents, lobbyists, local lobbyists, and representatives from interest or advocacy groups and hear public testimony in committee.

Lobbyists are frequently paid by special interest groups to promote legislation favorable to those groups. Knowledgeable lobbyists make concise, well-prepared presentations covering both sides of an issue and explain what will happen if legislation passes or if it does not pass.

Legislators often view lobbyists as experts in their particular field and use them as resources.

Constituents are most likely to gain access to a legislator with whom they are acquainted or through face-to-face meetings. All legislators try to meet with constituents who visit the capital.

Size of the district affects legislators’ ability to reach everyone. Reps. Nealey and Walsh represent 137,000 people in the region between Dayton and Prosser. Sen. Nelson’s district covers Wallowa to The Dalles and includes 127,000 constituents.

Town hall meetings are held live or via telephone to gather input from the constituency. The Washington legislators conduct many of their town hall meeting calls together and have good participation. Oregon has six communication rooms equipped for videoconferencing with sites such as community colleges and chambers of commerce.

Legislative committees often hold meetings in various parts of the state to informally gather information from local residents. Oregon does not have the funds for these tours.

“The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

—George Bernard Shaw

Lobbyists once sponsored the tours, but lobby funding cannot be used unless the same opportunity is offered to every legislator. During session, staff keeps newspaper editorial boards well informed about legislative news in order that their readership receives accurate information.

Legislators find newsletters, end-of-session reports and websites to be effective tools for letting constituents know what they are trying to accomplish. To avoid actual or perceived misuse of state funds, publication of newsletters is restricted during years legislators are candidates for re-election.

Reps. Walsh and Nealey and Sen. Hewitt frequently communicate with each other, hold joint meetings, share in-district obligations and act collaboratively at the request of stakeholders in the district. Their staff shares office space during the interim, and they work to coordinate mutual availability.

## Pointers for citizens wanting to communicate with government

1

Learn as much as possible about the **issue**.

Learn about the **government process** for handling the issue.

2

3

**Engage** the government entity in a timely and appropriate manner to make sure the comments are heard and considered.

When corresponding with decision-makers, be **brief, relevant, factual and respectful**.

4

**COUNTY**

Walla Walla County Commissioner Greg Tompkins and Umatilla County Commissioner Larry Givens spoke about communication at the county level.

Since 1992, Umatilla County has operated under a “home rule” charter—governance by three elected, full-time, paid commissioners, serving in at-large positions. The sheriff and the district attorney are also elected positions. The district attorney is a state employee. The deputy district attorneys are county employees over whom the commissioners have some authority. The commissioners have budgetary responsibility for law enforcement but no supervisory authority.

Three full-time, paid commissioners are elected to set policy, adopt and implement laws, and carry out the day-to-day operations of Walla Walla County. As they often have duties that take them from the office, Walla Walla County commissioners have considered hiring a county administrator to increase operational efficiency and manage the daily work.

The commissioners have offices in the county seats. To make themselves more accessible to constituents, Umatilla County commissioners have established office hours in Milton-Freewater and Hermiston, a practice that has opened new opportunities for communication with constituents. They also keep the traditional hours in the Pendleton office.

Commissioners are affected to a small extent by the open-meeting rule. Not being able to share information inhibits some of their work. Notice must always be given prior to public meetings. In Oregon, 24-hour notice is sufficient for official commission meetings, meetings with an issue coming before the commission or those at which action will

be taken. Notice for land use hearings varies. Conditional use permit hearings require 48-hour notice, and two-week notice precedes zoning changes. By statute, mailed notices must go to those within 750 feet of the boundary, but Umatilla County practice is to provide notice to those within a mile if those residents will be affected by the change.

The commissioners always provide time on the agenda for public comment. Umatilla County alters meeting times to accommodate constituents, which means occasionally holding evening meetings. Walla Walla commissioners have tried night meetings in various areas of the county. Costs increase because staff must be paid overtime, and constituent attendance has been limited. In both counties, commissioners may choose to hold planning meetings in areas that may be affected.

The counties use a variety of methods to reach their constituents. Umatilla County commissioners have monthly radio shows in Pendleton and Hermiston. Several times a call-in format has been used.

Each county publishes legal, budget and public hearing notices in the county’s newspaper of record. Because many constituents live in the Milton-Freewater *Valley Herald* and *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* circulation areas, Umatilla County may also publish notices in those newspapers.

Both counties have websites. All meetings of both boards of commissioners are recorded. Copies of Umatilla County’s recordings may be requested at the courthouse, and written materials are published online. Meeting agendas showing actions taken and complete meeting audio recordings are posted on the Walla Walla County website, usually the day following the meeting.

Walla Walla County has installed cameras for webcasting meetings, but they are not being used. Because of the expense and because not all county constituents have access to local cable television, the commissioners have not explored using the cable channel. Umatilla County has not discussed broadcasting meetings.

Sometimes the commissioners facilitate discussions between citizens and agencies. For instance, they work with Valley Transit to provide transportation between Burbank and Walla Walla.

Walla Walla County’s emergency management department has implemented a mass notification system using telephone, Twitter and Facebook. Citizens must register to be included. The Walla Walla County Public Health Department uses social networking. Legal counsel has cautioned the commissioners that public record laws apply to social media and may open the county to potential lawsuits.

One commissioner commented that being able to trust an elected official is extremely important. It takes building a relationship for people to believe the official is honestly listening to them. He spends time educating constituents about his job and establishing relationships. He builds trust by listening to constituents’ concerns, by not shutting them out of meetings, by returning calls, by taking calls at home and by being willing to adjust policies to accommodate their needs and desires.

Commissioners find it helpful to discuss issues with people who have relevant information and expertise. Some of the best communication takes place in ordinary settings, such as the coffee shop and the grocery store.



## Communication: An integral part of a bill's process from inception to law

- ▶ The code reviser drafts the bill language.
- ▶ The legislator "drops" the bill in the hopper and hopes the Majority leader chooses to refer it to the pertinent committee.
- ▶ If referred to committee, the bill promoter makes a request to the committee chair to hear the bill, schedules it, testifies and invites others to testify to the committee about the merits of the bill.
- ▶ If the committee votes the bill out of committee and there is a fiscal note on the bill, which means that money in excess of \$50,000 is needed, it will be referred to the fiscal committee, usually the ways and means (budget) committee. The testifying and voting process is repeated.
- ▶ If successful, the bill is referred to the rules committee, which decides whether it will reach the floor for a vote by all members of the House of Representatives or Senate.
- ▶ If passed with a majority, the bill is sent to the opposite chamber (House of Representatives or Senate) and it goes through the same process.

There are many checks and balances along the way. Throughout the process, a bill can be amended by the original bill sponsor, by any member of the legislature with support of a majority of committee members, or by any member when it hits the floor.

Public testimony on bills can be a challenge when the public is unaware that the issues are being discussed or when hearings are rescheduled. If advance notice allows, the public is encouraged to let their representative know how the bill will affect them. If the bill is introduced with a short turn-around, it is helpful to have someone at the capital to alert those interested in commenting. About 5 percent of Oregon's testimony uses videoconferencing.

### MUNICIPAL

Municipal communications were discussed by Rick Newby, College Place; Linda Hall, Milton-Freewater; Randy Hinchliffe, Waitsburg; and Jim Barrow and Nabel Shawa, Walla Walla. Cities' governance structure, budget, population and staff sizes contribute to the differences in their communication methods.

#### ▶ City of Walla Walla

Walla Walla has a council-manager form of government. Walla Walla's seven councilors are elected to serve four-year terms, and they

select one of their peers to serve as mayor. The council sets policy. Decisions require a majority of four. Staff, led by the city manager, implements that policy. The city manager has input into policy decisions, often bringing recommendations to the council.

The council appoints committees to act as liaisons with the community and to advise the council.

Public hearings for the budget are usually held mid-November, and the council adopts the budget at its first meeting in December.

Citizens are busy, so they usually do not contact city hall unless there is a problem. The City of Walla Walla employs a variety of methods to communicate with the public, but still struggles with reaching certain sectors of the population.

- **Website:** The city plans to rebuild its website. Citizens will be invited to serve on the development panel to ensure it will meet the users' needs.
- **Meetings:** The council holds two meetings and at least one workshop each month. Public comment is invited at the beginning of each council meeting and before the council votes on each agenda item.
- **Surveys** enable city officials to measure citizen satisfaction levels and the importance they place on specific issues. In fall 2012, the city tested a standardized city-county survey the state auditor's office is developing with the help of Elway Research. The information gathered will help guide budget development and determine where to focus resources. The survey used a representative sampling of registered voters. (The same sampling may be used for multiple surveys.) Surveys are costly. The way questions are crafted significantly affects the way the questions are answered, and survey methodology must account for many factors, such as landline and mobile telephones, multiple languages, and accessibility of computers and Internet. To mail out surveys, the recipients' addresses must be known.
- **Walkabouts:** Three to four times each year, the mayor, city manager and department heads walk through different areas of town, talking with property

owners, business managers and the “man in the street” to assess citizen satisfaction levels and to gather information about concerns.

- **Town hall meetings** are issue-based community discussions. The city provides a range of reasonable choices for handling issues and seeks citizens’ input.
- **Citizen advisory committees** provide opportunities for citizens to become involved in many facets of the community, such as historic preservation, bicycles, and parks and recreation.
- **Civic club presentations** inform the public about city issues and programs.
- **Newsletter:** Because of budget constraints, the newsletter is currently published in the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin*. Many people are unaware of its publication. Changing to a quarterly newsletter delivered to residences is under consideration.
- **Video:** Channel 17 is dedicated for city use as part of the cable franchise. There is little content and only those with cable are able to access the channel. Cost has prevented using the cable franchise for video presentations of the council meetings.
- **Social media** have not been used by the city, as public disclosure laws require the city to capture a copy for future disclosure every time the site changes. Software to perform this capture has been purchased for the library and parks and recreation. They are preparing to use Facebook and perhaps Twitter. Twitter has been used in emergencies when other communication forms

were not functioning.

- **Face-to-face conversations:** The city has no formal ombudsman, but citizens are welcome to meet with the city manager and council members.
- **Under consideration:** Hiring a **communication officer** to handle internal and external technological communications. Due to budget constraints, this position is not anticipated in the upcoming biennial budget.
- **Customer relations management systems** funnel all calls through one clearinghouse that is responsible for ensuring that questions and problems are addressed.
- Dissatisfied with communications between the government and its citizens, the City of Walla Walla hired a consultant to implement the Baldrige criteria, a holistic, performance-based management system that stresses effective communication. (For more information about Baldrige criteria, see “Best Practices and Resources,” page 31.)
- Several recent issues demonstrate the roles communication plays in city governance.
- **Pioneer Park Aviary:** It is the job of the council and staff to prioritize resources in the best interest of the city. Those decisions are not always popular with residents. (See “Pioneer Park Aviary: A Case Study,” page 22.)
- **Inland Octopus sign:** Citizen opinion was not sought when the city cited the Inland Octopus toy store for being out of compliance with a sign ordinance. That ordinance was originally passed at the request of citizens who wanted

to maintain the atmosphere of downtown.

- **Aquatic center:** Failure of a recent bond election demonstrates the complexity of communication between government and citizens.

#### ► **City of Milton-Freewater**

Milton-Freewater uses a council-manager form of government.

The city manager is responsible for the city’s communications. All incoming emails and phone calls are directed to staff. Email is the main medium citizens use to communicate with the city, and citizen input has increased. The relative anonymity of email seems to empower some citizens to share their opinions. People often expect the staff to respond immediately and become upset when this does not happen.

The city uses newspapers, press releases, council and committee meetings, neighborhood meetings, and one-on-one meetings to communicate with citizens. A pamphlet explaining the meeting process, protocol and etiquette is given to citizens who attend city council meetings. A subscription service is available to those who would like to receive copies of the council meeting documents and agendas. Copies are also available for check-out at the library. A call list of certified translators is available if requested. The city’s website is updated weekly, but the city manager said it is not user-friendly.

At the city council’s request, a Facebook page is being launched. The number of posts from outside the city government will be limited. A Twitter feed will be used to broadcast emergencies. The city manager expressed concern about the amount of staff time these tools will require and how quickly the back-up servers will be at capacity. Purchasing additional servers is a

financial concern.

The city annually recruits interested citizens to serve on standing committees that play an advisory role to staff and city council: planning commission, library board, recreation and parks committee, and budget and finance committee. All committee meetings are advertised and are open to the public.

#### ► **City of College Place**

College Place is a nonchartered city with a mayor-council form of government. The mayor and council are elected. Six to seven staff members support official communications. To ensure accuracy, the city manager limits the number authorized to provide official information. Standing committees advise the administration regarding policy and planning. They are also used as informal forums through which the city and citizens exchange information.

At council meetings, citizens may speak during a comment period before the formal agenda begins, but comments cannot pertain to items on the agenda. Citizens do not have the right to speak during the meeting unless the council opts to open the discussion. The city holds public hearings—some are mandated, some are not.

The city's website is updated weekly and offers information about public projects. All packets for the city council meetings are posted on the site. The website has made it easier for the public to contact the city and to leave feedback.

Input from citizens is increasing, primarily via email and phone calls, but also in the form of letters, cards and notes. College Place staff members reply to all email and written communications in a timely manner and as if they would fall under the Public Records Act.

A monthly newsletter (English-only) is sent out with utility bills. The city also uses press releases and posts notices. Some notices are required by law, but some are posted in a spirit of open communication.

The staff is open to meeting one-on-one with citizens. As a small municipality, College Place can offer citizens personal attention and communication. When the city was conducting the Whitman Street project and installing sidewalks, staff members visited with each household affected by the project.

The city encourages students and organizations focused on children to attend council meetings. Council members and staff accept invitations to visit the schools to discuss how city government functions.

Communication plans for the future include installing a reader board on College Avenue; televising council meetings (which will require the city to upgrade its technology) and posting the video on the website; holding informal meetings of the public, city staff and council members; and gathering citizen input through the website's public survey feature.

The council is not interested in using social media, so the staff has not pursued it. The city manager anticipates that the city will revisit this topic in the next few years.

#### ► **City of Waitsburg**

The City of Waitsburg is a territorial chartered city—the last in the state and perhaps the nation. It is governed by its own set of rules and is exempted from some state laws. Elections for mayor and all council members are held every April, and it is possible that the entire elected government could be replaced annually.

The council has no formal processes and no time limit for public

meetings. The council members, the city administrator, the city attorney and one citizen regularly attend the meetings.

All work is conducted by the two-person city staff or by contractor. The staff has an open-door policy, but citizens frequently prefer to investigate issues in a social setting, often starting at the hardware store.

The standing committees are historical in nature. The planning committee only meets when it has business, typically no more than three to four times a year. The planning committee is designated to hear citizen appeals. After appealing to the committee, citizens can take their issue to the council.

Taxes paid to the city stay in the city to fund its departments and programs. There are no taxing districts to help pay for specific items like flood control and summer recreational programs.

The city uses its website (updated monthly), weekly paper and mailings to communicate with citizens. At the mayor's discretion, a newsletter may be published. The city sends letters to all affected by public works projects.

## **SCHOOL BOARDS**

Max Carrera, Walla Walla, and Doug Case, College Place, spoke about the role of communication in local school districts.

By law, the primary responsibilities of school boards are budget, policy and supervision of the superintendent. Board members are elected volunteers and do not manage day-to-day operations. Within the College Place school system, the proper protocol for addressing issues is to communicate with the building administrator first. If the results are not satisfactory, the issue should then be discussed with the superintendent. Going directly to the board

disregards the process.

School board meetings are the monthly business meetings for the school district. Meeting attendance is low unless controversial issues are on the agenda. College Place agendas include approval of the minutes from the previous meeting, approval of the consent agenda (such as bills), presentations (noncontroversial public comments, PTA and club reports, and so forth) and action items. The board has the ability to add to the agenda at the meeting, but board members try not to do so. There are very few executive sessions (held solely to discuss personnel matters, buying or selling property, and contract language). All decision making is done in public, though board members may have discussions outside of the boardroom in groups smaller than a quorum.

College Place meeting agendas are publicized on the website and in the public notice section of the newspaper. The newspaper often chooses to list only the action items on the agenda. Members of the public can view a copy of the board packet at the district office. Walla Walla School District is considering emailing agendas.

Part of a board member's job is to stay informed on issues, and most of this takes place outside of board meetings. Directors frequently receive phone calls at home and work, and people speak with them about concerns when they are out in the community. Other communication with the public is by email, newsletter, radio, surveys, public presentations and social media. All communication with the school district is public information, and the district must fulfill to the best of its ability any information request it receives.

Walla Walla Public Schools

## ● College Place School District used the following communication campaign while promoting the recent school bond:

- ▶ The demographics of the College Place school district include city, country, Hispanic, Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist and retiree populations. Each group has a unique communication system. When seeking support for the bond, the school board sought leaders in each group and requested an opportunity to speak to their group. In the course of the campaign, they made 12 to 15 presentations to community groups.
- ▶ Four public presentations were made on school properties.
- ▶ Presentation times were mixed in order to provide more opportunities for the public to attend.
- ▶ A Facebook page was established.
- ▶ A texting system was established. People voluntarily provided their cell phone numbers because they wanted to be informed. This mode worked well, according to comments the district received.
- ▶ Door-to-door visits were conducted.
- ▶ Newspaper ads were timed specifically and placed in specific places in the paper.
- ▶ Letters to the editor were published.
- ▶ School district representatives engaged the city manager and city council with public presentations and one-on-one meetings.
- ▶ The board decided not to try to convince people. Instead, they concentrated on offering all the facts.
- ▶ The bond campaign was led by all the board members and several community members. The superintendent was not required to lead the bond drive.

conducted a survey as part of the high school bond campaign. It was published on the district website and hard copies were available at the schools. Most responses were received electronically.

When seeking bonds, the Walla Walla school board meets with the public, staff and business community. To determine the disposition of excess bond funds, the board held two publicized workshops. Most feedback received was in support of retaining excess funds and using them for a future project. Those opposed to using the funds were vocal after the

decision was made, including postings on Facebook.

Citizens influence the school board's decision making. For example: On the day the Walla Walla School Board was to decide whether to partner with the Lincoln Health Center to start a clinic at Blue Ridge Elementary School, the superintendent and board members received calls from Family Medical Center personnel, who expressed concerns that the clinic might compete with their services. The center's administrator spoke at the board meeting and at a prevote work

session related to the issue. The vote was delayed until the superintendent of schools could gather information from the Family Medical Center and other medical providers.

A recent survey showed that people learn about Walla Walla school district issues from teachers or staff, publications, website, newspapers, radio, social media, and family members who work in the district. Walla Walla's changing demographics are creating communication challenges—36 percent of the school population does not speak English, and some families do not have Internet or cell phones. A new diversity committee is planning creative ways to communicate with the Spanish-speaking population; for instance, through local businesses, such as restaurants.

College Place school district publishes two newsletters each year and sends them to everyone who receives mail. These mailings have resulted in very positive feedback. An electronic version has been added, but the print version continues to be published.

## PORTS

Community Council's target region contains three port districts. Administrators Jennie Dickinson, Port of Columbia; Kim Puzey, Port of Umatilla, and Jim Kuntz, Port of Walla Walla, discussed their ports' communication with citizens and other government agencies.

Ports are governed by an elected board of commissioners. The Ports of Columbia and Walla Walla each have three commissioners, and the Port of Umatilla has five. Their functions are policymaking, long-term planning and financial overview. Leases, contracts and public requests are directed to the commissioners.

Each port district also has paid staff to implement plans, follow

policies, and manage staff and the day-to-day decisions and activities of the port. Staff communicates directly with businesses, county commissioners and city leaders.

Port of Umatilla's executive director Kim Puzey is hired on a one-year revolving contract and is the only staff. He contracts with others for services.

The Port of Walla Walla holds one monthly meeting in the afternoon and one in the evening. Each begins with a public comment period, and public input is sought prior to the commission taking action on published agenda items. Agendas, written minutes and recorded minutes are posted on the port's website. Meetings are occasionally held in Burbank and in Waitsburg in an effort to increase public participation.

The Port of Walla Walla's general outreach efforts include an annual community bus tour, county fair booth, presentations to service clubs, radio interviews, annual newsletter (distributed as a supplement to the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* and *Waitsburg Times*, direct-mailed to rural communities within Walla Walla County, and posted on the Port's website) and *Walla Walla Trends* e-newsletter.

The Port of Columbia does not record its meetings. Communication tools include Facebook, postcards, email, electronic and printed newsletters, and telephone. The port has offered a lecture series and often holds public information meetings and ribbon cuttings for large projects.

One-on-one conversations with the port commissioners are the most effective way to communicate.

Attendance at port meetings is not very high, unless there is a complaint. One administrator said that uninformed citizens tend to be the most critical of port action. Often

when they learn the extent of due diligence conducted by the commissioners and staff, they agree with decisions that have been made.

Columbia County's Blue Mountain Station uses an executive committee to help guide the project and to help develop recommendations for the port's board of commissioners. The committee includes representatives of the city of Dayton, Columbia County, Dayton Chamber of Commerce, the agriculture industry and private citizens. Minutes are kept, but the meetings are informal.

Citizen involvement is often very difficult to achieve. Seeking participation for updating the comprehensive plans of the ports of Columbia and Walla Walla are good examples. The Port of Columbia sent invitations, letters and emails to encourage citizens and other local governments to participate. Only one private business person participated in the process. The Port of Walla Walla sent surveys to all rural communities in the county. Sixty-eight people responded. The plan is on their website.

One administrator commented that because the ports are special purpose districts, most citizens are generally not interested in their activities. Another indicated that the lack of interest or concern about port activities may reflect general satisfaction and lack of public involvement reflects the fact that the public is pursuing other interests.

Agencies are required to give public notice. Published notices in the newspaper are ineffective because the public does not read them. Contractors, however, do read the notices.

Individuals can influence port actions. For example, an Audubon Society member asked for a three-week delay in the construction of

the \$149 million prison in Umatilla to accommodate a nesting bird. The schedule was altered to accommodate the request.

One administrator noted a difference in the way the public and private sectors are perceived and treated, citing a lack of respect for government employees.

### WALLA WALLA WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PARTNERSHIP

The Walla Walla Watershed Management Partnership (WWWMP) is a unique entity through which stakeholders with competing interests, particularly fish and agriculture, work together to locally manage water resources. Its goal is to balance benefits for people, farms and fish by allowing greater flexibility and innovation in exercising water rights.

The Walla Walla watershed is identified as the ridgetop-to-ridgetop area of the crest that brings water from the origin of the Walla Walla River in Oregon to the Columbia River. The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation consider it to be territory ceded in the 1855 treaty, and 3,500 water rights are documented in this area.

Diversion for irrigation caused rivers and streams to dry up. Bull-nosed trout and steelhead were being placed on the endangered species list, and the tribes were reintroducing salmon. The crisis of conflicting needs led to the 2001–2007 watershed plan that brought stakeholders together to plan for water use. The 2007 Washington state Department of Ecology instream flow rule halted new water uses, protecting existing water right holders and effectively giving a water right to fish. The Washington state Department of Ecology provided guidelines to follow when water was short.

That same year, a local group of

## ● Opportunities and challenges for effective communication among citizens and government

- ▶ Evaluate the importance of communication and outreach; prioritize outreach if it is a valued activity.
- ▶ Expand opportunities for social connections to build trust and other skills or habits for cooperating.
- ▶ Capitalize on controversy as a means to generate interest or involvement, but do not miss opportunities to engage on regular issues also. Move beyond the narrow concept that government should provide customer service when it's designed to provide citizen service. Citizens should take a broader view of the process and engagement channels so they understand what is involved with their request. Communication must be two-way.

—Cathy Schaeffer, executive director, Walla Walla Watershed Management Partnership

stakeholders—state, tribes and water users—worked with the Ruckelshaus Consensus Center to explore governance options and tools for management. Members of the working group and other community leaders met with state legislators as part of this process.

In 2009, RCW 90.92 was shepherded through the state legislature by the late Senator Bill Grant. A unique 10-year pilot program won unanimous approval, and the Washington state Department of Ecology delegated its authority to the local group. WWWWMP works closely with stakeholders in Oregon who operate under different rules.

The nine-member committee includes an official of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, a Columbia County commissioner, a Walla Walla County commissioner, a Walla Walla city council member and a Gardena Farms Irrigation District #13 board member. The Columbia and Walla Walla County conservation districts jointly appoint one representative. These six members then appoint one

water right holder, one environmental interest representative and one at-large citizen position. The tribes often serve as the voice of the fish, but since WWWWMP has been operating, board members often speak for each other's interests.

Two experienced policy and technical advisory groups work with WWWWMP. The policy advisory group is broad-based and diverse. Its 27 members meet four to six times each year to work on strategic planning and develop reports. A nine-member water resources advisory group works on technical issues in the basin with state agency support and participation. Members include irrigators, fisheries and hydrologists.

As a local public agency, WWWWMP is subject to open public meeting and freedom of information regulations. The monthly board meeting at Walla Walla Community College is usually attended by 17 to 19 people. Committees held 24 meetings in 2012. Agendas and minutes are available for all. Decision making is by majority, but the group also strives for consensus.

In keeping with its “Flow from Flexibility” goal, WWWWMP has developed some unique tools. For example, a system for “water banking” has been devised so that water rights holders can retain their rights without having to use all of the water to which they are entitled.

Since this is a pilot project, WWWWMP has a strategic plan, fully documents all activities and makes an annual progress report. A Communication and Outreach Plan targeting multiple audiences (internal users, water users who are potential participants, the community at large, and organizations outside of the basin) includes 12 goals for an 18-month period. A survey of basin partners—agencies, tribes, citizens, and water rights holders—brought 80 responses.

The key principals behind WWWWMP are considered to be the “Walla Walla Way”:

- ▶ Involved citizens embracing a collaborative approach to problem-solving on various levels of participation. Strong community leaders sharing a common agenda.
- ▶ Commitment to cooperation: fish and farms.
- ▶ Proactive approach: on-the-ground success with mutually reinforcing activities creates momentum.
- ▶ Backbone support and communications: partnership.

### INTRA-AGENCY COMMUNICATION

Umatilla County has an internal two-way communication system that effectively relays information among commissioners and departments. Commissioners and senior managers meet twice monthly. The commissioners convey information from constituents and their liaison

activities with other agencies. The managers provide departmental updates. Following these meetings, the managers hold staff meetings to pass along the information. Memos are used between meetings to communicate urgent information.

City of Walla Walla staff is evaluating how best to use email, memos, and staff meetings.

### INTERGOVERNMENTAL COMMUNICATION

Communication enables inter-government cooperation and action. Meetings may be formal or informal and attendees vary, depending upon the purpose of the gathering.

Meetings between entities may be required for one governing body to carry out responsibilities set by the state. For example, the Walla Walla County Commission is a catch-all for county issues. Commissioners have budgetary responsibilities, but no management authority for those departments headed by other elected county officials. Commissioners work with entities that have publicly elected boards, such as fire and irrigation districts. They make appointments to other boards, such as the Walla Walla Housing Authority. As Walla Walla County’s legislative authority and pursuant to state statute, the county commission appoints the Rural Library District Board of Trustees; once appointed, the library board is autonomous and has its own taxing and other authorities.

The ports of Walla Walla and Umatilla and others work together to keep rivers open. The Port of Walla Walla is an active participant in the Walla Walla Commercial Air Service Coalition. The port also leads several coalitions that lobby for state or federal support. Projects include developing U.S. Highway 12, retaining the Washington State

Penitentiary and a \$4 million renovation of airport ramps. For the latter, requesting feedback in informal pilot listening sessions was effective. The port’s economic development advisory committee meetings (six times each year) inform the public about port activities and provide updated demographics and trends. Between 50 and 60 members of the business community attend these meetings.

Walla Walla city and county governments overlap in many ways (constituencies, geographic areas and services). Each has its own government structure and taxing powers. The elected officials and city manager meet each month for an informal exchange of information about issues, for instance, rural and city libraries. They may also hold formal joint meetings. Staffs of both entities also meet. The Walla Walla Joint Community Development Agency, a planning and development office instituted by intergovernmental action between the City of Walla Walla and Walla Walla County, is an example of a collaborative effort.

A county commissioner, a port commissioner, city councilors from Walla Walla and College Place, the City of Walla Walla’s manager, and the City of College Place administrator meet together to coordinate and communicate each agency’s activities.

A monthly Executive Alliance meeting includes leaders of the Walla Walla and College Place School Districts, Port of Walla Walla, Whitman College, Walla Walla University, Walla Walla Community College, cities of Walla Walla and College Place, Walla Walla County, Walla Walla Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Walla Walla Veterans’ Administration, the Washington State Penitentiary, and the Army Corps of Engineers.

The cities of College Place and Walla Walla meet informally at least six times a year.

College Place city manager and staff sit on several cross-agency committees and boards, including the Regional Transportation Planning Organization and the County Emergency Management Board.

Because the area that encompasses the city and urban growth boundaries of Milton-Freewater, Walla Walla, and College Place has exceeded the population requirement of 55,000, a new Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) has been designated to plan for use of transportation funds and will begin meeting in 2013.

Umatilla County and Walla Walla County Commissioners have recently held two joint meetings. Umatilla County commissioners would like to see joint meetings with Walla Walla, Columbia and Benton counties, with which Umatilla County shares borders and issues.

Most of Umatilla County's road department budget is federal transportation funding and payment in lieu of taxes on federal land in the county. In the 1970s, Umatilla County and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) formally agreed that the county would maintain the reservation roads in return for CTUIR's federal road funds. (It is often challenging to explain to constituents why roads on the reservation are being maintained while roads in other parts of the county are not.) Umatilla County works closely with CTUIR on other issues, such as timber, water and wildlife.

Walla Walla University is a property tax-exempt institution, yet it requires services. The City of College Place and Walla Walla University administrators partner on improvement projects. Administrators meet

regularly, and the city encourages at least one university employee to serve on the city planning commission.

Walla Walla and College Place school boards meet together annually. Both districts belong to the Washington State School Directors' Association, which holds an annual meeting, offers training and provides a forum for discussing common challenges. Directors also have regional meetings quarterly. Superintendents of schools in the Tri-Cities, Walla Walla and Columbia counties, as well as Pomeroy, meet monthly.

Leaders of various Columbia County agencies (port, city, county private business leaders, etc.) meet bimonthly to share information. A regional economic development council also meets bimonthly for planning. The port manager meets with counterparts in Walla Walla County, mostly through committee meetings and presentations. The port is a member of the Washington Public Ports Association and exchanges information with peers in that venue.

Walla Walla County has designated the Port of Walla Walla as the entity responsible for economic development for the county. The port serves as the Associate Development Organization to work with the state Department of Commerce. The Port of Columbia is part of the Southeast Washington Economic Development Association, and Umatilla County belongs to the Greater Eastern Oregon Development Council.

For strategic planning, the Port of Umatilla partners with the cities of Milton-Freewater, Pendleton, Pilot Rock, Hermiston and Umatilla.

During his tenure, the Port of Umatilla's executive director has developed personal relationships with legislators. He draws heavily upon those relationships to accomplish his

goals. For example, he and Washington's U.S. Sen. Patty Murray and a Washington crane business owner worked together to obtain a new crane for the port. He said his successor will need to be able to similarly bring people together on projects.

## ASSOCIATIONS

Cities, counties, ports and schools all have regional, state or national associations. These groups offer trainings and opportunities to network with peers. They also address common issues such as the public records act and unfunded mandates. Associations work directly with legislators and lobby for association members. Participation with these and other organizations helps to prevent agencies from missing opportunities for their constituencies.

## Suggested by speakers

- ▶ Strengthen civics courses to emphasize the importance of our form of government.  
—Washington state Rep. Terry Nealey

- ▶ Members of the Grandmothers' Roundtable take turns attending meetings and reporting to the rest of their group. They have gained knowledge of the many responsibilities of a county commissioner, as well as of the issues. This "network" approach is a model for others in the community.

—Walla Walla County Commissioner Greg Tompkins

- ▶ The Boise police department is a model for police using social media. They use Nixle software and have a dedicated, full-time staff position focused on posting and responding to public requests for information.

—Walla Walla County Sheriff John Turner



## NONGOVERNMENTAL COMMUNICATION RESOURCES

### GRANDMOTHERS' ROUNDTABLE

The motto of Grandmothers' Roundtable is "Agree to disagree agreeably." Members, generally numbering 10 to 15, are self-selected and represent many sectors of the local community.

The goal of Grandmothers' Roundtable is to help the community learn about topics that affect their lives. The group hosts public forums and writes columns for the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin*.

Members meet weekly for two hours. Minutes of each meeting are archived. The group may spend as long as a year collecting information on a topic before hosting a forum. They invite speakers, including government agency representatives and elected officials, to present at their meetings. They often find that these presenters have never talked with each other and that networking in the community is not taking place. Several of the speakers are selected to present at a public forum hosted by the Grandmothers' Roundtable. Approximately 100 people attend the forums.

Members also attend community meetings, such as city council and county commission, and report to the rest of the group.

The 10-year success of Grandmothers' Roundtable rests upon balanced and fair discussions, taking a broad perspective on topics, mutual respect, an "educate not advocate" philosophy, having fun, not being owned or directed by any one group or business, and members having time to invest.

### WALLA WALLA COUNTY SHERIFF'S ROUNDTABLE

Sheriffs make decisions that affect lives. Many of those decisions are

dictated by the law and may not be influenced by citizen input. Nonetheless, the Walla Walla County sheriff believes that those decisions should be informed by an understanding of the needs of the community.

Sheriff's Roundtable meetings are held quarterly in four areas of the county—Waitsburg/Dixie/Prescott (with the meeting location rotating between Waitsburg and Prescott), Touchet/Gardena/Lowden (held in Touchet), Wallula/Burbank (held in Burbank) and Walla Walla/College Place (held in Walla Walla).

Meetings are scheduled and published a year in advance at [www.co.walla-walla.wa.us/departments/she/SheriffRoundtables.shtml](http://www.co.walla-walla.wa.us/departments/she/SheriffRoundtables.shtml). Each meeting is scheduled to last for an hour, though they often run longer. The brief agenda includes a crime prevention tip, but most of the time is spent visiting and answering questions with as much openness as confidentiality laws allow. The sheriff also reports on positive happenings in his department. No minutes are taken.

When the roundtables started, attendance was high; it now fluctuates. Someone new attends almost every meeting. Lower attendance may indicate that the sheriff's office is doing its job and that people are satisfied and focused elsewhere.

The sheriff's department is making other outreach efforts:

- ▶ The sheriff is reaching out to the Hispanic population and attends other community meetings when invited.
- ▶ The sheriff communicates via email or phone and in person and would like to see more coverage of the sheriff's department in the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin*.
- ▶ The department has considered using Nixle, a website through

which citizens request updates from their public safety agencies. However, current staffing levels are insufficient to maintain the information in a professional and competent manner.

- ▶ The Sheriff's Department is increasing its volunteer base. The Sheriff's Foundation is a separate 501(c)(3) organization that educates the public about the work of the department and raises funds for projects such as a canine unit.

### WALLA WALLA VALLEY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The Walla Walla Valley Chamber of Commerce was founded 138 years ago with the purpose of attracting immigrants to the area to fill jobs. It is a private, member organization with 600 to 800 members, mostly businesses with 10 or fewer employees. The chamber is a 501(c)(6) organization and considers itself to be the voice of business. The chamber is not currently a member of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Four years ago, the chamber created a staff position dedicated to public policy to provide a voice in the state legislature and local government. The vice president of public policy and business development fills four key roles: ombudsman (introduces members to resource people who can assist with overcoming governmental barriers), voice of the business community, advocate for issues important to the business community and educator (stays informed about local, state and national issues and informs members).

The chamber has not experienced problems communicating with or directly contacting elected officials at the local, state or national levels. Legislators have been very open and communicative.

Every other week during the state legislative session, the chamber facilitates Legislative 411 calls between the three Walla Walla County legislators and all members who wish to attend. These calls are similar to the Legislative Hotline sessions the chamber used to hold, but without discussion groups afterward. The chamber also hosts an annual legislative luncheon at which most elected officials are invited to present an update and guests are free to ask questions. Occasionally, an elected official will approach the chamber about hosting a roundtable discussion in order to seek input on a topic. The chamber also hosts one or two candidate debates in an election season. These are open to the public.

The chamber's six- to seven-member public policy committee votes to endorse certain issues; for example, school district bonds. The chamber does not take sides or act on behalf of individuals or businesses. If an individual member's issue has a larger context or impact, the chamber will work on that issue at the local and state level.

Through the Hispanic Business Roundtable, the chamber is helping the Hispanic business community to know more about interacting with government.

To communicate with members about public policy issues, the chamber has a monthly newsletter, sends out email blasts and has a Twitter account. Members are encouraged to register for automatic updates on

various pieces of legislation or on certain topics. This option is available on the state legislature and other governmental websites.

### THE WASHINGTON POLICY CENTER

The Washington Policy Center (WPC) is a nonprofit, non-partisan organization that researches and analyzes policy throughout Washington. The think tank has been operating since the 1980s. Governed by a board of directors, it operates six centers and has 17 staff members. Financial support is raised through dues, events, and research. Its website, [www.washingtonvotes.org](http://www.washingtonvotes.org), offers plain language explanations of every bill. (3,700 were introduced in the last biennium.) The website also tracks legislative issues.

In 2009, a full-time presence was established in Eastern Washington. A 40-member Eastern Washington advisory board meets quarterly in different communities. Staff is mobile, communicating through large and small events and community presentations. Chris Cargill, WPC's Eastern Washington director, said one of his key roles is reminding the statewide organization that issues affect eastern and western Washington differently.

As a 501(c)(3) organization, WPC cannot be involved in politics, endorse candidates, contribute money to campaigns or work on campaigns. Their role is research, analysis and education of the public about issues at state and local levels. They also hold the government accountable by checking to see whether promises are kept. Cargill said WPC is "in the business of ideas" and operates from an ideological point of view.

WPC guards against special interest influence on its analysis



of issues. Research and fundraising are kept separate. Funders do not decide what is studied or influence the analysis. Citizens may suggest ideas, but staff selects which to study. They are most likely to research topics appearing before voters or the legislature. Issues that are studied must be related to WPC's mission, "improving lives through market solutions." WPC does not address social issues such as abortion, gay marriage or gun control.

WPC can support (or not support) specific issues by publishing their research and analysis through television, radio, newspaper and online media and by making presentations to local groups. If the issue is scheduled to be voted on by a legislative body, the white paper is published with the disclaimer that it is not intended to hinder or promote legislative action.

WPC may present to lawmakers (in a meeting or published policy note) ideas that emerge as a result of research and analysis. They must be invited to testify (present an analysis of a bill) before a legislative committee. WPC staff testified about 30 times in the last legislative session.

If legislators ask for an analysis of the language in a bill, WPC will suggest ways to strengthen wording and increase transparency.

In the last legislative session, WPC research and analysis materials were used to support legislators' arguments on both sides of the aisle. Cargill said, "When both sides are quoting you, that's how you know you're making a difference."

"When both sides are quoting you, that's how you know you are making a difference."

—Chris Cargill, Eastern Washington director, Washington Policy Center

## CITIZEN-TO-GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

One study session was dedicated to learning from citizens about their experience communicating with the government on all levels and about communication modes that work or do not work. This “town hall” meeting was publicized through the media, through local chambers of commerce and Community Council’s website and mailing list. Ten non-committee members attended, and one person submitted information in writing. Both citizens and government officials attended. This section reflects participants’ comments.

### ACCESSIBILITY TO OFFICIALS: NATIONAL, STATE, LOCAL LEVELS

Local officials are more likely to be accessible, responsive and engaged

with specific issues than those at state and national levels. Participants attributed this to the fact that local officials are more likely to be acquainted with and feel accountable to their constituents and that they have fewer constituents to whom they must answer.

### COMMUNICATION MODES

#### ▶ Letters and emails

On the national level, constituents often send emails or form letters related to specific issues. Trade organizations or other lobby groups may craft these messages for citizens to send to their legislators. Constituents receive responses that are prompt and well articulated, but frequently are not specific and contain no commitments.

#### ▶ Community meetings

Elected officials on state and local levels hold open houses, but their responses to questions at those

public events are often not specific.

Officials may hold open community meetings around a specific issue, such as Milton-Freewater’s Feb. 8, 2013, community security discussion among citizens, a state representative, the county sheriff, the district attorney, the city police chief and a court official.

#### ▶ One-on-one meetings

State officials make time to meet with constituents who visit the state capital while the legislature is in session. Constituents are likely to get direct answers in these sessions.

Because council and commission meetings are often time-limited, it is usually most effective to initially discuss issues with an official away from the formal meeting.

#### ▶ Court system

Citizens with access to lawyers and adequate funding may choose to communicate their disagreement with agencies through lawsuits.

## Observations made by government speakers

Each of the following observations was made by more than one government resource speaker.

- ▶ One-to-one is the preferred mode of communication. Several of the elected officials echoed state Sen. Mike Hewitt’s comment that “in a community such as ours, it seems from time to time as though I am a walking ‘town hall’ forum, where citizens and neighbors you see in the course of daily life are able (invited) to stop you and discuss policy.”
- ▶ Citizens do not take advantage of opportunities for communicating with government, unless they have a specific concern. Alasdair Stewart, of the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin*, has found that most government meetings are sparsely attended by citizens. He is sometimes shocked that people do not show up for certain meetings or issues.
- ▶ Many agencies appoint committees and boards, but volunteers are few.
- ▶ An entity’s communication options are limited by staff, budget and legal restrictions. For example, to comply with the open meeting law, public notice must be given any time a majority of the governing body gathers to discuss business. If two of three county commissioners or four of seven city council members are present at any gathering, it may be considered a public meeting.
- ▶ Citizens and government communicate in a variety of ways, but often some people are not satisfied with the results.
- ▶ Communication requires an understanding of issues and the decision-making process, among other things.
- ▶ The number of meetings and the inclusion of departmental reports are viewed as necessary for conducting business and for planning.
- ▶ Each entity has its own protocols. Port speakers suggested that citizens should speak to the elected officials, not staff, for best results. The reverse is true for school districts—speak to administration and then to the board.
- ▶ Communication should be honest and open so that there are no surprises or cover-ups.
- ▶ Many government agencies do not use social media.
- ▶ The frequency with which an issue is brought up and the number of complaints is often taken by officials as an indication of the importance of an issue.
- ▶ Often, the complaints are voiced after the decision has been made.

## EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE CITIZEN-GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

Government agencies identify ways to consolidate infrastructure for economy of scale and to improve communication. Examples: the Internal Revenue Service maintains all records online, and pertinent responses to questions about accounts are usually received within two to three days. State and federal income tax filings are piggy-backed. The Social Security website enables citizens to access multiple agencies from one portal. Similarly, Secure Access Washington has consolidated access to the departments of Revenue, Labor and Industry, and Employment Security.

In local government, officials (city councilors, county commissioners, school board members, etc.) are elected specifically to represent their constituency. One said their role is to serve as ombudsmen for their agencies.

Taking the time to learn about the agency and the regulations to which it must adhere helps citizens to develop reasonable expectations related to their issue and to access correct resources.

## BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE CITIZEN-GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

Government representatives sometimes do not follow up on commitments to citizens.

Sometimes constituents do not feel heard when they do not receive the answer they *want*.

Some citizens are hesitant to engage government agencies and officials because they assume their issue will be met with ambivalence or that they will “get the run-around.” Government representatives’ lack of respectful communication causes citizens to feel that their opinion does not matter and that attempting to communicate is not worth their time or effort.

Perceptions of others and emotions (desire for retribution and feeling like a victim were cited at the study session) create barriers to communication.

Without a clearly defined process, citizens may not know how to access the resources they need or how to appeal decisions with which they disagree. Government agencies may not clearly define criteria in their policies or may change policy or practice without informing affected constituents, such as changing the status of a road.

Some citizens cannot access or do not wish to use the Internet.

Citizens seeking help may become discouraged when referred to personnel who do not have decision-making authority. Frontline staff may misdirect citizens seeking help with specific issues. Several reasons were suggested: unclear process, lack of staff training about other departments, and staff ambivalence.

Officials at state and national levels have staff members who serve as “gatekeepers.” Citizens’ concerns may not reach the official, or citizens may hold that perception.

Some people will discuss concerns with their friends, but they will not discuss them with government officials.

Having partial information leads to speculation.

Officials’ desire to maintain chain of command does not allow for mid-chain breakdowns (the human factor).

## ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

### COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY

Commitment to Community (C2C) is a Walla Walla organization that builds a stronger community by strengthening neighborhoods. They currently work in the Blue Ridge Elementary, Washington Park and Edith-Carrie neighborhoods. Previously, they worked in the Jefferson Park neighborhood, but some residents moved and the neighborhood energy to make change waned. C2C is on call should neighbors there wish to take action again.

C2C has six employees. Residents and partners volunteer. C2C is unique in this area, but similar styles of engagement are being used by churches and groups in College Place and Milton-Freewater. C2C staff goes door-to-door in neighborhoods to get to know everyone. They focus on building relationships between neighbors and between residents and government entities and other organizations. Word of mouth is the most effective way to communicate. Knowing who in the neighborhood shares information in social circles is necessary.

Their activities are seasonally determined and depend on the willingness of residents to do the work. Past projects and activities have included

## ● Suggestions made by citizen participants

1. Expand Secure Access Washington to include access to city and county departments.
2. To create transparency, assign a tracking number to each citizen-government issue. Citizens could use the number to follow their issue through the system.
3. Establish clear appeals processes.
4. Success requires persistence. If you do not find the answer you need, keep looking for the person who has that answer.

garbage cleanup, graffiti cleanup and after-school programs in Washington Park in partnership with various city and nonprofit organizations. They also have built a community park and a garden in the Edith-Carrie neighborhood.

C2C educates residents about ways to communicate with government. Some residents feel it is the government's responsibility to identify and handle issues. They do not realize that the government may have limited resources to do so. Some translation is needed when residents want to communicate with government employees. Residents sometimes do not feel comfortable contacting the government because they believe their concern or question will be ignored. Some ask C2C staff to contact the city on their behalf.

When the City of Walla Walla renovated the infrastructure in Edith-Carrie as part of the infrastructure repair and replacement program, the city hired C2C to serve as liaison. During the design phase, residents worked with the city and subcontractors to implement their vision for their neighborhood. The city added improved street lighting and sidewalks to the original scope of the project after hearing residents' safety concerns at public meetings.

Comfort levels are the biggest obstacle to communication—for residents as well as for government employees and officials. C2C has found that the most effective way for government representatives to communicate is to go to a neighborhood and be more involved there; this is where residents are comfortable and will be most receptive to information.

Taking time to build confidence in residents while building relationships between neighbors and people who work for the city has been vital

to successful projects. Prior to major city-led projects, C2C has encouraged city staff to meet with residents to gather their input on the proposed project.

In one neighborhood, two streetlights were broken and the sides of the road had deteriorated. A C2C staff person invited the government employee who would be able to do something about the issue to meet with the residents at the site. The residents felt more comfortable requesting action once they realized the city cared enough to send a representative to their neighborhood. Within a month, the lights and street were fixed.

Another example is the wrap-up activities associated with the Edith-Carrie neighborhood renovation. An informal ribbon-cutting ceremony was held in the neighborhood with residents, city officials and employees, contractors, architects, and C2C staff in attendance. Many neighbors attended and the city representatives enjoyed speaking with them and learning more about the neighborhood. There was also a formal hearing at city hall with presenters speaking into a microphone, being recorded and becoming part of the official record. No neighbors attended. C2C staff believes that had such a hearing been held at Edith-Carrie, neighbors would have participated.

Relationship-building is time consuming, but effective. That time and effort is rarely considered in budgets.

The keys to getting neighbors to attend meetings and provide input are location, time, structure of the meeting and set-up of the meeting space. Who is sharing information and who is supposed to listen is also important. Neighborhood turnout is larger when meetings are held at the place of concern. This effectively



Craig Keister is one of a group of citizens who stepped forward over the last two years to save Pioneer Park Aviary. Turn the page to read an analysis of this example of citizen-government interaction.

demonstrates the amount of concern for an issue and can also help spur movement on issues that involve bureaucracy.

Many residents do not trust the police and fear retribution by their neighbors, so C2C has organized positive meetings with city staff, the police and influential neighbors.

The staff noted that little to no outreach to neighborhoods where C2C works was done prior to the vote on the Walla Walla High School and aquatic center bonds. They suggested that the reasons for low voter turnout in the neighborhoods were disenfranchisement (use of a mail-in ballot, lack of reminders to vote, literacy levels) and belief their votes do not count.



## Friends of Pioneer Park AVIARY™

The decision, based on service rankings, to cut the aviary operation by \$55,000 caused public outcry, so the Walla Walla Parks and Recreation Department gathered contact information for those interested in the issue and met with them.

### PIONEER PARK AVIARY: A CASE STUDY

The City of Walla Walla's Pioneer Park Aviary project demonstrates communication challenges and successes among citizens and government—in this case, Tim McCarty, deputy city manager; Jim Dumont, Parks and Recreation director; and Craig Keister, chairman of the Friends of Pioneer Park Aviary.

Pioneer Park Aviary is one of Walla Walla's attractions. The aviary holds about 180 birds. It is a game farm licensed by the Washington state Department of Fish and Wildlife and, as such, is able to breed birds for sale. It originated in 1983 as a project of the Walla Walla Lionesses. Significant

financial support was provided by the Yancey P. Winans Trust, and \$95,000 was spent to develop the facility. Since that time, the city has spent approximately \$1,000,000 on facility operation, maintenance and improvements. Structural repairs are needed to eliminate problems with predators. A master plan has been developed, and most of the funds are available—FEMA funds designated for the aviary, as well as city insurance and donations.

In 2009, the Parks and Recreation and Urban Forestry Advisory Board began reviewing all of the department's major services and ranking them by importance. Identified were park maintenance, non-fee-based recreational programs,

cemetery maintenance and record management, fee-based recreation that is 100 percent self-supporting in compliance with 2002 policy, the aviary, and the aquatics program.

This exercise took place in six public meetings and was an opportunity for the public to learn about the primary services provided by the Parks and Recreation Department. The advisory board rankings in 2009 and 2012 rated the aviary as the least important of the six primary services. The rankings are helpful in making budgeting decisions. In Fall 2012, the city surveyed 400 citizens. Among 20 services listed, the aviary was ranked 20th.

The biennial budget for the City of Walla Walla declined 8 percent in 2011–2012, compared to the previous two years, and city staffing was reduced by 32 positions. Every department and set of city services was affected.

The city council and staff took a multifaceted approach to communicating the city's financial status to the community. They prepared brochures with budget information. The budget was published on the city's website. They held two public meetings, one at the senior center and one at the fire department, in addition to the required public hearing of the city council. About 50 citizens attended each meeting. The city also accepted an invitation to make a presentation at a Tea Party meeting.

The city council and staff consider public opinion to be a constructive part of the decision-making process. Citizens may provide input at any time and in various ways. Comments at working sessions are the primary contact point but correspondence by email and letter can also be effective.

The decision to cut the aviary operation by \$55,000 (one-quarter of the required Parks and Recreation budget cuts) was based on the service rankings. There was significant public outcry, so the Parks and Recreation Department gathered contact information for those interested in the issue and met with them at the aviary.

Craig Keister was among 30 citizens who stepped forward to save the aviary in the last biennium. They formed a "Friends" group (steering committee). He chaired the effort with twin goals of involving the community and making it difficult for the city to say no to the aviary. The group developed a plan to raise \$110,000 with the intention of sustaining the

aviary for two years, at which time it was hoped that the city would have adequate funding to once again include the aviary in its budget.

The city acts as fiscal agent for the aviary project. Donors are able to make tax-deductible contributions to the project through the city. The city raises funds for a number of projects and programs. Information can be found on their website and is usually included in articles about specific projects.

Friends achieved its fund-raising goal. The group of 30 active promoters attributes its success to keeping the citizen-government partnership friendly and to a willingness and ability to work with the Parks and Recreation Department, the city council, and the community.

At the end of the two-year period, the city's economic situation has not improved, and the city is unable to carry the aviary. A new group of Friends has formed to rescue the aviary again.

Friends is committed to raising money and are working to be designated as a 501(c)(3) organization and to identify benchmarks for the project. The group has offered to assume responsibility for operational funding and to tackle the capital needs as well. The question remains whether the aviary can become sustainable. At the time of the presentation to the study committee, Friends was preparing to take its plan for sustainability beyond two years to the city council. The group has requested that the city continue to act as fiscal agent and that the online utility bill donation process be continued for two years. The donation page of the Friends' website, [www.friendsofpioneerparkaviary.com](http://www.friendsofpioneerparkaviary.com), is linked seamlessly to the city's web-

site so that birds can be adopted and donations can be made online.

Dumont foresees two options for operation of the aviary. One is for Friends to act as fundraiser and the city to operate the facility. Another is for the city to lease the property and the aviary facilities to Friends to fund and operate. If operation of the aviary does not go forward, Dumont said that the city would likely use the capital funds raised for the aviary and the FEMA and insurance funds to demolish the aviary and create a migrant bird habitat with educational interpretive signage.

Keister said that the relationship between Friends and the Parks and Recreation Department started positively because Dumont was friendly at the first meeting, took questions and was approachable. City staff has been receptive to walk-in visits and is willing to listen and to work with Friends. The relationship between Dumont and Keister is based upon honesty, sharing an understanding of the problem and how to address it, offering a united front, and Keister's increased understanding of the Parks and Recreation Department.

*Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* coverage has been a good tool for both parties to use in apprising the community of the aviary issue. The Parks and Recreation Department has not used Facebook and Twitter because of the city's inability to collect the metadata required to satisfy state statute. (The department has just received approval to use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.) The Friends of the Aviary has a Facebook page, but Keister says it has not been especially helpful. "The aviary needs action and financial contributions, not comments," he says.

## ROLE OF THE MEDIA

The media play several roles in communication among citizens and government. They inform the public of meeting times and government actions, provide a forum for public comment and hold the government to standards of accountability and transparency.

### PRINT MEDIA

The *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* covers Walla Walla, Columbia and Garfield counties and a portion of Umatilla County. It prints an afternoon paper Monday through Friday and a morning paper on Sundays. The *East Oregonian* primarily covers Umatilla and Morrow counties in Oregon and has offices in Hermiston and Pendleton. It prints a morning paper five days a week. In addition to the print edition, both companies offer a web edition, and staff members post stories to Facebook and Twitter. (see “Electronic Media” at right).

Newspaper staff must make choices. Staff and budget determine what can be covered and the manner in which it can be accomplished. The newspaper uses in-person reporting and relies on citizen submissions and updates. One editor said readers prefer stories to be summaries rather than minutiae and want to discover what are big issues. Sometimes, reporters do not correctly assess what the big issues are.

Editors, not the reporters, write headlines. Legal notices are submitted in legal language and cannot be rewritten. Editors at both papers acknowledge that mistakes are made and that what is printed does not always meet their standards.

The editorial page of the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* is very active and engages people. Some fact checking of letters to the editor is done by editorial staff prior to printing.

Though the paper is considered by many to be “liberal,” the editorial manager tries to balance the columns printed. The paper has a community council and many of the staff have lived in the area and worked at the paper for a long time.

An editorial board oversees the *East Oregonian* editorial page. To change the perception of the paper and to add people with long-term local experience, management intends to expand the editorial board to include two citizen advisors. A general application has been issued, and the staff and owners will make the selection. These citizens will provide input and will not write op-ed pieces.

One-off articles written by local citizens and printed in areas other than the editorial page are intended to be free of politics.

Oregon’s open meeting laws allow reporters to attend closed or executive sessions and to ask questions. Their watchdog role is intended to hold government officials accountable. Reporters cannot report on or share what occurs during those meetings. The press also holds government accountable through the editorial page and through reporting. Before particularly important government meetings, the paper will run stories about the issues to be covered. Washington’s open meeting laws do not allow reporters to sit in on executive sessions.

The *East Oregonian* staff includes three Spanish-speaking reporters. Two *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* reporters and its web editor speak Spanish. The *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* has considered publishing Spanish-language publications in the past and will revisit the topic in 2013. A former Spanish-language edition of the *East Oregonian* failed for several reasons. There was a lack of advertising,

many of the Spanish-speaking readers likely found the language level too stilted (not conversational) and most in the audience were used to a different type of newspaper (more sensational) in their native country. Skip Nichols, *East Oregonian* managing editor, suggested that the Spanish-speaking community’s lack of involvement with government issues reflects a tradition of non-involvement with government issues in their country of origin.

The *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin*’s 2007 community survey facilitated government and citizen communication about how tax dollars should be spent. The top votes went to a new police station, a pool (not an aquatic center), a new high school and road repair. Some of these projects were completed, but bond attempts have failed where the survey responses were not heeded. The paper continues to use the results of that survey in their reporting. Producing statistically accurate and relevant surveys is time-consuming and expensive, so annual surveys are not conducted.

### ELECTRONIC MEDIA

The motto “We bring the Valley to you” reflects the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin*’s commitment to making information available to consumers wherever they may be. To meet that goal, they offer a variety of formats: print, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc. Twenty percent of user traffic is by mobile phone and tablet, so the website has been optimized to provide a version for this audience.

The *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* intends to expand services to include an emailed headline newsletter and breaking news alerts. Staff is considering mapping news and crime data and publishing public records such as business transactions, property





sales and educational testing results.

Most reporters have smartphones and are able to create print and video content. Live streaming of debates has taken place during recent election cycles. In the near future, the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* will have the capability to stream discussions that incorporate emailed questions and calls taken in real time. Afterward, recordings will be archived for public access.

Online capabilities enable the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* to seek responses to poll questions and to serve as a sounding board for community issues. The public is more likely to comment in social media formats than to write a letter to the newspaper editor. Reporters incorporate these public reactions into subsequent news stories.

The *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin's* policy is to make no response to letters to the editor; however, if information posted on social media is clearly incorrect, staff will clarify, correct or add context. Occasionally, people may be blocked from posting on the site.

Facebook pages and web editions have provided opportunities for the citizenry and government to provide feedback to the paper about their reporting. In-depth stories that are too long for space available in the printed newspaper can be published online without space limitations. Information can be shared much more quickly electronically than in print.

The *East Oregonian* avoids using live blogs because they may decrease accuracy and standards.

The *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* has established access thresholds for users to reach before requiring online subscriptions. The *East Oregonian's* Facebook page is open to everyone. The website is mainly for subscribers, though there is some free content.

The *East Oregonian* averages two letters to the editor each day and has found that people who would not normally write a letter to the editor or call the paper may comment on Facebook or the website, often providing tips and sources for stories. The editor does not usually remove any comments unless they include curse words.

It is a struggle for the papers and staff to stay current with new technology.

### BROADCAST MEDIA

KUJ Radio's *Walla Walla Live* is a local interview program that highlights and raises awareness of events and individuals in the Walla Walla Valley. The conversations are non-confrontational and noncombative. Each *Walla Walla Live* interview is edited to remove commercials and is archived on the station's website. With the addition of staff, the program could take calls during interviews and facilitate conversations among the guest, host and public caller.

### CITIZEN JOURNALISM

Traditional media follow a paradigm that evolved in the 19th century. It is a repeating cycle: Professionals produce content, content creates an audience, audience attracts advertising revenue and advertising revenue pays the bills. In the 21st century, traditional media audiences are shrinking. That leads to lower advertising revenue and then to shrinking news staff. Some are concerned that this downward trend in professional media coverage will continue, resulting in "rural information ghettos."

Walla Walla Watchdogs is a community journalism project that recently launched a website, [www.wallawallawatchdogs.org](http://www.wallawallawatchdogs.org), as an experiment in citizen journalism. It is intended to be useful to the general public and originated with two premises: that it is not healthy to rely on a single source for daily news and that not-for-profit groups may be able to delve more deeply into Walla Walla Valley issues, events and people than can for-profit media.

Digital media offer unlimited space for content, low production costs, almost free distribution, unlimited time for production and distribution, and multi-media capabilities. They are interactive and can be unbundled—focusing solely on local news is possible.

A key difference from traditional media is that users formerly identified as "audience" become the content-generators. Two examples of user-generated content are Linux and Wikipedia. The strengths of user-created online content are peer review (how many people look at content daily) and wisdom of the crowds (edits they make to increase content accuracy). Being a senior editor (volunteer) is prestigious, and these writers often develop a following.

# Conclusions

## What we take away

These conclusions express the value judgments of the Study Committee and are based on the findings.

- ▶ Communication between constituents and government differs from other types of communication only in the appropriateness of language.
- ▶ Effective communication takes time and effort—clearly stating one’s own understanding of the problem, listening for information and understanding the issue from others’ perspectives. There are many barriers to citizen involvement, both real and perceived. Impediments are mechanical (space, time, language, etc.), personal and socio-cultural. Experience interacting with government varies from person to person. Power and influence are not equally distributed geographically or demographically. Multilingual and multicultural resources are not always available. While mechanical impediments exist, it is possible to work around them.
- ▶ Government officials have a tendency to believe that silence on the part of the public is proof of public satisfaction, but silence means many things.
- ▶ Our governments have evolved, making it easy to function without citizen input.
- ▶ Government entities have different understandings of laws that affect communication, such as social network and open meeting laws.
- ▶ There is no best way for constituents to communicate with government or for government to communicate with constituents.
- ▶ The squeakiest wheel is not always right.
- ▶ Access to diverse communication options equals more opportunity.
- ▶ Success in communication often happens in small groups, especially when intimately or passionately expressed.
- ▶ Participants may be too “close” to the subject for effective communication.
- ▶ Stakeholder investment is necessary for effective communication and outcomes.
- ▶ Forums such as the Grandmothers’ Roundtable can be an effective means for educating the public.
- ▶ The primary source of information for many people is friends and family rather than the government.
- ▶ Prior beliefs or assumptions of fact reduce understanding and clarity in discussions between elected officials and community members.
- ▶ Government communication at all levels can be arcane, and people need to be willing to expend energy to cut through its complexity. They do not always realize that they need some background—such as an understanding of protocols—to interact with government officials.
- ▶ Effective communication requires civility and respect from both parties. An accurate base of knowledge about the issue under consideration is important. A demonstration of goodwill can go a long way toward strengthening communication channels. The Aviary, Commitment to Community and the College Place Whitman Street project have demonstrated unique ways for enhancing communication among citizens and government.
- ▶ The average citizen who wants to be involved in the governmental decision process must make it a priority to attend board or council meetings and learn firsthand about all sides of an issue—not just complain after the decision has been made.
- ▶ Knowledge leads to understanding, and understanding leads to improved communication.
- ▶ Legislators assume that their decisions are based upon input from constituents, but they receive general and professional information through a variety of methods and often rely on trusted advisors for advice.
- ▶ Resources such as ombudsmen, citizen advocates and grass-roots facilitators can be effective liaisons between government and the community, but they are not always available or are not budget priorities.
- ▶ “The Walla Walla Way,” as practiced by the Walla Walla Watershed Management Partnership, values having the right people at the table so that stakeholders’ perspectives and opinions can be heard. They prepare materials to communicate clearly with their stakeholders and the community. It is a good model for other government entities to implement.
- ▶ One effective communication method is to approach people in an environment where they are already comfortable—for instance, city workers meeting with people in their neighborhoods.



- ▶ The media play two roles in citizen-government communication: facilitator of communication and government watchdog. While technology delivers a high volume of national and international news, coverage of state and local government is less than comprehensive. Media are private businesses, and operating margins dictate the number of print and broadcast reporters available to cover government. Local television broadcasts are not available to all area residents. The quality of citizen journalism varies. Accuracy and comprehensiveness suffer as a result.
- ▶ Lack of staff training can impede effective communication. Government's transparency and accountability may suffer if staff (at all levels) cannot help constituents efficiently navigate layers of bureaucracy.
- ▶ Government officials understand the importance of communicating with their constituents and their counterparts in other entities and want to communicate, but many times unclear and poorly articulated practices and procedures make their efforts ineffective.
- ▶ The culture of participation is languishing. People want government entities to be responsive, yet they do not fully make use of opportunities and information available to them. Convenient meeting times, unintimidating and accessible venues, and meeting formats that accommodate public needs encourage involvement; however, the norm is for individuals to avoid public meetings until an issue is so personal or pressing as to require them to publicly testify. Increased citizen involvement on well-functioning advisory and oversight boards and commissions is needed.
- ▶ Government decisions that are not supported by relationship-building, transparency and equal application of rules are barriers to individual-government communication.
- ▶ Many government entities continue to communicate as they have historically, though communication options have changed dramatically. Government needs to remain personally connected to its constituency. Technology is an essential component of citizen-government communication, but is underutilized, either intentionally or because technology use laws relating to the government are misunderstood. Clear guidelines for using, keeping and deleting electronic communications are needed at all government levels.

## Conclusions

- ▶ An elected official's communicative engagement is often inversely related to the size of his or her constituency. Sometimes quantity of communication causes the quality of communication to suffer.
- ▶ Engagement should be more highly valued by individuals and government entities.
- ▶ Constituents and government officials often have different expectations. Government officials rely on citizens to provide information to help with their decision-making. Voters elect officials to make decisions but do not show up for meetings unless they do not like the decisions.
- ▶ Relationship building is important. Knowing who can best act on the information and understanding what influences that decision maker facilitates effective communication. Leadership transitions can change communications—for better or for worse.
- ▶ In small communities, face-to-face conversation is necessary, but not sufficient for effective communication.
- ▶ A person's attitude and personality are key to effective communication, but he or she can be constrained by culture and mechanical limitations.
- ▶ Some people feel that they have not been heard if the resolution is not the one they desired.
- ▶ The culture of intergovernment and intragovernment communication is inconsistent.
- ▶ Not everyone has adopted a "citizen first" model—but probably should consider this if they wish to see a more engaged community.
- ▶ As agencies prepare budgets, leaders may choose to reduce expenses associated with communicating with the public, such as electronic and social media and the recording and distribution of public meeting records. This approach to budget balancing is short-sighted. Investing in projects such as televised council meetings could pay dividends over the long-term.
- ▶ While government acknowledges the need for increased communication, there is little budgetary action to support that need.
- ▶ While developing recommendations for community implementation, the study committee determined a conundrum exists.

While we could call the mayor, email a county commissioner or knock on the door of a port office, there was no efficient or effective method to contact the other part of the government-citizen equation—the citizen. We acknowledge this as problematic but believe that change within the various government entities to become more user-friendly is an opportunity to make citizen participation a more likely outcome of our recommendations.

- ▶ For citizens to gain knowledge of the facts, the processes of government, and the language of government takes time and effort and will be repaid in a more effective communication of citizens' needs and desires to those making the decisions—decisions that have very real impacts on the community. As a citizen, you should:
  - **Speak up and share ideas and values.** Take a class, join a discussion group, or participate in an active service organization where you are encouraged to speak your mind and use your time in making the community a better place for everyone.
  - **Attend one government meeting each month.** Vary your choice—hundreds of opportunities include nongovernmental organizations, committees, etc. Listen and ask questions.
  - **Volunteer for committees** and serve faithfully.
  - **Vote an informed vote.** Read; study; ask questions.
  - **Run for office.**
  - **Contact your elected officials** and ask how you can be helpful.
  - **Become an informed participant** in communication, government planning and implementation. It is the right and duty of all citizens.



# Recommendations

## Steps for improving communication

Recommendations are the Study Committee's specific suggestions for change, based on the findings and conclusions. They are listed without prioritization.

Effective citizen-government communication can lead the community to a sense of ownership and involvement. Positive interaction at a personal level should be used to build mutual confidence and trust and to ensure an understanding of operating rules and regulations. Acknowledge that resolution will take time, energy and commitment. Learn as much as possible about all perspectives of the issue. Recognize that there are at least two sides to every issue, and be prepared to compromise. Be sure that communication is taking place—ask questions and repeat what was said. Every citizen-to-government communication should be acknowledged.

To improve accessibility for people trying to interact with government, agencies and officials should create opportunities for the public to understand government through a variety of formats:

**A. Written materials:**

- a.** Create informative, multipurpose pamphlets and information sheets (multilingual as appropriate to the constituency) that explain how to communicate with departments and staff; for instance, give the preferred communication method, schedules, grievance process, etc.

**B. Public education:**

- a.** Offer citizens' academies, open houses or other presentations to explain government operations and points of access.

- b.** Use these knowledgeable citizens as emissaries to increase communication.

**C. Meetings:**

- a.** The setting and meeting language should be inclusive and nonintimidating.
- b.** Premeeting notices should provide notice and explain meeting expectations.
- c.** Expectations and procedural instructions to the public should be outlined at the opening of each meeting.
- D.** Employ interpreters and translators, as appropriate.
- E.** Demonstrate best and worst communication practices through skits or presentations to schools and community organizations.

All government agencies should inventory communication resources and move to maximize their use. Ideally, each should:

- A.** Revamp and simplify websites to make them more user-friendly and informative and dedicate resources to keep the content current, maintain the technology and educate the public about using the resources.
- B.** Update social network and technology guidelines to be consistent with state law.
- C.** Use media resources that are currently available but not used, such as video capabilities for broadcasting meetings.

Government and citizens share responsibility for increasing citizen involvement with government.

- A.** Each governmental entity should identify and implement effective strategies for communicating with specific constituent groups, such as using all available avenues of communication to reach residents affected by projects such as annexation or street widening.
- B.** Governments should offer orientation and training for boards, committees and commissions. Understanding expectations and requirements can be an effective recruitment tool.
- C.** Elected officials should annually hold town hall meetings in three to four community locations other than their dedicated meeting rooms. Citizens should be receptive to these opportunities and attend the meetings of those entities that affect their lives.

Every agency should have a general information telephone number and someone responsible for answering calls to that number. All employees should be cross-trained to assist customers.

- A.** The City of Walla Walla and Walla Walla County should designate full-time employees to improve and expand communication with the public.
- B.** Each request or problem should be tracked, for instance, by case number, category of concern, constituent contact information, etc.
- C.** To reduce expenses and avoid duplication of resources, entities should consider sharing office space and a database to track requests and issues.

## Recommendations

**D.** Front-line staff should be trained in technical elements related to their agency in order to assist customers. All staff should receive conflict resolution training and be cross-trained (with periodic updates) so that they are aware of the responsibilities and resources of each department.

▶ The City of Walla Walla should become a stronger partner with Commitment to Community, either by financial support or staff commitment.

▶ Private media companies should publish more local news and accelerate their investigative coverage.

**A.** Government and media should work together to broaden coverage.

**B.** Walla Walla, Milton-Freewater, College Place, Dayton, Waitsburg and Prescott city governments should meet together on a regular, formal basis to discuss common challenges and opportunities and then report on the meeting in a public forum.

▶ A reputable, nonpartisan third party should prepare presentations of city and county budgets, formatted to be informative, instructive, bilingual and easily understandable by the public. Budgets should be prepared and presented in two ways: as proposals for the future and as actual-to-budget comparisons that provide a real-time reference to current budget performance.

▶ **Identifying and using opportunities to encourage citizen participation should be one component of implementing all of the study recommendations.**

## GLOSSARY

- ▶ **Communication:** Communication is an exchange of information.
- ▶ **Effective communication:** A two-way information sharing process which involves one party sending a message that is easily understood by the receiving party.
- ▶ **Citizen:** A permanent resident of a county, town or city.
- ▶ **Constituent:** A person who helps appoint another as his or her representative, especially by voting in an election.
- ▶ **Constituency:** The voters, or loosely, the residents in a district, regarded as a group.
- ▶ **Entity:** A unit of government, such as a state agency, city, county or school district.
- ▶ **Government:**
  1. The governing body of a nation, state or community.
  2. A system by which a nation, state or community is governed.

## 2012–2013 Study resource speakers

Jim Barrow

Jim Bock

Chris Cargill

Max Carrera

Doug Case

Federico Diaz

Jennie Dickinson

Tim Ford (telephone  
comments)

Larry Givens

Yesenia Guevara

Delia Gutierrez

Linda Hall

Mike Hewitt (written  
comments)

Randy Hinchliffe

Julia Leavitt

Jim Kuntz

Lupe Mares

Sarita McCaw

Rick Newby

Skip Nichols

Kim Puzey

Terry Nealey

David Nelson

Bart Preecs

Cathy Schaeffer

Nabiel Shawa

Damien Sinnott

Alasdair Stewart

Greg Tompkins

John Turner

Carlos Virgen

Maureen Walsh

## Town hall participants

Roger Esparza

Robert Fastenow

Lavonne Filan

Mike Filan

Mark Higgins

Carrie Huskinson (written  
comments)

Dorothy Knudson

Marge Roff

Richard Sloan

Hal Thompson

# Best practices and resources

Resource speakers and Study Committee members provided the following resources for supplemental information and model programs.

## STUDIES AND REPORTS

- ▶ Godsay, Surbhi, Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Abby Kiesa and Peter Levine. *That's not Democracy: How Out-of-School Youth Engage in Civic Life and What Stands in Their Way*. Medford, Mass.: Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, Tufts University, 2012. [www.civicyouth.org/thats-not-democracy-how-out-of-school-youth-engage-in-civic-life-and-what-stands-in-their-way](http://www.civicyouth.org/thats-not-democracy-how-out-of-school-youth-engage-in-civic-life-and-what-stands-in-their-way)

- ▶ *Putting Citizens First: Transforming Online Government*. A White Paper written for the 2008–2009 Presidential Transition Team by the Federal Web Managers Council, 2008. [www.webmasters.ne.gov/Federal\\_Web\\_Managers\\_Council\\_White\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.webmasters.ne.gov/Federal_Web_Managers_Council_White_Paper.pdf)

- ▶ Waldman, Steven. *The Information Needs of Communities: The Changing Media Landscape in a Broadband Age*. Federal Communications Commission, 2011. [www.fcc.gov/info-needs-communities](http://www.fcc.gov/info-needs-communities)

## ARTICLES AND PRESENTATIONS

- ▶ Callaghan, Peter. “A Few Well-Aimed Questions Can Create Transparency,” *The News Tribune*, Tacoma, Wash., July 5, 2012.
- ▶ Corbell, Terry. “Thankfully, WA State Officials Listen to WPC—Ask

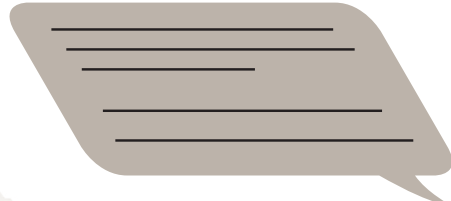
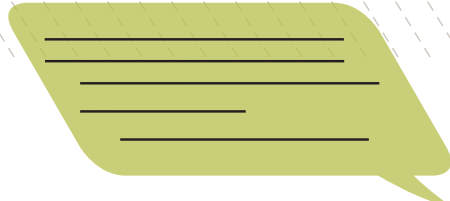
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- ▶ Baldrige Performance Excellence Program [www.nist.gov/baldrige/publications/bus\\_about.cfm](http://www.nist.gov/baldrige/publications/bus_about.cfm)
- ▶ Business Dictionary [www.businessdictionary.com/definition/effective-communication.html](http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/effective-communication.html)
- ▶ The Charlie Project [www.thecharlieproject.com](http://www.thecharlieproject.com)
- ▶ National Broadband Map [www.nbm.gov](http://www.nbm.gov)  
The map tool results for our study area can be found here:
  - Walla Walla: [www.nbm.gov/h054](http://www.nbm.gov/h054)
  - Dayton: [www.nbm.gov/9z4y](http://www.nbm.gov/9z4y)
  - Milton-Freewater: [www.nbm.gov/aucm](http://www.nbm.gov/aucm)

- ▶ National League of Cities [www.nlc.org/find-city-solutions-center-for-research-and-innovation/governance-and-civic-engagement](http://www.nlc.org/find-city-solutions-center-for-research-and-innovation/governance-and-civic-engagement)
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The mission of the Community Council is to foster a civic culture that inspires a citizen-driven, consensus-based, problem-solving process to prepare the greater Walla Walla area for future growth, change and challenges to enhance the quality of life for everyone. Community Council studies may be downloaded at [www.wwcommunitycouncil.org](http://www.wwcommunitycouncil.org).

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