Community Council

Improving Communication
Among Citizens and Government

Robert M. Withycombe, Ph.D., Chair

Final Report of the

Implementation Task Force

October 2015

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Among Citizens and Government

From the Chair

Over the last three years, a relatively small group of community volunteers has attempted to understand the interaction between citizens and government entities, and the various channels that facilitate communication between these groups. During the first year of this process a Community Council Study Committee, under the leadership of Douglas Carlsen, explored a wide range of ideas and practices for "Improving Communication Among Citizens and Government." The study committee conferred with concerned individuals and government entities from throughout the region, and while it was impossible to hear from everyone, the committee sought to enlist the participation of as representative a group as possible. As a result, a vast amount of invaluable information was gleaned and analyzed, and a list of eight recommendations for ways to improve communication between government entities and citizens was developed. The full study report can be found at www.wwcommunitycouncil.org

Following the initial study phase, a smaller committee devoted two years to meeting with representatives of numerous government entities, media companies and citizens' organizations operating throughout our region, in order to advocate for the implementation of as many of the recommendations as possible. The report that follows contains a more detailed account of our efforts. For the sake of brevity, I will highlight a few of our overarching observations:

- First, throughout our three years of engagement we discovered, not to our surprise, that there are literally hundreds of dedicated individuals working tirelessly in all parts of government: city, county, law enforcement, education, port districts, and other entities, frequently while underfunded and understaffed. Over the course of our study, our respect for these individuals grew immensely.
- Second, there are numerous individuals and citizen groups within the boundaries of our study region who are equally hard-working and

dedicated and who, in the interest of improving their own lives and the quality of life in their communities, seek to engage in a dialog with government entities.

- Third, the media (print, broadcast and digital) that operate within the geographic boundaries of our study have substantial power and credibility and are making concerted efforts — while also underfunded and understaffed — to engage, inform, and when needed, hold government entities accountable for their actions. Every private media company we interviewed expressed a willingness and commitment to expand opportunities for more coverage of government.

- Fourth, there are limits to how much can be accomplished. Life is complicated and uncertain; even the best efforts often lead to less than optimum results. Retaining a sense of "good will" remains essential to the cause of advancing our communities.

- Fifth, especially in today's digital world, citizens want information in a timely manner, and governments work best when they use every communication channel at their disposal to satisfy that need: public meetings that are welcoming; websites that are user-friendly and up-to-date; reports and minutes that are timely and easily accessed from any computer, smart device or library computer; budgets that are easily read and understood; and a willingness to use the entire range of media channels to communicate with citizens. Information is key to reducing frustration and strengthening government-citizen partnerships.

- Sixth, grassroots organizations are working to achieve positive changes that meet the needs of their constituents (better sidewalks, parks, sports fields, community lighting, housing, etc.). Government entities have formed partnerships with some of these groups, with impressive results. More partnerships like these are recommended.

- Finally, transparency should be everyone's motto. While we understand that legal constraints sometimes make this difficult, everyone—government and citizens alike—should commit themselves to openness and accessibility. Transparency coupled with respect is crucial for smoothly operating communities. Effort is required, but over the last three years, we have uncovered an almost unlimited willingness to devote effort to solve problems.

On behalf of the Improving Communication Among Citizens and Government Implementation Task Force, we hope that this report can serve as a resource for the future. Advances in communication technologies are occurring at the speed of light, and the world is becoming more interconnected every second. The basic

need for timely, clear, respectful and transparent communication will not diminish, but will rather become even more crucial as our society changes. Although we cannot take credit for many of the achievements mentioned in this report, we do feel that our efforts helped create a greater awareness among government entities, citizens, and the media about the importance of investing greater attention and resources into ensuring fluid communication and improving interaction between citizens and government.

Thank you for your time and attention, and we hope you enjoy our report.

Robert M. Withycombe, Ph.D.
Walla Walla, Washington
2015

Recommendations and Outcomes of Advocacy Efforts

Recommendation 1

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.

At a Glance

The task force met with representatives of city and county entities throughout the region,[1] and advocated for increased attention to ensuring timely and effective communication with all citizens.

- The task force advocated for the use of multiple methods of reaching different groups and constituencies. Messages must be clear and simple, aligned to the needs of the intended audience, and explain how the public can access the relevant government entities.
  - The task force learned, for example, that the City of Walla Walla:
    - Had recently begun implementing the Baldridge Performance Excellence organizational development model.[2] A component of this model focuses on ensuring optimum communication with constituents.
    - Had begun conducting periodic resident satisfaction surveys, the findings of which are being used – along with other information such as crime statistics and other pertinent data – to decide what services should be prioritized, allowing the city to make strategic planning decisions based on evidence rather than on anecdotal information or individual complaints.
    - Had created a new position of Communication Manager, who is responsible for ensuring optimum communication both within city government and with citizens.

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[1] The region referred to includes Walla Walla and Columbia counties and the Milton-Freewater area.

[2] The Baldridge Performance Excellence Program is sponsored by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)**,** and offers organizations of all types access to a proven improvement and innovation framework. For more information about this program visit http://www.nist.gov/baldrige/enter/index.cfm.

- - Utilizes several modes of communication, including informational inserts in residents' utility bills, and internal newsletters to employees.
- Government entities increasingly use the internet as a communication tool.
  - The City of Walla Walla, for example, has an "Open City Hall" link on its website that serves as a virtual round table and can be shared on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Citizens can also see announcements and press releases about the latest developments; sign up to receive email notifications from a number of city departments, and contact city officials directly via the web page.
  - The City of Dayton also has a well-designed and interactive website.
  - Although the websites for smaller communities such as Waitsburg are more basic, they provide citizens with important announcements and contact information for local officials and departments.
  - Government entities serving smaller populations expressed their openness to receiving citizen input and inquiries, but mentioned barriers they face, such as limited funding and staff.
- The task force advocated for entities to provide translation and, when pertinent, interpreters as part of their communication strategy.
- The task force recommended that government entities adopt best practices for meetings.
- The task force recognizes that education is essential to breaking the gridlock of communication among citizens and government. Some examples of existing citizen education programs are listed below. The task force feels that programs like these should be offered on a much more extensive scale.
  - The Citizens Academy, offered by the Walla Walla Police Department:
    http://www.wallawallawa.gov/depts/police/crimeprevention/citizensacademy
  - Leadership Walla Walla, offered by the Walla Walla Valley Chamber of Commerce and Walla Walla Community College:
    https://www.wwcc.edu/about-wwcc/partnerships/leadership-walla-walla/
  - The Sherwood Trust Community Leadership Program:
    http://sherwoodtrust.org/communityleadership.php
  - The Walla Walla Union-Bulletin Community Council.

Recommendation 2

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

- 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.
- Update social network and technology guidelines to be consistent with state law.
- Use media resources that are currently available but not used, such as video capabilities for broadcasting meetings.

At a Glance

The foremost lesson learned while advocating for the implementation of this recommendation is that technology is always changing. People expect to be able to access their government around the clock, either in person, on the phone, via email, or through a website, social media, an app, or any other platform. Government is greatly challenged to meet these expectations.

- Most government entities are trying to use current technologies to enhance their communication with constituents, but they are hampered by outdated laws and policies and by a lack of funds.
- Task force members surveyed websites from a range of government entities, looking at ease of use, interactive ability, and how up-to-date they are.
  - Most government entities with larger annual budgets support websites that provide features such as feedback opportunities, contact names, and access to public documents such as meeting minutes and budgets. Some entities include online access to audio records of public meetings. Most school district websites provide a parent/guardian portal for access to personal or confidential information. These larger entities also use other social media to communicate with their constituencies.
  - In addition to the websites referenced elsewhere, the task force would like to mention the following websites as examples of effective communication tools:
    - Walla Walla County Fire District #4 (www.wwfire4.com) is an example of a mid-sized local government entity with a robust website. In addition to general directory information, the site

provides an annual report that includes their mission, vision, core values, code of ethics, detailed budget report, and a link to employment opportunities. The site also includes an events calendar and a special kid's activities section. Links to local and state government and agencies such as Washington Emergency Management and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) are provided. Pictures, videos and music make the site attractive and entertaining as well as informative.

  ▪ In addition to the sections that effective school websites usually feature, the Milton-Freewater Unified School District's website (www.miltfree.k12.or.us) provides financial information in an understandable format. The Budget & Audit Information section includes current and past adopted budgets, budget committee member names, a budget meeting calendar and agenda, an audit report and documents on the budget process. There is also a section for frequently asked budget questions.

- Electronic notifications (E-Notifications) are used by several government entities. The City of Walla Walla offers an extensive "notification through email system." These systems proved to be especially helpful during the 2015 Blue Creek fire, as well as during the 2015 Gentlemen of the Road summer music festival.

- Online newsletters are distributed by several government entities including the Port of Walla Walla, Walla Walla Public Schools (WWPS), and Washington State University Extension Walla Walla County (WSU Extension Walla Walla). The newsletters are online and available to all community members who request receiving them.

- Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms are used by some government entities, but policies and laws about social media use are not consistent and clear. Retention and archiving requirements are challenging. The following is a small sample of the use of Facebook and other social media by government entities in this region:
  o The cities of Walla Walla and Dayton, the Port of Walla Walla, various departments of Walla Walla County government, and the College Place, Milton-Freewater, Touchet, and Walla Walla School Districts use Facebook and Twitter.
  o Columbia County and Walla Walla County Rural Library Districts have Facebook pages as well as websites.
  o The Walla Walla Public Library and Parks and Recreation Department have Facebook pages.

- New technologies evolve and improve or replace older technologies on a daily basis. ThoughtExchange and NextDoor.com are two newer communication technologies being used locally.
  - In 2015, Walla Walla Public School District (WWPS) initiated an online platform called ThoughtExchange. It is an online forum similar to Facebook and other social media technologies. Through ThoughtExchange parents, teachers, school administrators and other interested community members can share their views about topics of mutual interest and read others' comments.
  - Nextdoor.com is another example of a new technology that is being used by the Walla Walla community. It is a private social network for community neighbors and was designed to use the power of technology to build stronger and safer neighborhoods.

    In mid-2015, the geographical footprint of Nextdoor.com in Walla Walla covered areas from Dell Ave. in the northwest, to South 3rd Ave. in the south, to Reservoir Road in the east and Glen Erin in the northeast. There were nineteen designated "neighborhoods." People may join only the designated neighborhood where they live, but they may view and respond to postings from other neighborhoods.

    Local government entities such as the Walla Walla Police Department and the Walla Walla County Sheriff's Office have joined nextdoor.com as public agencies in order to disseminate information about public safety.
- Technology has raised people's expectations for government communication. Thanks to these expanded expectations citizens demand access to government entities at any time, anywhere, on any device. Technology can be used to facilitate citizen engagement via processes such as public participation, collaborative governance, digital democracy, and E-Government. It can assist people in engaging and dialoging with government entities, and in turn, help those entities to serve their constituents.
- At the same time as the use of technology is increasing exponentially, government budgets are going in the opposite direction. However, there is no doubt that technology can and does improve communication among citizens and government.

Recommendation 3

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

- Identification of Constituent Groups. Each government 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.
- Board Training**.** Governments should offer orientation and training for boards, committees and commissions. Understanding expectations and requirements can be an effective recruitment tool.
- Town Hall Meetings**.** 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.

At a Glance

Given the overarching nature of communication, the reader will find details about much of the research and advocacy efforts carried out with regard to this recommendation reported in the sections on Recommendations 1 and 2 above, and throughout the report.

During meetings with government entities the task force advocated for the following practices and principles:
- Print and online materials need to be readily available and easily accessible for all constituents.
- Agendas (if appropriate) and meeting guidelines need to be handed out at the door, and whenever feasible, made available in advance online.
- The degree to which government officials and staff consider citizen participation to be important will determine the level of success.
- Encouraging citizen input in a myriad of ways will in the long run lower costs and encourage greater citizen engagement.

The task force conducted an inventory of current efforts by government entities to identify and implement effective strategies for communicating with specific constituent groups.

- The task force recognized the work of Commitment to Community (C2C) as an example of an organization that has been successful in targeting and serving specific constituent groups. (Please see more details about C2C's work in the section related to Recommendation 5.)
- Other actions aimed at enhancing government communication with specific constituent groups include:
  - Nextdoor.com (Please see description in section on Recommendation 2.)
  - The *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* "Question and Answer" column by the Walla Walla City Manager.
  - Other local papers and broadcast media provide information about government entities' actions to various constituent groups. (For more details about this type of communication, see the section relating to Recommendation 6).

As mentioned in the section relating to Recommendation 1, above, the City of Walla Walla has begun implementing the Baldridge Performance Excellence organizational development model. This model provides a framework for the enhanced operation of government entities, non-profits, boards, committees, and commissions, and is a useful tool that assists them in optimizing their performance and serving their constituencies. Emphasis is placed on the importance of ensuring fluid communication both within the organization and externally.

Any organization, be it a small charity or a government entity, can benefit from the Baldridge Program's criteria and tools. More information is available at http://www.nist.gov/baldrige/index.cfm .

The Office of the City Manager of Walla Walla has affirmed that thanks to the city government's decision to consider effective communication as a vital area of concern, and to their efforts to implement best practices for both internal and external communication, the city is better able to serve its citizens and may serve as a model for other government entities.

The task force advocated for a plan of action to ensure that elected officials and board members receive training regarding public meetings and public records. It is very important that board members be trained in the vision, mission, bylaws and policies of the government entity for which they serve.

The Learning Center for NonProfits, sponsored by Walla Walla Community College and Sherwood Trust, (http://www.wwcc.edu/CMS/index.php?id=3134) is

an important local resource dedicated to training citizens in the many skills required for active community participation. Although the training and resources offered are specifically tailored to meet the needs of current and prospective nonprofit board members, staff and volunteers, most if not all of those skills are directly transferrable to citizen participation in government boards and commissions.

The task force recognized that citizens may not be aware of the many opportunities for participating on boards and committees, and advocated for providing this information at meetings involving citizens, and disseminating it via as many other communication channels as possible.

The task force found the following examples of town hall meeting practices being organized in the region:

- The Walla Walla County Sheriff's Roundtable
- Grandmothers' Roundtable
- Waitsburg Commercial Club
- Candidates' Forum sponsored by the Walla Walla Valley Chamber of Commerce
- Candidates' Forum sponsored by AAUW[3] and Grandmothers' Roundtable
- City of Walla Walla online Open City Hall (http://www.wallawallawa.gov/city/opencityhall)
- Walla Walla Public Schools ThoughtExchange online discussion forum (for more details please see the section relating to Recommendation 2).

Recommendation 4

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.

- Single point of contact. The City of Walla Walla and Walla Walla County should designate full-time employees to improve and expand communications with the public.
- Track community requests. Each request or problem should be tracked, e.g., by case number, category of concern, constituent contact information, etc.

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[3] American Association of University Women (AAUW)

- Staffing considerations. To reduce expenses and avoid duplication of resources, entities should consider sharing office space and a database to track requests and issues.
- Appropriate staff training. 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.

At a Glance

- As mentioned previously, the City of Walla Walla has created a Communication Manager position. This will improve all forms of communication, both within the city government and with citizens, and will help optimize communication via traditional media, the city's website, and social media.
- The task force surveyed the websites of various city, county, port, and other entities to gain a broader idea of what is available in the region. Some specific examples of websites are mentioned in other parts of this report, but in general, the task force is happy to report that by the end of their work, most of the websites surveyed had been designed to be relevant, up-to-date, interactive and user-friendly. The vast majority of websites includes various means for communicating with key officials and government bodies.

Recommendation 5

The City of Walla Walla should become a stronger partner with Commitment to Community (C2C), either by financial support or staff commitment.

At a Glance

In its final report in 2013, the Community Council Study Committee on Improving Communication Among Citizens and Government recognized Commitment to Community (C2C) as a program that utilizes excellent communication strategies for the purpose of strengthening neighborhoods and empowering residents to take ownership of their resources.

The task force followed C2C's efforts, and met with city officials and with nonprofits to advocate for funding of C2C and for further partnerships with other

government entities. They were pleased to learn that Commitment to Community will receive funding from the City of Walla Walla for 2015 and 2016. For more information about C2C, visit http://www.c2cwallawalla.org/ .

Recommendation 6

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

- Government and media should work together to broaden coverage.
- 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.

At a Glance

The task force met with the editors and publishers of most of the newspapers published within the Community Council region, including the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* (U-B), the *Dayton Chronicle*, the *Waitsburg Times*, the *East Oregonian*, and *The Tri-City Herald*. The goal of the task force was to obtain commitment from these newspapers to publish articles from government entities; publish more local news that ties into government entities; increase their investigative efforts with regards to government entity activities, and more generally, to increase citizen awareness and engagement.

All of the newspapers affirmed their interest in informing and engaging their readers and serving their communities.
- The *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin* indicated that they will welcome articles submitted by government entities.
- Local weekly papers affirmed that one of their core beliefs is the importance of their commitment to the communities they serve, and of the newspaper's crucial role in engaging citizen participation by focusing on local news rather than entertainment. They also expressed their commitment to reporting on all government entities.

The task force also met with local representatives of television, internet and radio — Spectrum Reach (cable television and internet) and Capps Broadcast Group (radio and internet) — regarding the options they offer to government entities.

- The task force learned that television, internet and radio are less expensive than many people might think, and may therefore be a viable option for some government entities.
- Television, internet, and radio companies can offer their clients customized campaigns targeting distinct constituencies.

The goal of the task force was to advocate for increased cooperation among government entities in the region. They found the following to be examples of entities that collaborate across jurisdictional lines:

- The Economic Advisory Committee (EDAC) was created by the Port of Walla Walla in 1996, with the goal of enhancing the economic health of Walla Walla County through the development and execution of an economic development plan. The plan is designed to be implemented countywide and for the benefit of all communities within the county. EDAC meetings are held six times per year and are open to the public. For more information about the plan and about EDAC, visit http://www.portwallawalla.com/economic-development/edac-meetings
- The Walla Walla Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization (WWVMPO) was created in 2013 by the governors of Washington and Oregon to carry out comprehensive and cooperative multimodal transportation planning for the communities located in the region of southeast Washington and Milton-Freewater, Oregon. This organization is responsible for ensuring that the transportation elements of comprehensive plans adopted by towns, cities and counties in the region conform to state requirements, and that those comprehensive plans are consistent with the regional transportation plans adopted by the organization. For more information about WWVMPO, visit http://www.wwvmpo.org/
- The Southeast Washington Economic Development Association (SEWEDA) is dedicated to developing entrepreneurs, businesses, and industries within the region of Asotin, Garfield, Columbia, and Whitman Counties of Washington, by connecting federal, state, regional and local resources. For more information about this organization, visit http://www.seweda.org
- The Indicators Project is the result of a coalition of private, nonprofit and public leaders who came together in April 2015 to discuss joint development of a set of statistical indicators that may be used as measures of community progress. Out of the fifty attendees at the initial meeting, over two dozen expressed interest in developing a solution that can be in place in 2016.

Recommendation 7

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.

At a Glance

The task force's aim was to encourage public entities to provide the public with budget information that is widely accessible and easy to understand. The following are some notable examples:

- The City of Walla Walla Walla is engaged in an ongoing effort to make the budget more understandable for community members. It recognizes that no one format will meet everyone's needs.
    - For the 2015-2016 biennial budget the City of Walla Walla produced a tri-fold pamphlet, "A Look Ahead," a very simple summary of the budget that was inserted in utility bills.
    - On the City of Walla Walla's website http://www.wallawallawa.gov/depts/finance/budget there is an explanation of the budget process, and links to Expenditure and Revenue reports for the 2013-2014 and the 2015-2016 biennial budgets. The link for the 2015-2016 budget includes additional summary reports, a copy of a PowerPoint presentation about the budget and the pamphlet "A Look Ahead."
- The City of Dayton provides annual financial reports and budgets, with effective graphics and detailed explanations, on its website http://www.daytonwa.com/inside-city-hall/city-clerk/finance/city-budget .
- Walla Walla County's 2015 Budget Power Point Presentation is a user-friendly presentation with effective graphics, definitions, and accessible and engaging language that appears on the Walla Walla County website. One can also view budgets and annual reports for the years 2006 to the present. http://www.co.walla-walla.wa.us/index.shtml

Recommendation 8

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

No additional information is included in this report about Recommendation 8, since, as the recommendation itself prescribes, the task force placed emphasis on encouraging citizen participation as an integral part of its efforts to advocate for the implementation of all the other recommendations.

Community Council

The following individuals participated in some portion of the implementation process for the Improving Communication Among Citizens and Government study. Their interest and dedication are sincerely appreciated.

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Community Council

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Tallman's Pharmacy
Walla Walla General Hospital

Appendix
BEST PRACTICES AND RESOURCES

Articles and Reports

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www.codeforamerica.org – Code for America (CFA) builds open source technology and organizes a network of people dedicated to making government services simple, effective, and easy to use.

www.digitaldemocracy.org — Digital Democracy Project.

www.governing.com – Governing the States and Localities distributes a magazine and online newsletters such as *Governing Daily, Governing Insider, Infrastructure, Finance, Data, Technology, Human Services* and a newsletter titled *Better, Faster, Cheaper.*

www.govtech.com — Government Technology, Solutions for State & Local Government distributes a magazine, online newsletters and articles such as *Local Government in a Digital World* and *Network Security Solutions for Government.*

www.mrsc.org — The Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to proactively supporting the success of local governments state-wide by providing collaborative consultation and immediate access to a vast research and knowledge base. Access free training webinars and publications on their website.

www.open-oregon.com — Open Oregon is an educational and charitable organization whose mission is to assist and educate the general public, students, educators, public officials, media and legal professionals to understand and exercise their rights to open government, and their rights and responsibilities under the Oregon Public Meetings and Records laws.

http://www.doj.state.or.us/public_records/pages/index.aspx — This section of the Oregon Department of Justice's website provides resources about Public Records and Meetings Law.

www.sunlightfoundation.com - This organization works to make government and politics — at the federal, local and international levels —more accountable and transparent.

www.atg.wa.gov/open-government-training#.VK7YCk10yM8 — This section of the Washington State Attorney General's website is dedicated to open government, and offers training materials and other resources related to open government, public meetings and public records.