CITY OF MILL VALLEY
Strategic Communications Plan
Update November 2017
PURPOSE
The Strategic Communications Plan is designed to:

- Identify goals and strategies to effectively communicate with the community
- Encourage public engagement and the democratic process
- Assist in the development of internal communications policies
- Define communications expectations and strategies for high profile topics and issues
- Improve the overall effectiveness of the City in meeting the needs of the community

This update to the 2014 Strategic Communications Plan builds upon the original plan’s foundation by reinforcing original goals and outlining future actions, policies, and programs.

BACKGROUND
In January 2014 the City Council made the establishment of a comprehensive communications plan one of its Priority Projects. In June 2014, the City of Mill Valley adopted its first Strategic Communications Plan which included the establishment of a Communications Group, Communications Liaisons within each department, and the identification of five goals to improve strategic communications in the City.

One goal of the Strategic Communications Plan was “Measurement and Evaluation” of our outreach efforts. Since the completion of many actions outlined in the 2014 plan the Communications Group has undertaken this update to examine the effectiveness of the City’s communication policy and strategies, and set new actions to achieve these goals.
SUMMARY

The Communications Plan outlines goals that reinforce the City of Mill Valley’s commitment to public engagement, transparency, and community service.

- **GOAL 1.** Provide Courteous and Responsive Customer Service
- **GOAL 2.** Use Multiple Platforms to Engage with the Public
- **GOAL 3.** Provide Timely, Relevant, and Concise Communication
- **GOAL 4.** Build and Expand Relationships, Promote Civic Engagement and Two-Way Communication
- **GOAL 5.** Measure and Evaluate Communication Efforts

ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

All departments within the City of Mill Valley share responsibility for delivering exemplary customer service and responsiveness, conducting public outreach, and encouraging public engagement. Citywide communications strategy and support is provided by the Department of the City Manager.
The Strategic Communications Plan is guided by the mission of the City of Mill Valley and the mission, core values, key issues, and community values outlined by the City Council and the MV2040 General Plan.

The mission of the City of Mill Valley is to provide a full range of municipal services to residents and businesses in accordance with the general plan and City Council policy and direction. City staff shall deliver those services in an efficient, effective and courteous manner with a commitment to operational excellence.

The mission of the Mill Valley City Council is to serve faithfully the residents and businesses of Mill Valley and nurture the City’s overall quality of life. The Council does this by setting policy for the City and direction for Mill Valley’s City Manager and its Boards and Commissions, at all times guided by values core to Mill Valley’s heritage.

City Council Core Values:
• A balanced, inclusive, and open approach to policy-making and city leadership.
• Resident participation that promotes open communication, mutual respect, and the development of community leaders.

City Council Key Issues:
• Effective two way communication between City staff/Council and the community.
• Excellence in customer service.

MV2040 General Plan Community Values:
• Operational excellence by city officials and employees.
• Cultivating community participation, volunteerism, mutual respect, civil discourse and civic responsibility.
• Furthering excellence in public education and an open, effective and mutually supportive relationship among the community, public schools and the City.
Goal 1. Provide Courteous and Responsive Customer Service

Provide high quality customer service through responsive, professional and transparent interactions. Align communication with the guiding principles, mission, and values of the City of Mill Valley.

Objective 1: Provide high quality customer service at all times.

Action 1: Use hiring as an opportunity to identify customer service oriented candidates.

Action 2: Conduct a customer service survey to identify areas within the City that require improved customer service.

Action 3: Provide training for incoming hires and current employees to support best practices in customer services.

Objective 2: Promote and reinforce the City’s Responsiveness Policy

Action 1: Include Responsiveness Policy in new hire orientations.

Action 2: Reintroduce Responsiveness Policy in training sessions with communications liaisons
The City of Mill Valley employs various communications methods when doing business, conducting outreach, and promoting civic engagement. The City is committed to multimodal approaches to communication that incorporate modern tools as well as traditional methods of outreach.

City Website
The City of Mill Valley website was redesigned and redeveloped in 2016 as one of the actions from the 2014 Communications Plan. The website is the central point for information about the City of Mill Valley and includes integrated subsites for the Library, Mill Valley Recreation, and the SASM Wastewater Treatment Plant. The website receives an average of 19,175 visitors per month. Information on the website includes:

- General information
- Public meeting webcasting and archives
- News
- Event calendar
- Recreation and Library events and news
- Citizen Request Management (CRM)

Email
According to recent surveys email is the preferred method of communication for most of the public. The City’s bi-monthly email newsletter MVConnect was established in 2014 as part of the 2014 Communications Plan and is sent to over 14,000 subscribers with an average open rate of 38%. Email newsletters are also used for targeted audiences or special projects including RSVP parking permits and the Miller Avenue Streetscape Project weekly updates. The City uses email for:

- Direct emails to individuals and community groups
- City eNews
- Email newsletters (MVConnect, Library eNews, Recreation eNews, Miller Ave)
- RSVP Parking Permits
- Meeting Agenda Emails

ONLINE ENGAGEMENT
By the Numbers

- 99,139 Website Page Views Per Month
- 16,076 Residents on Nextdoor
- 14,731 Subscribers to MVConnect
- 1,196 Likes on Facebook
- 968 Followers on Twitter
Social Media

The City of Mill Valley uses social media to disseminate news, public notices, events, and urgent alerts to members of the community. NextDoor has proved to be the most popular social media platform for communicating with the community and has been used for urgent alerts (sending email or text to subscribers) in the case of gas leaks, flooding, major incidents that impact the community. The City manages the following social media accounts:

- Nextdoor
- Facebook
- Twitter
- YouTube

Local Print Newspapers

Many residents get news about the City of Mill Valley through traditional news outlets. City staff regularly sends press releases and provides information to local news organizations. The Marin Independent Journal is the City of Mill Valley’s adjudicated newspaper.

Print/Direct Mailing

Direct mail is still the most effective means of reaching households and businesses in Mill Valley. The City regularly mails public notices, postcards, and promotional material.

- Recreation Activity Guide
- Postcards and letters
- Flyers
- Public notices
- Permits
- Maps, handouts
- City budget
- Business license renewal notices
- Posters
- Signs
- Brochures
Community Organizations / Partnerships

The City regularly relies on relationships with community organizations and neighborhood leaders to help promote City news, events, and public meetings. A partnership with the Mill Valley Chamber of Commerce allows the City to conduct outreach with local businesses and leverage the Chamber’s communication outlets.

- Neighborhood groups
- Churches
- Civic organizations
- Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center
- Mill Valley School District
- Local Schools - Newsletters/PTAs

Public Meetings / Workshops

The formal business of governing and decision-making is done through our meetings of the City Council, Boards, and Commissions. Additionally, public meetings and community workshops are regularly scheduled to attain public input, build consensus, and to provide information to community or neighborhood stakeholders.

- Meeting agendas, staff reports, minutes
- Elected and appointed policy-making bodies
- Neighborhood Association meetings
- “State of the City” presentations
- Annual Community Meeting

Signs

Communicating with signage and banners allows us to reach audiences that may not be tied into other mediums the City employs to inform the public. The City uses the following types of physical signage:

- Banners (E. Blithedale/Depot Plaza/Miller)
- Construction signs
- Electronic sign trailer
- Public notice posters
- Neighborhood flooding/fire signs
Direct Public Contact
Person-to-person interaction and over-the-counter communication constitute the primary form of conducting business at City Hall, the Community Center, the Library, and the Wastewater Treatment Plant. The Library and Community Center have a combined average of over 500,000 visitors per year.

- Over-the-counter interactions
- Government offices and facilities
- Library and Community Center
- Councilmember on the Plaza
- Educational programs (Wetlands Days, City Hall field trips)
- Special outreach events

Emergency Communications
The City of Mill Valley’s emergency communications policy is defined by our Emergency Operations Plan. The Mill Valley Fire Department and Police Department currently use Alert Marin’s reverse 911 technology to ping resident telephones and emails in the case of an emergency or in emergency preparation. The Fire Department and Police Department use the following Emergency Notification Systems:

- Alert Marin
- Nixle
- Siren
- Community Emergency Response Team (CERT)

Television, Cablecast, and Online Video
The City broadcasts all regular City Council, Planning Commission, and Parks and Recreation Commission meetings in cooperation with the Community Media Center of Marin. Meeting videos are also streamed and archived online through the City’s website. Various departments also use YouTube to archive promotional videos online. Television and online video is commonly used for:

- Local news coverage
- Local Government Channel for City Council, Planning Commission and Parks and Recreation Commission meetings
- Granicus meeting video archive
- Online video - YouTube
- Local movie theater video
Community Events
The City of Mill Valley maintains a presence at a number of annual community events including:

- Memorial Day Parade
- Fall Arts Festival
- Dipsea Race
- Mill Valley Film Festival
- Movies in the Park
- Evacuation Drill
- Library Events
- Recreation Events

Surveys/Focus Groups
As part of ongoing assessment, and public engagement in decision-making the City employs surveys and focus groups to measure public interest and opinions on a range of matters.

Recent surveys indicate that members of the public prefer email and social media for City communications but printed materials, banners, and mailing still remain effective tools for getting the word out to the community.
Goal 2. Use Multiple Platforms to Engage with the Public

Utilize multiple communications platforms, including traditional and new media, to improve public outreach, transparency, information access and sharing with the public.

Objective 1: Expand and improve upon existing communications platforms to encourage two-way communication, civic engagement, public outreach, transparency, information access and sharing with the public.

Action 1: Continue to use traditional and new media, including social media (such as Twitter and Nextdoor) to enhance and expand communications.

Action 2: Use small surveys (e.g. one question in an e-newsletter) to solicit input from the public on important topics.

Action 3: Review potential online tools or solutions that will increase open government, transparency, citizen engagement, or improve user experience.

Action 4: Develop half-sheet print newsletter to be mailed quarterly or semi-annually to the public.

Action 5: Train staff to utilize the Citizen Request Management System for tracking citizen requests and expand list of topics.

Action 6: Continue quarterly staff training for website administration.

Action 7: Consolidate all public meeting agendas in Granicus archive.

Objective 2: Ensure that City communications reach all audiences

Action 1: Identify target demographics in Mill Valley and create procedures to ensure effective communications to all groups.
Objective 3: Expand the City’s multimedia presence through video, audio, and complementary resources.

Action 1: Produce videos which educate community members about City services and programs, highlighting City events and activities.

Action 2: Develop video series for building in Mill Valley.

Action 3: Explore and establish procedures for creating and disseminating videos related to emergency information and high profile issues.

Action 4: Upgrade Council Chamber Audio and Video system.

Action 5: Collect and archive video and audio recordings of Citywide events.

Objective 4: Explore potential signage and wayfinding improvements.

Action 1: Research feasibility of permanent electronic, variable message signs at City gateways.

Action 2: Investigate costs associated with a City wayfinding program.

Action 3: Develop Historical Signage Program
The City of Mill Valley aims to make communication clear and concise without jargon or language that would confuse members of the public or discourage public participation. Staff’s approach to public engagement takes into consideration that topics are communicated well in advance of public meetings and sensitive topics or community issues are given special consideration.

In regard to relevancy and importance, Mill Valley residents have consistently voiced a preference for communication from the City related to traffic congestion and road closures, land use planning, and local events. Due to the sensitivity within the community to these topics, specifically traffic congestion and land use planning, this communications plan aims to outline current practices and identify strategic solutions to improve outreach.

The City of Mill Valley has conducted three communications surveys over the past 3 years each resulting in similar responses for the top 3 topics that respondents would like to hear about, traffic/road closures, local events, and land use planning.
Traffic Congestion and Road Closures

The City of Mill Valley uses a number of platforms to inform the public of upcoming road closures and major traffic congestion incidents. In Spring 2017 staff conducted a traffic behavior and communication survey (664 total participants) in order to better informed on effective solutions for communication around traffic congestion.

Traffic Congestion

The City of Mill Valley encourages drivers to stay informed on traffic conditions prior to making a trip. According to our survey of traffic behavior and communication 45.14% of respondents stated they do not look at traffic conditions before starting a trip. A number of tools are available for drivers with access to a smart phone or the internet including:

- **MVtraffic.org** - The City’s traffic conditions website includes a map of Mill Valley with current traffic conditions.
- **511.org** - 511 consolidates the Bay Area’s transportation network and allows users to plan trips via public transit, carpool, driving, and biking.
- **Google Maps, Apple Maps, Waze, Other Traffic Apps** - Map and travel applications for smart phones allow users to plan trips and estimate travel times based upon current traffic conditions.

In the case of a major incident causing a backup of 30-minutes or more the City of Mill Valley will push out information to the public via social media, Nixle text/email alerts, and a website alert. In the case of after-hours, holiday, or weekend traffic incidents that cause significant traffic congestion all City staff are encouraged to contact the Police Department so proper outreach can be conducted. Additional work should be done by the City to promote and expand notification tools and the internal process to ensure a consistent level of service in the case of major incidents.

Weekly Road Closures

Upcoming road closures and lane shifts are posted to the City website and emailed to subscribers at the end of each week. Road closures that will cause significant delay are promoted through MVConnect and social media outlets. Any road closure or lane shift that will impact E. Blithedale traffic is considered sensitive enough to promote widely. In the case of seasonal flooding on Miller Avenue that causes a road closure staff will send out urgent alerts (to subscriber text/email) on NextDoor and Nixle as well as promote on social media. It is the responsibility of Public Works and Public Safety staff to be aware of upcoming road closures that will have a significant impact on major arteries and to ensure timely communication in advance.
Do you believe it is worthwhile for Mill Valley to post traffic congestion information on its website and on social media or is it already available through other outlets?

- Yes: 64.03%
- No: 35.97%

If yes, what is the best way for the City of Mill Valley to communicate major traffic incidents to you (slowdowns of 30 minutes or more)?

- Post to the City Website: 44.52%
- Social Media Post (Facebook and Twitter): 30.45%
- Nextdoor Alert: 4.63%
- Text/Email to my phone (via Nixle): 6.18%
- Other (please specify): 8.88%

Public Education and Promotion of Transportation Alternatives

69.42% of respondents to the Traffic Behavior and Communications Survey identified as single occupancy vehicle drivers on a typical day. As the City of Mill Valley makes improvements to bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and public transit facilities, these alternatives should be promoted alongside the conversation about traffic congestion and incentivized to reduce trips and single occupancy drivers. Additionally, conversations about traffic should include information about typical traffic patterns in Mill Valley, peak traffic hours, and how road capacity, road volume, and the number of trips per household contribute to traffic congestion.

Land Use and Construction

Retaining Mill Valley’s small-town character is one of the City’s defining core values. City staff recognizes the community’s desire to be a part of any decision-making process where projects and planning decisions might have some impact on the character of our town. Staff makes every effort to publicize upcoming public meetings where either the City Council or Planning Commission will be discussing significant changes to land use policy or proposed construction projects that generate neighborhood or community interest. To this end, City staff has expanded and reimagined the public notice process to bring more awareness to proposed projects or policy changes. In 2015, the Planning and Building Department reformatted the design and format of mailed public notices to be printed on bright orange paper and written with more concise information to increase visibility and readability. Additionally, Planning and Building staff is regularly consulted on upcoming projects or public hearings that require additional promotion through the City’s MVConnect email newsletter, social media, and community stakeholders. The City should continue to remain vigilant and transparent in all of its outreach but especially on topics related to land use policy and large construction projects where the small-town character of Mill Valley may be threatened.

Community Events

The City of Mill Valley, the Mill Valley Public Library, and Mill Valley Recreation regularly promote events through a combination of printed posters, banners, social media, online calendars, email marketing, and outreach to community groups. The City has had a long-held policy of only promoting City-sponsored events and residents who are interested in learning about the wide range of special events, public meetings, and regular programming are encouraged to subscribe to email newsletters, social media, and to visit the City website or facilities for the latest upcoming events. It is not in the capacity of City staff to promote all regular community events and so the City’s agreement with the Mill Valley Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Center helps support the Chamber’s Enjoy Mill Valley Community Calendar which promotes other non-City-sponsored events in the community.
**Goal 3. Provide Timely, Relevant, and Concise Communication**

Communicate City news and information internally and externally in a timely, cohesive, and proactive manner so that community members are well informed and able to access information pertaining to the City.

**Objective 1: Disseminate information to community members related to City activities, projects, events and initiatives in a clear, concise, and cohesive manner.**

**Action 1:** Encourage brevity and plain-speak in City communications.

**Action 2:** Outline editorial standards and process for City communications.

**Action 3:** Ensure consistency and quality of the content and appearance for all City publications and communications.

**Action 4:** Reinforce communications standards, procedure, and resources through quarterly staff training and new staff orientation.

**Action 5:** Review and refresh standby statements and templates for emergency response

**Objective 2: Disseminate information to community members related to City activities, projects, events and initiatives in a timely and proactive manner.**

**Action 1:** Create specific communications strategies for high profile issues and topics including traffic congestion and road closures, land use planning and development, and local events.

**Action 2:** Create Planning and Building guides and resources to highlight new guidelines, educate the building process, and clarify misconceptions in the community.

**Action 2:** Work with Department Heads to identify 5-8 issues/programs on which they will require communication strategy assistance in the upcoming months.

**Action 3:** Implement expanded Nixle platform for public safety outreach.

**Action 4:** Ensure a clear line of communication exists between Public
Works, Fire Department and Police Department in regard to major road closures or lane shifts that will have an adverse impact to local traffic conditions.

**Action 5:** Create social media calendar and strategy for posting of upcoming policy decisions, and agenda items.

**Objective 3:** Improve internal communication operations in order to improve public outreach and increase interdepartmental cooperation, effectiveness, and productivity.

**Action 1:** Continue training Communications Liaisons within each department to assist in City-wide communication and outreach efforts.

**Action 2:** Work with Communications Liaisons to identify potential improvements to internal communications, strategy, and procedures.

**Action 3:** Conduct internal staff survey to review potential improvements to communications, operations, and staff satisfaction.
Effective two-way communication between City staff/Council and the community has been a long-standing key issue for the City Council. The City remains committed to this ideal and will continue to look for ways to improve two-way communication and civic engagement.

The City relies on relationships with community organizations and stakeholders to amplify neighborhood concerns and leverage social networks in our outreach and engagement efforts. Currently the City of Mill Valley has regular contact with a number of local organizations including Homeowner and Neighborhood Associations, the Mill Valley Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Center, Rotary Club, and the Mill Valley School District. While the City has significantly improved our online outreach over the past 3 years staff aims to expand community relationships to reach a broader audience and encourage public engagement and participation.

As part of this goal the City created a new part-time position of Volunteer Coordinator in 2017. This role will help increase engagement with local volunteer groups, create volunteer opportunities in the City, and streamline the process for the public to participate in volunteer positions and empower change in the community.

**Goal 4. Build and Expand Relationships, Promote Civic Engagement and Two-Way Communication**

Cultivate community participation, volunteerism, civil discourse and civic engagement by encouraging two-way communication and public involvement in City decision-making processes.

**Objective 1: Identify opportunities to increase public awareness, participation and community engagement.**

**Action 1:** Continue and expand reach of Neighborhood Association meetings to include additional community groups and offer an opportunity for direct feedback and comments from community members.
Objective 2: Communicate accurate, factual, objective information about issues facing the City.

Action 1: Enable all public employees to communicate with community members about policies, programs, services and initiatives they are familiar with and for which they have responsibility.

Action 2: Communicate the expectation that employees shall provide information services in a non-partisan fashion consistent with the principles of a balanced, inclusive, and open approach to local governance.

Action 4: Provide public speaking training for employees.

Objective 3: Present compelling, engaging content that community members will find useful and interesting and will increase awareness and familiarity with the functions of our local government and the activities in the community.

Action 1: Highlight and promote the City’s work, achievements, progress on projects, awards and accolades.

Action 2: Highlight existing City services, interesting historical facts, and basic information about the functions of local government and how City services are performed and funded.

Action 3: Identify and develop key publications from all departments to distribute at community events to consistently provide community members with important information from across the City organization.

Action 4: Locate City literature displays in public places throughout the community to improve public access to basic City information and resources.
The City’s Communication efforts should be regularly assessed to maintain effectiveness and to ensure that the public is brought fully into the democratic process. A number of factors can contribute to the success or failure of City communications including the evolving landscape of personal technology, new communications platforms, and staff changes at the City. By integrating regular evaluation of our communication strategies into our work we will continue to narrow the citizen engagement gap.

**Goal 5. Measure and Evaluate Communication Efforts**

Conduct ongoing measurement and evaluation of the Strategic Communications Plan.

**Objective 1: Integrate ongoing public assessment into work practices of all departments.**

**Action 1:** Assist all departments in assessing effectiveness of outreach, public noticing, and promotions.

**Action 2:** Identify existing modes of daily, face-to-face public interaction that yield opportunities for gathering public input.

**Action 3:** Integrate simple surveys into existing email marketing and social media engagement.

**Action 4:** Utilize the annual Community Meeting and community workshops to conduct informal surveys on communication methods and satisfaction.
Objective 2: Collect quarterly statistics on City communications.

Action 1: Gather data on website analytics (visitors, pageviews, length on page), email marketing metrics (subscribers, open rate, click throughs), social media metrics (retweets, followers, mentions).

Action 2: Gather data on uses of services, complaint tracking, inquiry tracking, event attendances, downloads, and other metrics to establish a baseline of data.

Objective 3: Review data and make recommendations to modify and improve plan.

Action 1: Collect information and feedback to determine the effectiveness of communications strategies.

Action 2: Conduct annual Department Head interviews to assess communication efforts and strategies.

Action 3: Survey City Council, Boards, and Commissions to identify areas of improvement.

Action 4: Conduct a review of Communications Plan every 4 years.
CONCLUSION

The City Council and staff value two-way communication and recognize the need to provide timely information that is transparent, concise, cohesive, and accessible. We hope to build on the success of our initial Communications Plan by improving current practices, expanding our relationships with community stakeholders, and supporting staff through regular training. This Strategic Communications Plan clearly reiterates the Guiding Principles, Goals, Objectives, and Actions for the City to continue implementing our communications strategy to ensure that we are reaching more people, creating more avenues for civic engagement, and conducting the business of government with transparency.