



Cabarrus County External Communications Policy

Cabarrus County seeks to inform its residents, businesses, and visitors by engaging in pro-active and interactive communications. Cabarrus County's communications plan recognizes that the most effective and quickest methods to communicate County policies and activities to the public is by working in partnership with the traditional news media, while also directly communicating with constituents through digital media platforms, such as the County website and third-party social media applications.

A. Communicating with Media Outlets:

The Communications and Outreach Office is responsible for the County's media relations. Non-routine media requests should be discussed with the Communications Manager prior to response. All County employees should notify the Communications and Outreach Office about routine and non-routine media inquiries immediately following the request. Even seemingly routine media requests may be used to contribute to a larger story that may be controversial. Therefore, it is extremely important for employees to notify the Communications and Outreach Office each time they are contacted by a media representative.

Definition of Routine Media Request – A routine media request is one that seeks basic factual information. Examples include: seeking general information about public events offered by libraries, parks, Senior Centers, etc.; seeking general information about programs or services offered; or other requests seeking information that is readily available and non-controversial.

Definition of Non-Routine Media Request – A non-routine media request may include responses that require the interpretation of policy, employee records, public record request for detailed records, legal action, or emergency situations.

Definition of Media – The term "media" refers to all individuals and organizations who maintain print, broadcast, or digital communication vehicles for public consumption. This definition includes newspapers, magazines, television, blogs, digital news sites, and other vehicles. The Communications and Outreach Office will determine the creditability and validity of these media outlets.

Inquiries from media outlets are given a high priority by Cabarrus County and should be responded to as quickly and efficiently as possible. Every effort should be made to meet media deadlines and to ensure that all information released is accurate.

Because the media often works on tight deadlines, it is important that all departments respond as soon as possible when the Communications and Outreach Office requests department information or a spokesperson for the media. If another priority prevents an immediate response, a courtesy call should be made to the reporter confirming what information is requested and advising when the requested information will be available.

COUNTY SPOKESPERSONS

In most cases, there will be one spokesperson designated for response to each media inquiry. For countywide inquiries, the spokesperson will most often be the Communications Manager/Public Information Officer. For department-related issues, the spokesperson will most often be the Department Director. The spokesperson will work directly with the Communications Manager to ensure that information for specific media requests is communicated appropriately.

Unless otherwise authorized, the County's spokespersons are:

- Communications Manager/Public Information Officer
- Department Directors or Managers
- County Manager and Deputy County Managers
- Clerk to the Board
- Sheriff and Emergency Management Director (Law Enforcement and Emergency have specific media policies that govern their procedures)
- Members of the Board of Commissioners

Exceptions regarding departmental spokespersons may be made at the discretion of the Department Head.

With the exception of routine media requests, media inquiries received by other County staff should be referred immediately to the Communications and Outreach Office, in addition to their Department Head.

An appropriate response to the media would be, "I'm sorry I don't have the full information regarding that issue. I will give your request to my Department Director (or the County's Public Information Officer) who will respond to you as soon as he/she is available." Please obtain the reporter's name, phone number, topic of story, and deadline.

SENSITIVE OR CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

Sensitive or controversial issues often become headlines in the media and have the ability to become viral online. This provision provides the framework for the County's Communications Manager to respond appropriately and as soon as possible to these issues.

County employees should notify the Communications Manager/Public Information Officer immediately when a sensitive or controversial issue pertaining to operations of the County organization is identified, or when an emergency situation occurs (i.e. those that will have an impact on a large number of residents, could potentially generate great media interest, and those that involve high-profile individuals or organizations).

County staff should not wait until there is media interest before contacting the Communications Manager. Immediate notification is critical in order for the Communications Manager to prepare for and to respond to media inquiries. In a crisis

situation, the County Manager will communicate with the Communications Manager, Deputy Managers, and the County Attorney.

Sensitive or Controversial Issues may include, but are not limited to:

- Issues that may affect the County's public image or citizen confidence.
- Existing or potential threats to public safety, welfare, or property.
- Personnel issue regarding any County employee, such as performance evaluation, reasons for termination, reasons for not hiring, harassment claims.
- Legal claims or lawsuits filed against Cabarrus County or any of its employees or agents.

Sensitive and controversial issues of interest to the media may be best assessed by asking the following:

- a. Is the issue a threat, existing or potential, to life, health or property?
- b. Could the issue likely be interpreted to negatively affect public confidence in or opinion of Cabarrus County government?
- c. Is the issue of particular interest to the general public?
- d. Are there legal ramifications, existing or potential, raised by the issue?
- e. Has more than one member of the media inquired about the same issue?
- f. Has someone threatened to go to the media about the issue?
- g. Is there unusual or inappropriate interest by a person or small group of people about a seemingly routine issue?

LEGAL ISSUES – Inquiries regarding pending litigation or exposure to litigation should be referred to the Communications and Outreach Office.

PERSONNEL ISSUES – Inquiries regarding personnel-related information should be referred to the Human Resources Department as well as the Communications and Outreach Office. The Communications Manager will coordinate a response with the County Manager's Office.

ELECTIONS ISSUES – Inquiries regarding election and campaign issues should be referred to the Board of Elections director. The Board of Elections director will contact the County Manager and Communications Manager as appropriate.

PUBLIC SAFETY ISSUES – During a major emergency (i.e. severe weather, chemical spill, large fire, etc.), the procedure for handling the media is highlighted in the County's Emergency Operations Plan. The plan designates the County's Public Information Officer as the main point of contact for the media. Because the Sheriff, Emergency Medical Services and Emergency Management departments operate 24/7 and their work generates a high volume of media calls, those departments have designated personnel as media spokespersons for routine public safety issues and follow specific guidelines when releasing information.

GENERAL OR ROUTINE ISSUES

Broadcast media: Calls or visits from broadcast media (TV and radio) should always be referred immediately to the Communications and Outreach Office and the employee's Department Head. The Communications Manager will coordinate a response, including designating a spokesperson, after consultation with the County Manager and the relevant Department.

For security reasons, County policy prohibits filming or photographing inside any County-owned facility without prior approval by the Communications Manager and/or County Manager.

Local print media: Calls from local print media regarding most departmental issues and programs may be handled by Department-level directors, managers, or other designees. The Director may designate an employee in their department to respond to media questions about specific topics within their expertise. The Communications and Outreach Office should be informed of these media requests – including the name of the reporter and the topic – either before or immediately following these interviews.

Digital/Social media – Contact generated from unknown bloggers or other editors of social media sites or digital news sites should be directed immediately to the Communications and Outreach Office, who will evaluate the media outlet and determine an appropriate response. The best response is to ask what information they need, and then tell them you will gather the information and call them back.

ERRORS IN REPORTING

Errors in reporting will be brought to the attention of the Communications Manager, who will coordinate a correction with the designated media outlet.

B. COUNTY-INITIATED COMMUNICATIONS

Most proactive media (*see definition above*) contact is initiated through the Communications and Outreach Office. This includes issuing news releases and media advisories and personal contacts with reporters, editors, and bloggers. Departments seeking publicity for events or activities should submit a Communications Request through the Watercooler intranet site at least three weeks in advance of the date of preferred media coverage. Departments are strongly encouraged to submit requests as soon as the need for communications assistance is identified to ensure the Communications and Outreach Office has adequate time for planning and implementation.

Occasionally, News Briefings or News Conferences may be held to provide media with in-depth information about an issue or to announce or respond to an issue of great significance. The Communications Manager will be responsible for scheduling any such media events.

COUNTY WEBSITE

The authorized website of Cabarrus County is www.cabarruscounty.us. The County's website is to be used as a communications, awareness building, image enhancement and economic development tool for the County, as well as an online portal for government services.

All County departments should utilize the website as an effective means to communicate with residents and targeted groups, including community leaders and organizations, local and potential businesses, current and potential residents, visitors, and County employees. The County website should showcase County accomplishments, educate the community about how government works, encourage public participation in local government, as well as provide demographic and commercial information that supports business expansion and recruitment.

Adherence to the Cabarrus County Website Policy will facilitate the timely flow of information appropriate for the website through an effective internal process that maximizes message consistency, staff resources and accuracy of information.

COORDINATION: The County's website is coordinated by the Communications and Outreach Office. Requests for web design work for completely new web sections and related content for posting on the County's website will be routed through the Communications and Outreach Office.

Departments are responsible for monitoring their respective areas to ensure accurate and timely information. Each department will provide the Communications and Outreach Office with one department contact, who will participate on the Communications Team and be responsible for the department's web content. A list of authorized personnel will be maintained by the Communications and Outreach Office.

Website submissions should meet the goals and expectations of the County as a whole. Content should fall within the parameters of County policies and state and federal law, including copyright laws.

The website communications management system (Adobe Contribute) allows each department to update standard information (such as calendar information, events, news items, etc.) by using pre-approved templates.

Departments may not develop separate sites with separate web addresses (URLs) without written authorization.

RESPONSIBILITIES:Department-Level Communications Team Liaison

- Content updates to department's website
- Receive department head approval for website changes
- Check for outdated information and broken links monthly (minimum)

Department Head

- Oversight of Communications Team Liaison
- Ensure guidelines are followed
- Approve all content and changes
- Designate alternate web coordinator if necessary

Website Content Manager (Communications and Outreach Manager)

- Overall coordination of content and design
- Implementation of communications guidelines and policies

Information Technology Services & web programmer

- Specialty web services
- Graphic creation assistance
- Technology architecture standards, infrastructure and security

RESPONSE TO WEB INQUIRIES: All requests for information through the County's website (webmaster email) will come directly to the Communications and Outreach Office. The Communications and Outreach Office will be responsible for forwarding the inquiry/request to the department designee, who will track the response. Staff should attempt to respond to web inquiries within a 24-hour period.

LINKS TO OTHER SITES: Links to other websites are limited to government or public agencies; local organizations that receive County funding; and commercial or non-profit websites that have a formal, distinct and project-specific relationship with the County and only for a time limit to be determined by the Communications and Outreach Office. (For example, if the County is a sponsor of an event; or if a vendor site provides useful information about a County service.)

SOCIAL MEDIA/DIGITAL MEDIA

Official sites for Cabarrus County through social media and other digital applications carry the same weight as the County's official website and must be treated with the same respect. In some cases, a social media site can add to the public's understanding of a department or specific project.

Emerging online collaboration platforms are fundamentally changing the way county government is able to work and engage with citizens and community partners. It is important for Cabarrus County to be aware of and participate in this web of information, interaction, and idea exchange.

Before a site is created:

Department head should make contact with the Communications Manager who will bring the request before the Digital Communications Committee to discuss the need for creation of County site(s) such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, MySpace, blogs, etc. The department head must provide a business case for the need and use for a social networking application.

Creation of the site: Pages should be set up as the organization's page, not as an individual. The site will be created by ITS and handed over to the department upon approval by the Digital Communications Committee.

Maintenance of site: One department employee should 'own' authority of the site. He/she should check it daily. No photos, video or documents will be posted to site without approval of the department head.

General Rules of Engagement: As a general rule, most comments from readers should be posted unless they are inflammatory, personal, or Spam. Department and/or the Digital Communications Committee reserve the right to terminate the site.

County Employee Social Computing Guidelines:

Blogs, wikis, social networks, virtual worlds and other social media

These guidelines apply to all Cabarrus County employees who participate in any form of social networking on behalf of the County. First and foremost, County employees are obligated to be aware of and comply with all applicable statutes set forth in the Cabarrus County Personnel Ordinance, including the Technology Appropriate Use Policy.

Employee commitment:

Before creating any external social media site representing County departments, the site administrator should agree to the following and sign his/her name.

I know and will follow all Cabarrus County personnel policies.

I will stick to my area of expertise: I am sharing information with a mass audience and it will be archived for years. I will take this role and its responsibilities seriously.

I will be transparent. If I am dishonest or try to write anonymously, I will lose readers and credibility for myself and the County. If I have a vested interest in a topic, I will say it up front.

I will identify myself—name and, when relevant, role at Cabarrus County—when I discuss Cabarrus County or County-related matters. I will write in the first person and make it clear that I am speaking for myself and not on behalf of Cabarrus County.

If I publish content to any site outside of Cabarrus County's official sites and it has something to do with work I do or subjects associated with Cabarrus County, I will use a disclaimer such as this: "The postings on this site are my own and don't necessarily represent Cabarrus County's positions or opinions."

I will post links to news articles/research that will interest my readers: This will provide a service to the readers and generate links back to the site.

I will not speculate: I will not repeat rumors. If I don't know it to be true, I won't say it.

I will not try to be first to share information with the public: If I know of something that should be used in a news release, or on the County's other sites, I will contact the Communications and Outreach Office.

I will think about the consequences. I am sharing information publicly and must be willing to back it up with my supervisor.

I will not argue with readers: People may disagree with my perspective at some point. I will respectfully clarify my position, if needed, but I will not engage them in an argument.

I will be the first to correct my own mistakes, and I will not alter previous posts without indicating that I have done so.

I will never, ever, address personnel issues. They are protected by law and I could end up in court if I discuss them.

I will take care to ensure that I am always representing the interests of Cabarrus County in a professional manner.

I will not use County sites to raise money.

I will add value to the public dialogue on the issues that are in my purview by providing worthwhile information and perspective.

Employee signature _____ Date _____

Social Media Community Guidelines:

The following guidelines will be posted on the Cabarrus County Facebook page and will be required on any other community sites administered by Cabarrus County departments.

We welcome your participation as a means of sharing your own experiences, suggesting improvements, and chiming in on the conversation. To keep our community focused, we ask that you follow our posting guidelines here:

1. This Community is moderated and all comments are reviewed.
2. Comments made on this site are not official public record. To provide official comments please click here (provide link)
3. The appearance of external links or advertisements on this site does not constitute official endorsement.
4. To ensure exchanges that are productive, informative, respectful of diverse viewpoints and lawful, we will review all comments and we will remove comments that are or include:
 - **Off Topic.** We will exclude comments not related to the subject of the conversation. If you have an idea for a subject, would like to provide feedback, or would like follow-up from us, please contact us (provide link).
 - **Spam.** Comments focused on selling a product or service, or comments posted for a purpose of driving traffic to a particular website for personal, political, or monetary gain, will be excluded. Comments in HTML format (or URLs) will not be accepted. Please only enter plain text.
 - **Personal Attacks.** If you disagree with the content, we'd like to hear from you, but ask that you refrain from comments that attempt to defame or defraud any financial, commercial or non-governmental agency or personal attack of others. Malicious intent and or participation not in the spirit of civil conversation will be excluded.
 - **Illegal.** Comments that suggest or encourage illegal activity are not allowed. Laws that govern use of copyrights, trade secrets, etc., will be followed.
 - **Offensive Language.** Comments including, but not limited to, graphic, obscene, explicit, abusive, derogatory, or racial content will be excluded.
 - **Private or Confidential Information.** You participate at your own risk, taking personal responsibility for your comments, your username and any information provided. Please do not provide any specific personal information about yourself or other individuals. Please note that we cannot accept comments from individuals under the age of 13.

GUIDELINES FOR EMPLOYEES ACTING AS PRIVATE CITIZENS

The following guidelines are offered to employees who may choose to contact the media as a private citizen. These guidelines do not prohibit such contact but support other County policies regarding improper use of County equipment and property.

Letters to the Editor may not be prepared on County time, printed on County letterhead, mailed at County expense or emailed from a County email address. Telephone contact must not be made on County time using County telephones. Use of County facilities, computers or supplies is prohibited.

Responses or letters to the media, preferably, shall not include the employee's official title or imply that comments are made on behalf of Cabarrus County government. You should include a sentence stating that you are speaking as a private citizen. Similar disclaimers must be given if an employee addresses a public meeting, participates in a radio talk show, or is interviewed for a radio or television program unless the employee is officially representing the County.

Cabarrus County understands that employees may maintain or contribute to personal blogs, message boards, conversation pages and other forms of social media (such as Facebook and Twitter) outside of their job function and may periodically post information about their job or Cabarrus County's activities on these outlets. If an employee posts Cabarrus County or job-related information, they are required to exercise good judgment and abide by Cabarrus County policies.

If an employee is engaging on external social media platforms personally, they should not use Cabarrus County's name in their identity (e.g. username, "handle" or screen name), nor should they speak as a representative of the County. If a media inquiry is generated (either from a traditional media journalist or from a blogger), please direct it to the Communications and Outreach Office.