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## onnections for a Lifetime: Building Community Trust and Relationships

March 27, 2001



**VIRGINIA  
BEACH**

Citizen Communication  
and Interrelationships Work Group  
Final Report - March 2001



## **Acknowledgment**

The *Citizen Communication and Interrelationships Work Group* would like to thank all of the citizens, volunteers, and staff who contributed to the research, development and review of this report.

Special thanks to those who participated in the surveys, interviews, and focus groups and to the civic organizations who critiqued the draft report.

This valuable feedback from the community became the foundation for the recommendations made in this report.

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# *Executive Summary*

## **Background**

In August 1999, the Citizens Communication and Interrelationships Work Group was formed for the purpose of developing recommendations, methods, processes, policies, procedures and training needed to create and maintain active, two-way communication between the City government and Virginia Beach citizens.

## **Research**

Several methods were used to gather citizen input and identify “best practices.” A survey on communications and two focus groups were professionally designed, administered and analyzed. There was also face-to-face discussion and solicitation for input with civic groups, the business community and City Council. The Work Group also did original research to discover “best practices” from cities across the country.

## **What We Found**

The research discovered satisfaction on one level but communication related needs when viewed more fully. The Communications Survey found 80-82% approval for the amount of communication from the City and the ease for citizens to communicate with their government.

However, success in communications, whether giving information or receiving information, is different from a belief that the exchange will make a difference. Nearly one-third of overall survey respondents said they thought the City was “not interested” in their opinions and this viewpoint was also expressed in the focus groups. Over half of the survey participants also said they did not know how to influence City decisions.

While focus group participants were enthusiastic about many of the existing and proposed communication tools, they were more focused on *principles of communication*. They told us that “how we communicate is as important as what we communicate.” Over half of their highest priorities related to how information is handled. There was strong support for wide use of public dialogue, early information sharing, ease of participation and the use of information as opposed to persuasion. Overall, study participants were appreciative that the City of Virginia Beach is giving serious attention to its relationship with citizens.

## **Statement of Opportunity**

Representative government works best in an environment of openly shared information and viewpoints. Vital to its success is mutual understanding and trust among elected officials, citizens and government employees. Communication can occur in ways that share information while building positive relationships among these groups.

The communication challenges presented by the above statements are not unique to Virginia Beach. The historic skepticism of the American citizenry toward government in general has grown in recent years. Citizen groups and governments around the nation are looking for ways to address the issue. What is unique about the recommendations contained in this report is that they are based on the expressed concerns of Virginia Beach residents. They represent a shared sense of how to seize the opportunity to build a more connected, and therefore stronger, community through better

communications. In short, it will take “Connections for a Lifetime” to create our “Community for a Lifetime.”

### **Report Recommendations**

While the recommended actions are organized within two tiers, it is important to remember their connectedness when considering them:

#### **First Tier Recommendations:**

- ? **Build mutual trust and confidence through a “paradigm shift” in citizen engagement**  
This shift would provide for greater **ease of participation**, a commitment to **early information sharing** and a policy for developing **information, not persuasion**.
- ? **Make public dialogue the cornerstone** of a communication and interrelationships process whose outcome is a belief by citizens that they can make a difference in their community.
- ? **Ensure effective staff communications with citizens.** Adjust employee selection and training programs to assure that the City hires competent communicators and then provides training that leads to improvements in communications and in the trust between citizens and their government.
- ? **Form a citywide *Civic Academy*** to expand the community’s leadership base and civic capacity for collaboration and problem solving.
- ? Purchase a **weekly “City Page”** in The Virginian-Pilot for maximum exposure of factual information and messages about City services, programs, events and issues.
- ? **Enhance VBTv 48 programming** to make it a primary source for news and information on important civic issues and to provide civic instruction.

#### **Second Tier Recommendations:**

- ? Continue to **invest in electronic government** to ensure that the City is prepared to be skillful in the use of this rapidly growing citizens’ communication tool.
- ? Do research and then develop a plan to **make public hearings more effective and meaningful** communication experiences.
- ? Expand recruitment for membership on the **citizen advisory boards and commissions** to find new participants, including some youth representatives.
- ? Restructure existing programs, or create new ones, to **educate children about government** and build civic mindedness.
- ? **Increase meetings with print and television media representatives** to develop relationships, build understanding and share issues.

## *Background*

The quality of communication between citizens and elected officials and between citizens and government employees is of paramount importance. Representative government works best in an environment of openly shared information and viewpoints and public involvement processes that promote mutual understanding and trust. The strategy document entitled “Community for a Lifetime” proposes an outcome strategy that speaks directly to this environment:

*We facilitate citizen communication, learning and engagement by creating forums for honest and open dialogue on community issues by ensuring inclusion and an equal awareness and knowledge, and by providing appropriate methods and tools.*

This outcome was assigned to the Public Relations and Marketing Commons Policy Team for action. The Commons Policy Team formed a subgroup called the **Citizens Communication and Interrelationships (CCI) Work Group** in August, 1999. This report contains the results of the Work Group’s work.

The work leading to this report included the publication and presentation to City Council of a document entitled “Citizen Communication and Interrelationships Progress Report” in October, 2000. The Work Group has made a number of significant changes to its recommendations since that time. These changes were the result of exchanges with individual citizens and staff members, with civic and business groups, and with two focus groups. They include a much stronger emphasis upon trust-building as an outcome of our communication, a commitment to talk with citizens rather than survey citizens to gauge the success of the recommendations, a greater systems approach to our staff recruitment, selection and training program relating to communications and relationship-building, and the elimination of earlier suggestions about using automated telephone messages to communicate with citizens. These changes are addressed within the body of the report.

This report is organized in a way that presents the recommendations first. Substantiating research can be found in the **Methodology and Summaries of Findings** section.

### CCI Work Group Charter

The Work Group was directed to:

- Develop recommendations, methods, processes, policies, procedures and training needed to create and maintain active, two-way communication between the City government and Virginia Beach citizens
- Include research about best practices in other cities
- Consider opinions of citizen groups throughout Virginia Beach
- Make recommendations that would assure a consistent quality of communications across the organization, be useable by individuals in and out of City government, and be capable of being tracked and evaluated for success.

### Outcomes

The Work Group ultimately identified four outcomes that it believes can be the result of its recommendations. The outcomes build upon a foundation of solid communications and culminate in issues of relationship and engagement, areas where we believe we have real opportunity for improvement:

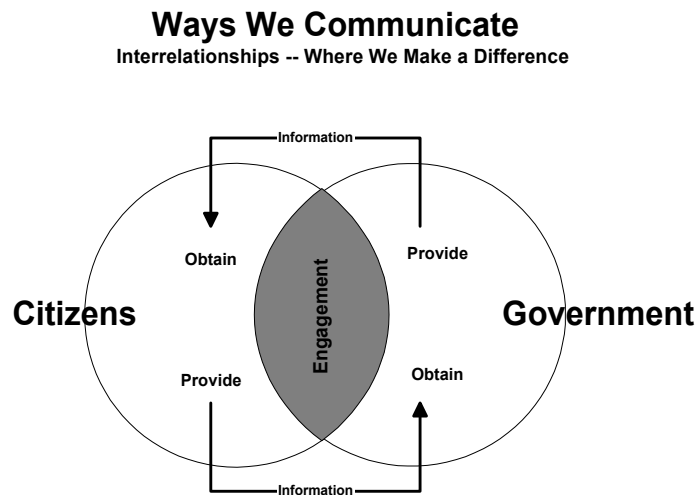
- [Communications](#): Citizens are aware of City services, programs and events sponsored by City government. Citizens understand all sides of complex civic policy issues.
- [Civic Engagement](#): Citizens engage with one another and with government in deliberation about civic policy issues.
- [Civic Capacity](#): Citizens feel they can make a difference in civic issues.
- [Member Capacity](#): Citizens and government employees experience open and easy communication with each other. Government members have the skills, tools, and capacity to effectively build positive relationships with citizens.

## *Recommendations*

Improvements in communications and interrelationships between government and citizens invite leadership from all members of government. There are leadership roles for both City Council and City staff. The job of making improvements is not solely the job of the Media and Communications Office. It's everyone's job. The Communications Survey supports this viewpoint.

Actions taken to improve communications will make gradual, incremental change in areas that are already perceived and experienced as generally successful. It's fair to say that the real issue we are grappling with is the development of improved interrelationships between City Council and City staff and the citizens of Virginia Beach. We can have all the communications in the world, but without solid relationships, we'll see little improvement. Conversely, if we build increased trust between government and citizens, our communications issues may become even smaller.

**There may be a tendency to think of "communications" and "interrelationships" as if they are two separate activities. They are not. Every opportunity for communication is an opportunity to build trust and understanding between City government members and citizens. The business of communications is in fact the business of creating positive interrelationships among us all.**



Communications and interrelationships take a number of forms. One-way communications ("Providing" and "Obtaining" information) have both active and passive attributes. Their success, however, will be affected by the participants' relative confidence in the usefulness and meaningfulness of the effort. Similarly, there can be highly engaged activities in which the participants are working and learning with one another as they strive for a common goal. Engagement is where real interrelationships occur. It is active, and it takes effort. The willingness to expend this effort will be largely based in a belief that it will make a difference.

While the recommended actions are organized as a list within each tier, it is important to remember their connectedness when considering them.

### **First Tier Recommendations**

- **Building Mutual Trust: A Paradigm Shift in Citizen Engagement:** This recommendation is rooted in the reality that a paradigm shift is needed in terms of how we engage our citizens to build trust and confidence, and it is in direct response to common themes expressed by citizens through surveys and focus groups. The paradigm shift is multi-faceted but has three primary areas of focus: **Ease of Participation, Early Information Sharing, and Information versus Persuasion.** All three of the components are interrelated and interdependent. Each individually and collectively represent a new approach to citizen engagement and building mutual trust.

- ? **Ease of Participation:** Citizens have expressed the desire that government take into account what their everyday realities are. One recurring criticism heard from citizens is the frustration expressed for their inability to attend City meetings due to the time of day the meetings are held. We live in a world in which the majority of adults in any household are working away from home. Meetings need to be held and structured to respect the lifestyle, realities and time constraints of citizens. Issues such as childcare and access often surface. The availability of childcare at meetings and electronic exchanges of information are just two ways that speak to real world issues of family life and convenience and can be combined with other tools to increase the ease of participation.

Process Manager: City Manager's Office with the assistance of City Council and Parks and Recreation

Action Plan:

- ? Request that City Council discuss the establishment of a pilot program with night-only Council meetings and recommend to other boards and commissions that they also consider doing so. This might maximize the opportunities for citizen involvement.
- ? Request that Parks and Recreation conduct a three-month pilot program to provide childcare at Council Meetings, whether held only at night to create a "family friendly" environment.
- ? Establish a team, comprised of a member of the City Clerk's Office, the City Manager's Office, Public Works, Public Utilities, and Management Services to develop a process to accept and forward electronic input into processes such as zoning changes; public hearings; council agenda items. Many communities have continual "electronic public hearings" where citizen input is collected and forwarded to the appropriate staff and to all council members for use in their deliberations.

Projected Costs:

- ? Having all City Council meetings at night will increase the use of overtime for staff.
- ? Estimated cost of childcare at meetings would be approximately \$30 per hour (includes staff and supplies) and assumes that space would be provided in either

City Hall or in a Human Resources Training Room. An average three hour meeting would cost \$90. Parks and Recreation suggests that this service be limited to children ages three (potty trained) to 12 years old. Children older than 12 could attend the meeting itself. To recoup part of the cost a nominal fee could possibly be charged for the service.

- ? Costs are unknown at this time for the process to establish electronic public hearings. Further research needs to be done on potential software.
- ? Costs of advertising are estimated at \$4,000.

- ? **Early Information Sharing:** Any plan that intends to increase citizens' belief that they can make a difference in their government must make a serious commitment to the sharing of information early enough and in ways in which citizens can understand and know how and when to contribute their viewpoints. This component of our recommended paradigm responds to citizen requests for timely, accurate and accessible information from their government. Survey and focus group feedback underscored the perception that citizens feel they often don't have information early enough to be able to form opinions and contribute to public discourse. The combination of early information sharing and face-to-face dialogue between City representatives and citizens would combine to create mutual understanding, trust and real learning. Any program of early information sharing and citizen feedback will be imperfect; not everyone will find out about these opportunities and others may only find out much later that they were actually interested in them. Nevertheless, they offer an opportunity in an imperfect world to invite real citizen engagement at a time when it can be useful to both government and citizens.

Process Manager: Chief of Staff with assistance from each Chief, the VBQSS Coordinating Center (VCC), Human Resources Training, City Manager's Media and Communications Group, and the Communications and Information Technology (ComIT) Department

Action Plan:

- ? Each Chief would identify an issue manager for critical projects/large issues who would be responsible for reviewing information provided to the public for that project/issue prior to its release with an eye toward getting the information to citizen stakeholders early in the process with adequate time for public dialogue. The issue manager would be responsible for the consistency and accuracy of the information distributed for that project.
- ? Provide training to Directors, middle managers and supervisors in the Philosophy of Completed Staff Work with a focus on involvement of citizens early in the decision making process. The Completed Staff Work Document, which is an integral part of the Virginia Beach Quality Service System, clearly identifies the need to involve stakeholders in the formation of decisions. Citizens are clearly stakeholders in nearly every decision we make as an organization. Currently a workgroup commissioned by the Chief of Staff is working on the Completed Staff Work Document and should be consulted in developing this training.
- ? Utilize City Page, the City's Website, VBTv 48, public dialogue, conventional public information vehicles, forums, and the like, to get information out early.

Projected Costs:

- ? An existing training contractor has developed a training class which he has given to several agencies. This could be extended to other departments. Estimated cost

would be approximately \$4,000. Expansion of the Completed Staff Work training to the rest of the organization would cost \$300 per session.

- ? **Information versus Persuasion:** It is recommended that the government include a diversity of viewpoints of an issue when it attempts to educate citizens about individual projects, programs, etc. This component of our recommended paradigm shift responds to the feedback we heard from citizens. Education and understanding, rather than persuasion, would be the prevailing ethic. When government designs a public forum, exhibit or flyer, it would offer pros and cons, identify the anticipated risks as accurately as possible, and explain the rationale for its particular recommendation. This approach “anchors” our citizens in the decision-making process and ensures them that they are a part of the vision and destiny of our city.

Process Manager: Chief Information Officer with the assistance of all City staff and decision makers

Action Plan:

- ? Information pieces on decisions and projects published to support dialogues and hearings, or published as stand-alone items, should identify the major alternatives that are being considered and provide the reader with some understanding of the variables the City is weighing, the direction the City is leaning toward and reasons for its decisions. This standard would also apply to video and Internet products as well. When there is a legitimate risk to the City, that needs to be explained as well as the steps the City took (or is taking) to mitigate the risk discussed.

Projected Costs:

- ? Minimal

- **Public Dialogue:** Experiences with "community conversations" and with the dialogues used to develop the Comprehensive Plan and the Open Space portion of the Outdoor Plan suggest increased reliance upon structured public dialogues that build mutual trust and shared understanding. These dialogues support the government employees' preference for face-to-face contact, and they help assure that accurate and early information is the basis of public discussion. They invite citizens to be part of the learning as a project evolves and provide feedback as decisions are being made. Public dialogue can be used by both City Council and City government employees, it can address fundamental leadership issues as well as neighborhood-level concerns, and it can be the cornerstone of a communications and interrelationship process whose outcome is a belief by citizens that they can make a difference in their community. The Outdoor Plan model can be a vehicle adapted for all types and levels of dialogue.

Process Manager: City Manager's Office (Chief Information Officer, Media and Communications Group and Assistant to the City Manager for Community Affairs), and Management Services

Action Plan:

- ? Citywide Public Dialogues: City Council and City staff would sponsor citywide

dialogue on issues of critical importance to the goals of City Council and to the accomplishment of the "Community for a Lifetime" strategy. The Outdoor Plan model would be the fundamental structure of the dialogues. The dialogues would invite a shared understanding of how alternative actions affect our ability to become the city we desire. Understanding rather than consensus would be the outcome.

? City Council Dialogues: City Council members, who volunteer to do so, would lead public meetings in their respective districts to hear citizen input, build consensus around the goals of City Council or develop shared understanding about a citywide issue. The meetings would be led by the City Council member with assistance from City staff. Each meeting could include time to offer feedback from previous meetings, have a structured dialogue on a chosen topic, and receive input or questions from citizens about locally important issues. Depending on interest, a training session would be made available for participating City Council members so they can choose the meeting method most appropriate to the chosen outcome. These dialogue meetings should be scheduled regularly and frequently so citizens can anticipate and plan for their occurrence.

? City staff dialogues: City staff would make use of existing meetings of citizens to address community and neighborhood level issues that require citizen input or participation in the consensus-building or decision-making process. For instance, the Citizen Advisory Councils associated with each Police precinct did broaden their membership to include Fire, Housing and Parks and Recreation issues and brought in representatives from other departments as needed.

Projected Costs:

? All of these would require significant commitment of staff and time. City Manager's Office may require additional staff given the additional work. A "pilot" effort would gauge interest, effectiveness before full implementation and hiring of staff.

? Printing materials estimated at \$5,000

- **Effective Staff Communications with Citizens:** City employees have many opportunities each day to be knowledgeable and caring representatives of the policies of City Council and the directives of government. Telephone conversations, face-to-face visits in offices, presentations and dialogues with community groups, news releases, email and letters all provide opportunities to improve both communications and confidence between citizens and their government. In addition, policy research and preparation requires that these employees know how to use focus groups, dialogue, surveys, etc. to improve their understanding of citizen viewpoints. This recommendation suggests that employee recruitment, selection and training programs can assure that the government hires competent communicators and helps them improve their skills over time. It will enable staff members to prepare presentations and printed materials that are designed for a particular audience, and it will help presenters more ably and accountably respond to citizen questions and provide more detailed responses to unanswered questions. It includes action items developed earlier by the Citizen Inquiry Team, and it expands the definition of an employee's job to include assuring a better city not simply better services from a particular department.

Process Manager: Chief of Staff and Chief Information Officer with assistance from the Customer Communications Coordinator, VBQSS Coordinating Center, Assistant to the City Manager for Community Affairs,

Action Plan:

- ? When existing job statements are reviewed, assure that communication and trust-building knowledge, skills and abilities of appropriate levels are part of the recruitment and selection process for new employees.
- ? Review the outcomes for citizen communication outlined in this report during each orientation training for new employees.
- ? The Professional Support Development Team has completed City Telephone Standards and a training manual for consistency in handling telephone calls. The Standards have been adopted by the Management Leadership Team and implementation is still under review. We feel that this is a critical first step to clarify the organization's expectations in these situations and we recommend that this effort receive priority support.
- ? Align the work of the team implementing the strategic plan for creation of a Citizen Contact System to ensure it considers how such a system would build relationships as well as provide customer service.
- ? Offer training classes on the use of focus groups, surveys and other techniques to gauge public sentiment. This training should focus on individuals throughout the organization who will routinely use the training in the performance of their jobs.
- ? Provide follow-up/comment cards to city staff to use at all public speaking engagements. Completed cards should be returned to the speaker or sent to the City Manager's Office. The City Manager's Office will track the questions and the responses. It is of critical importance that City staff understand the need to respond in a timely fashion to citizen questions, even if the initial response is that they are working on the answer. An open discussion at a Department Leadership Meeting would help convey this message.

Projected Costs:

- ? Costs for the Citizen Contact Center would be known after the RFP process.
- ? Estimated costs for the telephone training depends on the final recommendations of the PSDT.
- ? Printing of Follow-up Cards will cost approximately \$1,000
- ? City Manager's staff may require additional staff to process and track comment cards in order to maintain a reasonable response time.
- ? Develop research methodology training (focus groups, surveys, dialogue, etc.) that can be replicated throughout the organization. Estimated development cost is \$10,000.

- ***Citywide Civic Academy:*** The primary outcome of this recommendation is the expansion of our community's civic capacity for leadership, collaboration and problem solving. The citywide ***Civic Academy*** will empower citizens to engage the City as equal partners by expanding their individual and collective capacity to influence government and become an active participant in the future direction of their city. The formation of a citywide ***Civic Academy*** will create a new cadre of community leaders who will become intimate with how City government works, understand how to learn about complex civic issues, know the appropriate channels for two-way civic dialogue, and understand how to affect the decisions of their government. This recommendation envisions the role of government beyond that of providing basic services. It expands the role to that of a capacity builder, facilitator,

community partner, co-trainer and catalyst for civic action. Through a robust collection of partnerships, programs, methods, policies, processes and products, the *Civic Academy* will be the institutional framework used to develop and nurture a whole new generation of community partners.

With the *Neighborhood Institute* as its nucleus, the *Civic Academy* will be a partnership of community leaders, civic organizations, businesses and city leadership. Citizens will receive training and orientation in a wide range of areas including: the role and responsibilities of being a board member, how to form a civic league, how to run effective meetings, dialogue versus debate, how to conduct a neighborhood needs assessment, conflict resolution, diversity, how to work with media, forming a 501(c)(3), and fund raising, among others.

Another component of the citywide *Civic Academy* is helping people know how to influence their government. The Academy can review available community resources -- from housing to health, city planning to community policing, from a review of meeting places for community groups, to an inventory of recreational outlets. The opportunity to add value to the average citizen's knowledge base is limitless. The City can act as co-sponsor and/or partner with others to provide the training. VBTV 48 and Vbgov.com are natural and valuable conduits to reach citizens with this training.

Process Manager: Department of Housing and Neighborhood Preservation with assistance from Management Services Department, Media and Communication Group

Action Plan:

- ? Create a workgroup to develop a proposal and related comprehensive presentation that will articulate the composition of the proposed citywide Civic Academy. The presentation will include details about the institutional framework of the Civic Academy, its structure, curriculum, potential partners and target audience.
- ? Present the citywide Civic Academy idea to civic league presidents and key community opinion leaders during a focus group designed to gauge receptivity to the program. We'd ask participants to provide feedback about what they like and dislike, training they would add. The feedback received would be used to shape the program to the expressed needs of the community.

- **City Page:** Newspaper advertising can be used to provide citizens with current, accurate and pertinent information about City services, programs, issues and projects. A weekly "*City Page*" would have short informational pieces about city projects, programs, and events as well as be a potential source for public notices about public hearings and the like. The weekly *City Page* would be included in the Hampton Roads section of The Virginian-Pilot. The Virginian-Pilot has a major impact on the City's image and how the City is perceived by the general Hampton Roads public. Many Hampton Roads residents read The Pilot to get information about our city. Placing information in the 'main sheet' ensures maximum exposure and allows us to 'tell our own story.'

*City Page* would permit the City government to tell a coherent story about Virginia Beach. Telling the story, however, is not the same as having it believed. If *City Page* is to boost the

trust that readers have in its content, it must include all sides of an issue when it attempts to educate citizens about individual projects, programs and policies. While **City Page** will be a place to tell the story about positive experiences of citizens and their government, it must be a trust-builder as well as an image-builder.

Process Manager: Media and Communication Group/City Manager's Office

Actions Plan:

- ? Conduct a pilot test for six months to assess the value of a **City Page**. (Pilot period currently underway from January through June, 2001 on a twice a month basis, not weekly).
- ? Implement a full page "**City Page**" in the Virginian Pilot on a regular basis to include ads and short informational pieces about City projects, programs and events.

Projected Costs:

\$208,000 for a weekly "main sheet" full page (note: partial funding included in the Proposed Resource Management Plan for FY 2001/02 would provide for an every other week schedule).

\$40,000 in salary and benefits for a Media and Comm. Coordinator and \$10,000 to convert the part-time freelance graphic artist to full time to design/layout the page.(note: these costs are included in the Proposed Resource Management Plan for FY 2001/02

- **Enhance VBTV 48 Programming:** Program VBTV 48 to become one of the primary sources for up-to-date "news" and information coverage on important civic issues; include in its programming civic instruction similar to that offered by the Neighborhood Institute; and be a place of inclusiveness. Increased resources, including an expanded advertising budget, would be required to bring these new opportunities to Virginia Beach residents and provide these services to City Council and City departments. These recommendations will bridge the apparent gap between a citizen expression for more VBTV48 programming and current viewership levels. The proposed actions that support the recommendation link this proposal with the investments in Vbgov.com and the development of a civic academy as recommended in this report.

The enhancement of VBTV programming also dovetails with positioning the City as "government as educator, partner and builder of community capacity." When VBTV programs are utilized as a vehicle to partner with the Neighborhood Institute, community groups, the business community, and the like, it will become a more proactive and positive force in citizen communications. Raising the level of quality and quantity of VBTV programs will also result in increased viewership and will parlay VBTV into a recognized primary source of detailed information.

Process Manager: Video Services Division/ComIT with the assistance of the Media and Communications Group

Action Plan:

- ? Conduct viewer research and best practices research to determine how to enhance VBTV.
- ? Produce and air advertisements on cable television to direct viewers to VBTV

programming where City programs, events, issues, etc. are promoted for City government.

- ? Create and produce additional programming that continues to support Council's goals and supports the recommendations in this report; increase video public meeting/forum coverage; create additional single issue programs about the "hot topics/issues" facing the City.

Projected Costs:

\$17,000 for research to include a telephone survey of citizens and focus groups  
\$ 42,000 - Salary and benefits to hire two staff members mid-year  
\$ 2,000 - Increase in freelance budget to support additional news programs  
\$ 12,000 - Increased advertising

### **Second Tier Recommendations**

- **Investment in Electronic Government:** The Work Group recommends increased opportunities for e-mail communications among citizens, government employees and City Council members; the creation of more interactive electronic government opportunities; and the development of structured, moderated "chat" on civic issues. Improving communications and relationships could provide an additional focus for some of the VBgov.com initiatives in development. E-mail communications seem to be analogous to one-on-one methods that are used by citizens and preferred by government employees. Online discussions could parallel public dialogues on selected topics of importance to the community. If investment is made in the City's Web site, investment must also be made throughout government to assure that elected officials and government employees have the capacity and competency to participate and respond quickly to electronic communications. While the Communications Survey did not strongly support investment in the City's Web site, it seems essential that the government prepare itself to be a skillful participant in the evolving electronic communications experience. Providing "24 hours a day/seven-days-a-week" opportunities to build virtual community is one of these experiences.

Process Manager: Chief Information Officer with assistance from the Webmaster, Public Libraries and the Media and Communications Group.

Action Plan:

- ? The work of the E-Gov Citizen Commission has been excellent. Recommend that the city continue to support the work of this group with the request that they focus on creating a system whose services help build relationships, connect people and build trust.

Projected Costs:

? Unknown

- **Public Hearings:** Public hearings are required of many City departments. These experiences probably range between one-way presentations with audience questions to structured dialogue among citizens and government representatives. We recommend research to develop an understanding of the current practices and the legal and regulatory requirements for such hearings. Based on this research, we recommend development of a

plan for additional communication experiences that might be used during these hearings to increase the degree of dialogue among all participants. Adaptation of the Outdoor Plan Model could be one method to enhance the quality of public hearings. Improved methods of notification and better citizen understanding of the public hearing process are other methods to be considered. The purpose of the recommendation is to find ways that we might go beyond the minimum requirements of the public hearing, so the experience is more meaningful for the participants.

Process Manager: Chief Information Officer with support from the City Clerk's Office, City Attorney's Office, Media and Communication Group, Planning; Public Works, Parks and Recreation, and Public Utilities, Community Services Board

Action Plan:

? Form a team comprised of two City Council Members; one Planning Commission Member, one Board of Zoning Appeal member, one Community Services Board Member, and one each: City Clerk's Office, City Attorney's Office, Planning, Public Works, Parks and Recreation, and Public Utilities. This team would examine the various types of public hearings/public meetings currently undertaken to gain citizen input and seek ways to improve the process for all parties. The team would develop a set of guidelines for holding each type of public input process. These guidelines would include: how to enrich the process with dialogue opportunities where the law and regulations permit; when to hold each type of meeting to provide meaningful input; legal requirements; advertising requirements; who the players would be in each type of input process; etc.

Projected Costs:

? Minimal - approximately \$2,000 for printing of guidelines.

- **Citizen Advisory Boards:** Citizen advisory boards and commissions are comprised of people who are willing to be civic leaders. It is recommended that all citizen advisory board members be briefed on the "Community for a Lifetime" strategy and be invited to see their work as one part of an overall community initiative. It is also recommended that the recruitment program be expanded to bring new names into the pool of potential participants, and that government respond to all individuals who offer their names so they are aware of the status of their opportunity. The City government's recruitment program must not overlook the youth of our community. Participation on teen advisory boards and as members of Council-appointed boards and commissions can enable teens to participate in civic decision-making while learning about the hard work of governing. Finally, it is recommended that we develop a program that helps define and nurture the relationship between the advisory groups and City Council. Members of citizen advisory groups are our frontline civic participants. They are an obvious place to begin improving communications and relationships.

Process Manager: Chief of Staff with the assistance of the City Clerk, the Volunteer Council, the VBQSS Coordinating Center (VCC) and Human Resources Training

Action Plan:

? Request that the City Council discuss methods to increase citizen participation on various boards, commissions, and citizen advisory groups through their appointment process, to encourage active participation in government decision making.

- ? Provide training to citizen advisory groups on City Council’s goals, the Virginia Beach Quality Service System (VBQSS) and the City’s Strategy. A workgroup for Organizational Learning and Development has interviewed staff liaisons from a variety of Council appointed Boards and Commissions to determine what they need to understand about the Virginia Beach Quality Service System to effectively fulfill their role. Recommendations on specific training and who would provide the training are still under discussion. Extend similar training to citizen advisory groups as well as Council appointed Boards and Commissions.
- ? Encourage the formation of teen advisory boards throughout the government to bring the voice of young people into government decision-making, and include young people on appointed boards and commissions where their viewpoints are important to the outcomes.

Projected Costs: Minimal

- **Educating Children about Government:** Building civic mindedness among our children may be a profoundly important investment in helping to build a “Community for a Lifetime.” It is recommended that we restructure programs such as “Job Shadowing” and “Official for a Day” that are shared between the government and the public schools. It is recommended that whenever students join members of government, the members of government be furnished with a set of guidelines for topics relating to communications and interrelationships that can be shared with the children. This approach could be expanded to include contacts with curriculum planners and civic teachers to extend the concept into the classroom.

Process Manager: Youth Opportunities Office

Action Plan:

- ? Develop a set of guidelines for use by City staff when participating in programs such as Job Shadowing Day and Official for the Day. These are opportunities to share with the children of our community, not just what the staff person does for a living, but also why they are in local government. We can share the concept of civics and why it’s important. These are opportunities to improve communications, understanding, and interrelationships within our community.
- ? Contact the public school system and private school curriculum planners to see if there is interest in extending civic education into the classroom.

Projected Costs:

- ? Minimal

- ? **Increase Meetings with Print and Television Media:** Periodic meetings among representatives of the print and television media and leaders of Virginia Beach government could be a valuable way to build understanding. Members of the Management Leadership Team, department directors, middle managers and key media contacts would meet with editors and editorial board members, assignment editors and news directors. The outcome of these meetings would include development of more personalized relationships, sharing of issues anticipated on the government’s horizon, dialogue about perceived problems and planning for the ways that government and the press can collaborate in the building of a “Community for a

Lifetime” while the press can maintain its watchdog role in our democracy. The recommendation derives from the recognition of the importance of the media in an overall communications plan.

Process Manager: Media and Communications Group(MCG)/City Manager’s Office with the assistance of the public relations staff within City departments and agencies

Action Plan:

- ? Arrange an annual meeting with the Directors/middle managers and local news reporters/editors/editorial writers at the beginning of each fiscal year or calendar year.
- ? Continue on-going contact (daily or several times a week) with reporters and assignment editors to pitch stories and provide access to information, experts to interview, etc.
- ? Extend the media tour program to include broadcast media as well as print and conduct at least two media tours with City experts annually.
- ? Update current Media Relations Manual and redistribute to all City departments
- ? Conduct media relations and interview training for City staff who have contact with reporters.

Projected Costs:

- ? Annual meeting - \$500
- ? Media Tours - \$1,500
- ? Media Relations Training - 2-day, \$10,000

## **Monitoring/Measuring of Implementation**

It is recommended that monitoring the implementation of these recommendations be the responsibility of the Chief Information Officer through the Public Relations and Marketing Commons Policy Team. It is also recommended that the citizen communication survey conducted by this Work Group serve as a benchmark and be conducted again after implementation of the recommendations.

- **Progress Reports:** To assess progress, identify needs and opportunities, and report back to the City Council, a group will be convened to set citizen communication goals related to this report, evaluate them on an annual basis and issue a report.

Process Manager: Media and Communications Group

Action Plan:

Convene a Citizen Communication Task Force that would include representatives of the Citizen Communication and Interrelationships Work Group, a representative of the Coalition of Civic Organizations and other such civic groups.

## ***Methodology and Summaries of Findings***

The Work Group supported its work by conducting a Communications Survey in February 2000. The survey was designed, administered and analyzed by Continental Research Associates, Inc. The Work Group relied upon the same survey methodology to gather information from a variety of unique citizen groups: businesses, civic leagues, the media, churches, the resort industry, agriculture, and volunteers in government. It heard presentations about the Outdoor Plan dialogue methodology, and it learned about public information programs being undertaken by the Media and

Communications Office, VBTv 48 and the City's Web site. It surveyed municipalities of all sizes throughout the United States to learn about citizen communications and relationship programs already underway. It presented its initial conclusions to City Council in October, 2000. Following that presentation, it worked with civic and business groups, individual citizens, staff members and two citizen focus groups to refine its recommendations.

## Communications Survey

The Communications Survey established that the government of the City of Virginia Beach does an excellent job communicating with citizens. **More than 82% of the respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the level of communication the government has with its residents and believe they are able to keep up-to-date with City services, policies and projects.** In this respect, we are working to improve a process that already enjoys considerable success.

Survey results exhibited heavy reliance (75 percent) on the Virginian-Pilot and local television news to get information about the City of Virginia Beach services, policies, and projects. Forty-nine (49) percent of respondents receive their information from the Pilot/Beacon, with 26 percent indicating they received their information from television news.

Respondents to the survey provided interesting insights when asked to recommend ways for the government to expand communications with citizens. VBTv 48 was the overwhelming choice for the government to expand communications with citizens. At the same time, there was very little interest in placing more information in the newspaper. There is a paradox in this response: while there may not be an expressed interest for more information to be inserted in the newspaper, the newspaper is the place where most citizens get information about government.

Another common method of sharing information between the government and citizens is to send City staff to civic, social and cultural groups to talk about government services. While many respondents felt this was important, there was enough polarization of viewpoints to suggest that just sending representatives to meetings will not be an effective way to tell the government story. Small meetings where conversation and dialogue prevail may be more useful in boosting mutual understanding. Speakers may not achieve this outcome.

One interesting aspect of the survey concerns expanding the City's Web sites. While very few people felt this was important, the response may be attributed to the very newness of the medium. An investment in "electronic government" may be an important investment for the future, even if it is not a crucial issue today. The investment in electronic, interactive communications between government and citizens will become increasingly important as more and more individuals become accustomed to communicating on the Internet. More recent survey results from the Citizen Survey, conducted in June 2000, show that 76% of the households in Virginia Beach have Internet access at home or through their employer and 29% reported having visited the City's Web site.

Communication is not a one-way street. It does not occur simply from government to citizens. To have communication, citizens must be communicating to their government. Here, as with the issue of government communications to citizens, there is broad satisfaction in Virginia Beach: over 80% of the respondents indicated satisfaction with how easily they can communicate with their government. Once again, recommendations to improve communications are being made within an

atmosphere of general success.

Attendance at City Council meetings and participation in workshops and citizen information meetings as a way of getting or giving information is an experience enjoyed by a very small percentage of residents (6.2% and 9%, respectively). On the contrary, the survey would invite us to believe that in the course of a year, over half (56%) of the adult residents of Virginia Beach make contact with a government office by telephone and almost half (45.2%) visit a government office in person. The government has many, many opportunities throughout the day to inform its citizens and to learn from them through conversation and visit.

Success in communications, whether in giving information or receiving information, is a different thing from a belief that the exchange will make any difference. On this score, we seem to have an opportunity for real improvement.

While almost 71% of individuals surveyed felt that government is interested in hearing their opinions, nearly one-third of respondents indicated that government was “not interested” in these opinions. The relative number of negative responses suggests room for improvement.

The survey also indicated that holding a belief that government wants to hear my opinion and knowing how to express that opinion effectively are two different things. Over half of all respondents indicated that they did not know “how” to influence decisions.

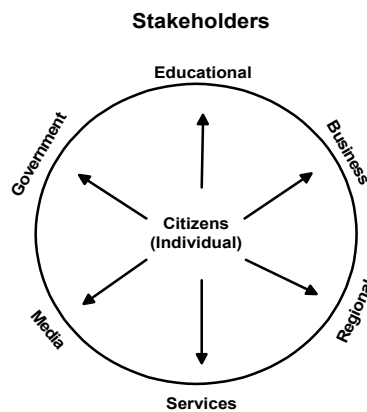
Some citizens know how to influence decisions and indicate that they have attempted to exert that influence over the past year. Long time permanent residents, registered voters, and people with relatively higher incomes are more likely to be involved in influencing government. Almost one quarter of this group is not satisfied with how easy it is to communicate with their government. That number is offset by another quarter of the respondents who are very satisfied. On the other hand, and more telling, almost 43% of the same group does not believe that government is interested in their opinions and suggestions. This is a relatively large number, and it is particularly important, because it comes from those people who are in fact most involved with government.

Citizens make many contacts with government that may extend beyond an intention of “influencing” decisions. An assessment of the nine questions in the survey in which people indicated whether someone had communicated by phone, visit, letter or participation in a City Council meeting, a public hearing or public workshop adds more understanding about the quality of the communications and relationship between citizens and their government.

Of the 323 people who participated in the Communications Survey, 226 individuals indicated they had made some effort to contact the government in the past year. Among these people, there was an overall sense of satisfaction with their ease of communicating with the City, but there was an expression from 34% of the respondents that the City was not “interested” in hearing their opinions or suggestions. Once again, we seem to have an opportunity during individual telephone calls and visits to make a tremendous difference in the degree to which citizens understand and develop confidence in their government. These “moments of truth” invite improvement.

## [Stakeholder Survey](#)

The questions that comprised the Communications Survey were administered in varying degrees of rigor to six stakeholder groups: civic leagues, business persons, the resort industry, the media, churches and volunteers with the City of Virginia Beach government. These groups represented a substantial cross-section of the Work Group's stakeholder plan.



The purpose of the survey was to assure the availability of a variety of viewpoints and to detect when a unique group within the city might differ from the whole. The stakeholder surveys generally confirmed the overall indications of the Communication Survey. Respondents had a very similar sense of satisfaction with the manner in which government communicates to them and their ease in communicating with government. At the same time, the stakeholder groups also experienced a similar skepticism in the interest of government in using their opinions. Only church and business leaders and developers expressed a sense of confidence in the level of interest their government had in their viewpoints.

The stakeholder survey pointed out other differences of opinion between stakeholder groups and the overall population. Business leaders, civic group leaders, church leaders and government volunteers all indicated a preference for increasing the amount of information in the newspaper, sending more City representatives out to speak in the community, and increasing use of the government's Web site. Sending information by mail to each household also received more affirmation among volunteers, church leaders and business leaders. On the other hand, business leaders had little interest in expanding programming on VBTv 48.

The variables that influenced these opinions aren't known. It may well be that representatives of these groups are relatively more active information-seekers than the population as a whole. In any case, their responses suggest the need to examine the relative costs and advantages of more newspaper and/or direct mail communications, suggest that City representatives will always be requested as speakers, and point out that our Web site may already be an important source of information for those people who are more avid information-seekers.

Another disparity between the stakeholder surveys and the Communications Survey was found in the responses that church leaders made to the question of the government's interest in using their opinions. Unlike other groups, the leaders of the ten congregations who were surveyed strongly indicated they felt the City was very interested in their opinions and they were well aware of the ways that their opinions could be used to influence these decisions.

Responses from civic league leaders and developers provided one final and very revealing difference among respondents: unique among stakeholder groups, and also different from the survey of the whole population, these individuals showed a markedly stronger propensity to telephone, visit and write an elected City official as well as attend City Council meetings, speak out at a city public hearing, and attend a citizen workshop. The differences were dramatic. They point to the fact that while a very small number of citizens in Virginia Beach avail themselves of these communications and relationship opportunities, a large portion of that group may be comprised of leaders of organized civic groups. The data is revealing in terms of who may be most active in influencing government decision-making. It is also a persuasive argument for increasing the number of civic leaders who can successfully bring the concerns of their group before elected officials. In addition, it is a strong invitation to develop awareness of an overall City vision or strategy among citizen leaders and business persons if we are to avoid a growing tendency of groups to compete against groups for limited resources without any sense of how everyone contributes to the whole.

## **Local and National Government Practices**

Forty-one government offices in Virginia Beach responded to a set of questions about citizen communication. Their responses confirm a shared commitment to citizen communications. The variety of methods alone supports this assertion.

Among the respondents, over 25% indicated that their office had a requirement for “public hearings” as a way to share information and develop an understanding of citizen viewpoints. These “public hearings” range between informal dialogue and closely regulated hearings before City Council. Since public hearings will always be part of the communications landscape, improvements to them would be an opportunity to enhance citizen communications and interrelationships. The success of the public meetings on Open Space/Outdoor Plan demonstrates that the public input process can become a positive experience for all participants.

The City of Virginia Beach employees also believe that face-to-face contact offers them the best opportunity to exchange ideas with citizens, develop mutual understanding and make modifications to existing policies and proposed programs. They also believe that this kind of contact is generally the best way for citizens to learn about government services, policies and programs.

The survey also pointed to an important group of citizens that need to be considered within a plan for improved communications and interrelationships: citizen advisory boards. More than 25% of the government respondents work with some form of board. The members of these boards are citizen leaders willing to engage in civic issues. While the survey data did not identify any specific communications problems among these advisory groups, improving their communications and interrelationship would again be an opportunity to enhance the process them and for City Council.

Research of cities nationwide showcased a myriad of promising two-way communications vehicles and programmatic efforts designed to foster and enhance relationships. Cities large and small have ideas and programs that Virginia Beach can replicate. Active programs of civic instruction, formal dialogue and feedback, improved publications and advertising, personalizing the “face” of government, and experiments with telephone, written and electronic interactions are all under exploration. The Work Group drew from many of these experiences in developing its

recommendations.

Some highlights include: Phoenix's *Neighborhood Association Tool Kit*, Tucson's *City Page*, 24-hour telephone comment line, and e-mail exchange; Ventura County, California's mall-based touch-screen kiosks for paying traffic tickets; Delray Beach, Florida's citizen *Capital Improvement Tours*; Lakewood, Colorado's *Citizens' Planning Academy*; Orange County Florida's *Citizens First Strategic Plan*; Scottsdale, Arizona's use of citizens' homes to conduct community meetings; and Indianapolis' *Front Porch Alliance*. Many cities are also successfully using Government TV to build relationships and communicate with their citizens. (See Appendix for a detailed summary).

## **City Council, Citizen and Staff Member Feedback**

The Communications Survey, stakeholder survey and national "best practices" inventory pointed to a set of preliminary recommendations that the Work Group presented to City Council in October, 2000. The purpose of the presentation was to assure alignment of the initiative with City Council direction and to hear feedback from Council on the work-to-date. The Work Group heard discussion on a number of issues that day, and in particular it learned of the importance of the concept of City Page to the Council.

Following the presentation, the Work Group shared its preliminary recommendations with middle management staff members at a Leadership Meeting and with a number of civic and business groups. It generally heard that the report was a "good start." The Work Group was praised for "the complete nature of the review." At the same time, it was encouraged to share the report quickly with all stakeholders, and it was urged to involve more citizens in the working out of the report and its resulting actions. Finally, it learned that it needed to include young people within its field of view.

## **Focus Groups**

To provide additional input to the Work Group, focus group consultant Bonney & Company was engaged to provide statistically balanced focus groups. Two separate focus group sessions were conducted on Tuesday, January 9, 2001. Participants were all over the age of 18, all full-time residents of Virginia Beach, and they represented a demographically and geographically diverse panel.

The results of the sessions provided invaluable guidance. Each group chose the "five most impactful recommendations" among the original list of 17 choices. Both focus groups confirmed earlier research findings by selecting *City Page*, Early Information Sharing and Public Dialogue.

### **Highest Priorities of Focus Groups:**

*City Page* in Newspaper  
Early Information Sharing

Public Dialogue  
Newspaper Inserts/Home Mailing  
Information vs. Persuasion  
Ease of Participation  
Speaker Follow-up

The *Executive Summary* of the research report noted that “Four of their highest priorities have more to do with how information is handled rather than specific communications vehicles. They likewise noted that the recommendations they most favored are not discrete, or necessarily linear, activities, but rather an interwoven tapestry of intent and action. Members of both groups observed, for example, that the *City Page* will have little credibility if the City does not also begin to share information earlier.”

The focus groups influenced the revisions to the recommendation concerning VBTv 48. Participants indicated that they found VBTv 48 while surfing through channels, rather than as a chosen destination. At the same time, the majority of participants said they had watched the channel. Their most commonly cited program was City Council meetings. The original recommendation related to VBTv 48 now includes the suggestion that research be done to determine the kind of programming that would attract citizens to VBTv 48 as a chosen destination. Only after this research, do we recommend investing in enhancements to the channel’s programming.

The focus groups also produced a compelling confirmation: quoting from the *Executive Summary* of the focus group research report “the key to engaging citizens in the life of their city lies in finding ways to make the life and decisions of the city more personal to more residents.” All government communications must invite the reader or viewer to see his or her neighborhood in the picture, to see how or why this issue might affect them.

The *Executive Summary* of the focus group research report also said:

“Overall, study participants seemed impressed that the City of Virginia Beach is giving serious attention to its relationship with citizens. Despite their varying degrees of civic engagement, all of the persons who took part in this study seemed sincere in their comments and appreciative of the opportunity to have input regarding this relationship.....

Study participants were also quick to point out that they perceive their voices to ‘matter.’ Unfortunately, more than a few study participants....do not believe the City of Virginia Beach currently cares to either hear or consider their opinions.....These findings suggest that the City of Virginia Beach will not only enjoy the support of residents, but also greatly enhance the perceived quality of trust and communication among and between residents of Virginia Beach and the City government if it implements even only the three primary recommendations identified earlier. The findings further indicate that the implementation of other communication changes will only strengthen the interrelationship between citizens and the City government.”

## Submitted by the Citizen Communication and Interrelationships Work Group

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