

CITY OF CHESAPEAKE, VIRGINIA	NUMBER:	47.0
ADMINISTRATIVE REGULATIONS	EFFECTIVE DATE:	1/10/03
SUBJECT: Disseminating information to the news media	SUPERSEDES:	3/18/02

I. INTRODUCTION

The City of Chesapeake actively pursues opportunities to inform the public about all aspects of its operations to the extent permitted under privacy statutes and exemptions under freedom of information laws. The City also recognizes the vital role played by the news media in a democratic society, and on-going cooperation with the news media enhances the dissemination of information about the City's programs and activities. The free flow of information is vital to Chesapeake residents' ability to participate in local government and to the City's ability to effectively govern. All care must be taken to ensure that information provided to the public and news media is accurate and complete and reflects the official position of the City organization.

II. PURPOSE

This administrative policy establishes guidelines for providing information to the news media. These guidelines are not intended to hinder open communication between employees and the public or news media. They are, however, intended to ensure an accurate, consistent and reliable flow of information about City activities. They are also designed to ensure the City's compliance with the guidelines of freedom of information regulations.

III. DEFINITIONS

The Public Communications Department is the City's primary contact for the news media and is responsible for the coordination and monitoring of information disseminated to the public. This department is also designated by the City Manager to be responsible for ensuring City-wide compliance with this administrative policy.

Public information officer (PIO). This title refers to City staff who are assigned by the director of a City department, either permanently or on a case-by-case basis, to provide specific information to the news media regarding operational activities of their respective departments. Examples include designated public safety personnel at a crime scene, recreation personnel at a City special event, departmental information specialists, etc. While PIOs receive specific attention in this policy, these individuals must comply with all provisions herein.

Official City positions. The City often takes a position or has an established policy toward issues facing the community or the City organization. These positions are either approved by a majority of the City Council or formulated by the City Manager and affected department directors. In many cases, issues arise quickly and official City positions may not be formulated when news reporters request them.

Dissemination of information through the news media. Providing information to the public through the news media may include interviews with news reporters, letters to the editor, guest editorials or columns in newspapers, appearances on television or radio news talk shows, or similar instances. In

most cases, this will involve local newspaper and television news; however, it also includes national trade publications. This policy does not address the placement of advertisements, newsletters, brochures, and other media in which the content of the information is determined solely by the City.

Personal opinions. As citizens of the United States, everyone has the right to form and express opinions about public issues. A distinction must be drawn, however, when an individual is acting in the role of representing the City organization. When speaking for the organization, employees' comments must reflect the organization's position on programs and issues. Personal opinions may or may not be the same as positions taken by the organization as a whole, and they should not be used when speaking on behalf of the City.

Basic information. Basic information is factual information that can be provided on-the-spot and is non-controversial information about a department's basic operations. It is information already available to the public or in general circulation. Providing such information does not require the City staff member to perform any additional research, analysis, interpretation or study. Examples of basic information include: notices of meetings, lists of items included on public meeting agenda, public notices required by law, information regarding operating hours and/or closings, basic facts regarding fire or crime scenes, etc.

IV. PROCEDURES

- A. The Public Communications Department is responsible for coordinating and monitoring the dissemination of City-related information to the news media. Departments and/or individual City employees who, in the course of their official duties, receive requests for information from news reporters must first refer these requests to the Public Communications Department, except under circumstance noted in "J" below. For requests filed under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), the department receiving the request shall also immediately notify the City Attorney's office and follow established procedures for handling FOIA requests.
- B. The Public Communications Department is responsible for informing the City Manager's office of reported media contacts which are not deemed to be of a routine nature.
- C. The Public Communications Department will review each request from reporters and coordinate a timely response. This may involve facilitating interviews with the appropriate spokespersons, and/or providing requested information to news reporters. Particular care is to be taken to respond in a timely manner whenever possible, balancing the deadline needs of news reporters with the time requirements of City staff responding to requests.
- D. Department directors and/or department PIOs may release basic information of a routine, factual nature (see definition above) without the need to notify either the City Manager's office or the Public Communications Department beforehand. However, Public Communications must be provided with a summary report for any contact by a reporter.
- E. When a designated City spokesperson releases information to news reporters, the spokesperson must provide a summary of the issues discussed to the Public Communications Department immediately after the contact/release of information. This should include: the issues discussed, a synopsis of the questions asked and answers provided, any information regarding follow-up or additional interviews the reporter is planning to request, description of any materials provided to the reporter, and projected dates for printing/airing of the story.

- F. If, in the course of providing information to a reporter, the interview evolves into areas of controversial or sensitive issues, the spokesperson should stop the interview and refer the reporter to the Public Communications Department. It should be understood that stopping the interview at this point is not intended in any way to hinder the process, but rather to ensure that the most coordinated response is provided to the reporter.
- G. Department directors have primary responsibility for official public statements or announcements issued by their department. Department directors may, at their discretion, issue departmental policies for the distribution of routine basic information without their prior approval, subject to periodic review. Department directors may delegate responsibility for media relations to a departmental PIO, according to the needs and resources of each department. Names and contact information for departmental PIOs shall be provided to the Public Communications Department and shall be updated as changes occur.
- H. In cases where a reporter is requesting information or interviews relative to topics which may be time-sensitive or controversial, department directors must notify Public Communications by making actual voice contact with the Public Communications Department. Voice mail messages, e-mails and/or faxes do not constitute adequate contact when time-sensitivity is an issue. It is permissible to e-mail or fax the specific details, so long as a follow-up call is immediately placed to alert appropriate staff that the e-mail or fax has been sent. If it is not possible to contact the Public Communications Department, the City Manager's office should be contacted directly.
- I. If asked by a news reporter to give an opinion about particular issues or programs, City employees should explain that giving personal opinions on behalf of the City is not appropriate or part of their responsibility. It is, therefore, advisable to decline comment and offer to direct the news reporter to the Public Communications Department.
- J. It is appropriate for City employees involved in a newsworthy event (i.e. fire, crime scene, water main break, ribbon cutting, etc.) to respond to reporters about facts surrounding the specific event. However, the information provided to reporters should be released in coordination with the staff person in charge of the event or the person designated as the public information officer (PIO) for the event. Information should be limited to the facts pertaining to the event or the safety and welfare of the public, and employees should only comment on areas directly related to their job tasks. Information that may be sensitive or have implications relating to litigation or personal privacy should not be discussed. In addition, information or speculation which deals with broader issues or policies of the City should be deferred to the Public Communications Department.
- K. City employees who attend City Council, Planning Commission, or other similar meetings may, upon reporter request, provide clarification regarding actions taken by the meeting participants. Only factual information directly related to the issue may be provided. If the reporter asks for speculation regarding the implications of these actions, those requests must be referred to the Public Communications Department.
- L. When determining what information to immediately release, City staff members are advised to err on the side of caution and to refer any requests about which they are unsure to their supervisor and/or the department head.

- M. Department directors who become aware of issues or events that may have the potential for generating news coverage should report such activity to the Public Communications Department. This is not limited to controversial or sensitive issues, but it may also include incidences of positive actions and accomplishments that could be of interest to the news media or general public.
- N. During times of emergency, when the City's Emergency Operations Center is either fully or partially activated, staff must take extra care to ensure that information released to the media is coordinated with the City Manager (Emergency Coordinator) and the Public Communications Department. Specific provisions for the distribution of information during emergencies, outlined in the City's Emergency Operations Plan, shall take precedence during times of EOC activation.
- O. No portion of this policy should be interpreted as to infringe upon the provisions of applicable freedom of information statutes. The City of Chesapeake adheres to all freedom of information statutes and encourages the timely flow of accurate information to both the public and the news media.

Clarence V. Cuffee, City Manager

Date