Niagara Region

# Niagara Region

# Communications Overview

## Information Report

## May 9, 2021

BOULEVARD
STRATEGY GROUP

# Table of Contents

# 1.0  Introduction

On April 24, Regional Council directed the Chief Administrative Officer to provide a report to the Corporate Services Committee on a potential reorganization of the core communications resources found in all departments of Niagara Region, including Public Health, with a view to creating a unified strategic communications entity.  This report is to be delivered to Corporate Services Committee for discussion at their May 12, 2021 meeting.

A full copy of the resolution is included under Appendix 1 of this report.

While comprehensive, in-depth analysis is not feasible within the short timelines between the resolution and report delivery, this report addresses Regional Council's direction by providing information and context including:

- Role of communications in the municipal sector.
- Core communications functions in municipal government.
- Current state of communications resources across Niagara Region (centralized division, Public Health, other departments).
- Operational needs and obligations.
- Proposed guiding principles.
- Potential options for further consideration.
- Conditions for success under any model.

This report shall not be interpreted as a comprehensive review, but a point-in-time snapshot and operational considerations, collected and reported over a six-day timeframe during the week of May 3, to assist Regional Council in determining whether they wish to proceed with further analysis.

# 2.0 The Role of Communications in the Municipal Sector

This section provides an overview of why communications are important in municipal government, and the functional responsibilities that are generally involved in executing communications at the municipal level.

## 2.1. Supporting Business Objectives

Communications resources exist to help the organization meet its business objectives.  In the municipal sector, these business objectives generally related to the following:

### 2.1.1. Build public trust

As public trust in government and the media decline, particularly over the past year,[1] strategic approaches to communications in the municipal sector are more important than ever to dispel misinformation and build credibility.

From a communications perspective, building trust includes both proactive strategies with consistent, reliable and credible information to advance an organization's image, and the ability to quickly mobilize and respond when an organization's reputation is at risk.

### 2.1.2. Provide information on programs and services

Operating departments typically rely on communications teams to provide accurate, relevant, timely information to the public related to municipal services.  Examples of public information requirements may include construction of major capital projects; road closures; service disruptions; service levels for winter maintenance; Council meetings and agendas; notice for public meetings; and budget information.  It could also include communications related to community events or facility openings.

### 2.1.3. Public safety during emergencies

Emergency communications relate to public information that is of an urgent or critical nature and typically pertain to public safety.  Given recent public health emergencies associated with COVID-19, there are significant lessons to be leveraged by municipal governments related to what is working well and where there is room for continuous improvement.

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[1] Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021.  Available at: https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer

Beyond responding to single emergency events, emergency communications require significant preparation to ensure quick response when required, particularly for after hours or extended emergencies.

### 2.1.4.   Change behaviours

Communications professionals support changes in public behaviour, consistent with positive policy outcomes.  Examples might include smoking cessation, waste diversion strategies and behavioural changes that contribute to sustainable transportation choices.

### 2.1.5.   Generate revenue and improve service utilization

Some operating functions, such as public transit operators, require support in the form of marketing to drive revenue generation or cost recovery for their operations and encourage service use.

These divisions require targeted and specific marketing support based on best practices within their industries to ensure programs and facilities are filled and revenue is maximized to the greatest extent possible to offset the operating costs associated with their services.

Depending on the specificity of their focus, operating departments that rely on revenue generation may draw either on centralized communications divisions or use their own departmental resources to drive marketing activities.

### 2.1.6.   Attract business and investment

Economic development divisions rely on communications within and outside the business community to support their work in business retention, expansion and attraction.

The extent to which economic development communications requirements draw from centralized corporate communications divisions varies across municipalities.  Many economic development divisions have their own in-house or external consulting resources.  Others rely on shared services with corporate communications.

### 2.1.7.   Build employee engagement

High employee engagement is a prerequisite for outstanding customer service, and internal communications is a major contributor to employee engagement.  While employee engagement is sometimes viewed as a Human Resources or Chief Administrative Office function, to be truly effective employee engagement must be owned by every leader in the organization. As a result, departmental requests for internal communications support have the potential to draw significantly on communications resources.

### 2.1.8. Engage the community

Communications divisions are often involved when two-way communication is required with members of the public. Some common examples in the municipal sector include budget surveys, online engagement platforms, and innovative approaches to public engagement in the development of a range of policies including Official Plans, secondary plans, departmental master plans and overarching public engagement frameworks and online platforms.

Beyond supporting conversations on corporate issues, communications divisions are increasingly expected to stay engaged in community issues that celebrate civic pride.

## 2.2. Core Communications Functions in Municipal Government

To support the business objectives listed in section 2.1, municipal communications are often organized according to the following core communications functions.

### 2.2.1. Public relations

Public relations professionals are focused on building a strong, integrated, positive image for the corporation. Their role includes strategy, development and execution for tactics including:

- Media relations, including developing press releases, pitching stories, media monitoring, tracking and reporting on media coverage, and developing editorial forecasts and calendars based on internal and external opportunities.
- Digital media content, working closely with communications advisory services and creative services to ensure all content meets consistent standards for the organization.
- Digital media tracking and reporting, identifying trends and opportunities for the organization to strengthen its image.
- Issues management and crisis communication when risks involve enterprise-wide issues or span multiple departments.
- Leveraging corporate and community data to drive continuous improvement in public relations activities.

### 2.2.2. Communications advisory services

Communications advisory services professionals perform as internal consultants for operating departments. Their role is similar to those in the public relations function but tailored to the specific needs of the operating departments they support with less emphasis on overall corporate integration. The role of professionals in this function include:

- Providing advice and support that is tailored to the department or division they support, including issues management, promoting programs and services, and marketing and policy campaigns.
- Working with colleagues in other functions, proactively scan for emerging opportunities to improve departmental communication and develop recommendations for enhancement.
- Ensuring departmental or divisional content is current and up to date on all corporate communications channels including the municipal website.
- Ensuring compliance with internal client service standards and individual service level agreements.
- Ensuring overall high satisfaction for communications activities with internal clients.
- Internal communications – at a corporate level for advisors supporting the Corporate Leadership Team and Corporate Services, and at a departmental level for other advisors.

### 2.2.3.  Creative services

Creative services professionals are accountable for effective visual identity for an organization.  Their roles include:

- Ensuring consistent application for visual identity standards, including the corporate logo, across all collateral produced and distributed by the organization.
- Providing graphic design services that meet client needs, resonate with target audiences, are consistent with the corporate brand and consider modern industry best practices and trends.
- Providing or securing videography services.
- Providing or securing photography services.
- Overseeing digital design for web, social media and digital collateral (for example, digital newsletters).
- Developing service level expectations with internal and external printers, photographers and/or other vendors, to ensure design is effectively applied and translated in the production of promotional materials.

### 2.2.4.  Public engagement

Public engagement professionals design strategies and provide tools, support and platforms for two-way communications with members of the public.

- Ensuring all public engagement campaigns and strategies are coordinated and executed according to consistent corporate standards and public participation best practices.
- Working collaboratively with communications advisors to advise internal clients on public engagement strategies to meet business needs and reach target audiences and stakeholders.

- Working collaboratively with creative services colleagues to elevate public engagement campaigns in a way that are appealing to targeted stakeholders.
- Working with business intelligence professionals to ensure all public feedback resulting from engagement campaigns are part of a centralized data source and available on a corporate-wide basis.
- It should be noted that tactical implementation of public engagement, including event management, speaking at public information centres, and attendance at community events, is normally considered an operational function in municipalities of comparable size to Niagara Region.

### 2.2.5. Leadership

In the municipal sector, the communications leader is accountable for the overall integration of the above functions, demonstrating positive progression on key performance indicators, engagement of a high performing communications team, keeping corporate leadership and Council apprised of issues and successes, and building trust and confidence with key stakeholders and partner organizations in the community.[2]

## 2.3. Adjacent services

While at times closely related to communications and engagement, the following adjacent services are not considered core communications and have been omitted from the analysis contained within this report:

- Customer service
- Intergovernmental relations and advocacy
- Political protocol
- Events management

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[2] At Niagara Region these stakeholders include, but are not limited to, the twelve Local Area Municipalities, Brock University, Niagara College, Niagara Health, and private sector partners.

# 3.0 Niagara Region Communications Resources – Current State

The previous sections have provided information and context related to the general business objectives and communications functions in municipal governments.  This section outlines the current organization of communications resources at Niagara Region.

## 3.1. Centralized Strategic Communications and Public Affairs Division

### 3.1.1. Mandate and Services

Strategic Communications and Public Affairs provides support and expertise in the areas of public relations, graphic design, web and social media.

The team plays a key role in how members of the public, staff and other levels of government perceive and interact with Niagara Region. Services to internal clients and the corporation include:

- Media relations; issues and reputation management.
- Website management, social media and digital communication tools.
- Advertising and digital analytics.
- Brand management and creative services, including graphic design.
- Strategic communications counsel and planning.
- Public relations research.
- Crisis communications.
- Internal communications.
- Marketing.
- Video production.

### 3.1.2. Core Communications Positions

There are nine positions devoted to core communications functions within the central Strategic Communications and Public Affairs Division.  Eight of these positions are permanent and one position is temporary.  All positions are funded through the municipal tax levy.

## 3.2.  Public Health Communications

### 3.2.1.  Mandate and Services

The Public Health Communications and Engagement Team's mandate is to provide innovative, strategic communications services to colleagues in Public Health.

Services include:

- Strategic communications planning
- Graphic design
- Health communications planning
- Media relations
- Social marketing support
- Social media management
- Crisis and issues management
- Public relations
- Internal communications

The Communications and Engagement Team provides these services to support the Public Health department in fulfilling requirements associated with foundational and programmatic standards within the *Ontario Public Health Standards* and *Health Protection and Promotion Act*.

### 3.2.2.  Core Communications Positions

The communications roles within Public Health were reviewed as part of this analysis.  Each job description was reviewed against the core communications services described in section 2.2 of this report.

Based on this analysis, there are 11 positions (10 within the Public Health Communications and Engagement Team and 1 elsewhere in the department) where roles are more than 50 per cent related to core communications functions.  Eight of these positions are permanent.  Two of these positions are temporary full-time, and one is temporary part-time.

The majority of these positions are funded 70 per cent from the provincial government and 30 per cent from the municipal tax levy.  This funding allocation requires these positions to be 100 per cent devoted to advancing public health outcomes. There are 1.75 temporary positions funded through 100 per cent provincial contributions.

It should be noted that, while core communications functions comprise at least 50 per cent of these roles, there should be consideration for other accountabilities and duties that are unrelated to core communications.

## 3.3. Communications Resources in Other Departments

The April 24, 2021 motion from Regional Council included consideration for communications resources across the corporation.

### 3.3.1. Decentralized positions related to communications

As part of the research process, a scan for communications and engagement roles was undertaken across the corporation.  Job descriptions for each of the roles were reviewed to determine the percentage of the role devoted to core communications functions.  The results of this preliminary scan identified a limited number of roles in the following departments that are more than 50 per cent devoted to core communications functions:

- Community Services – 0 positions
- Corporate Services – 0 positions
- Public Works – 2 positions, funded through the rate budget
- Economic Development – 1 position, funded through the municipal tax levy

Operating needs and obligations associated with these positions are described in section 4.2.

## 3.4. Non-salary Resources

While not feasible within the timelines associated with this report, it is recommended that a more comprehensive review assess corporate-wide budget allocations to determine whether there are significant line items related to core communications functions such as advertising, design, production, photography, marketing and promotions.

# 4.0 Operational Needs and Obligations

The majority of service demands for municipal communications relates to the needs and objectives of operating departments.  As such, speaking with internal clients and service delivery partners within operating departments is an important part of researching potential integration of communications resources.

The preparation of this report included consultation with the Medical Officer of Health and support staff, as well as a consultation with the Corporate Leadership Team on May 6, 2021.

Based on discussions and information resulting from these consultations, the following considerations merit careful analysis should Regional Council wish to pursue a centralized model.

## 4.1.  Public Health

Communication and engagement play an important role in Public Health's obligations to the Ministry of Health, including the requirements associated with both Foundational Standards and Program Standards stated in the *Ontario Public Health Standards, 2018.*[3]

It should be noted that the *Ontario Public Health Standards* do not specifically mandate the structure or placement of communications resources within an organization and does not preclude the consolidation of resources into a centralized model.  However, should communications resources be located outside the department, the following considerations would need to be recognized and addressed:

- In order to continue to receive 70 per cent provincial funding, positions would need to remain 100 per cent dedicated to the achievement of public health outcomes as prescribed in the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*, and requirements under the *Ontario Public Health Standards*.
- Public health would require communications support with specialized knowledge of foundational health promotion approaches.
- Communications support would continue to be required by Organizational and Foundational Standards Division, Health Promoters, Family Programs and leaders across the department, including support for internal communications.
- Models may need to be adapted pending completion of the current provincial *Public Health Modernization* initiative.

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[3] These Standards are available at: https://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/oph_standards/docs/protocols_guidelines/Ontario_Public_Health_Standards_2018_en.pdf.

- Consistent with the recommendations of the *Campbell Commission Report* (post SARS) and the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*, the Medical Officer of Health has a duty to speak out on public health concerns. Provisions for communications support and channels to support this duty would need to be considered as part of consolidation.

## 4.2. Other Operating Departments

In discussion with the Corporate Leadership Team, the following operational needs and considerations were raised with regard to potential consolidation of communications resources into a centralized division serving internal clients.

- Consistent with the considerations raised by Public Health, communications resources must work in close collaboration with operating departments, have strong, specialized knowledge of the business requirements of each functional area, and commitment to supporting employee engagement.
- Communications resources must support various legislative obligations including, but not limited to, communications and engagement requirements under the *Municipal Act, Planning Act, Accessibility for Ontarians with a Disability Act, Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Personal Privacy Act, Canada's Anti-Spam Legislation, Highway Traffic Act, Environmental Protection Act, Long-term Care Homes Act* and other applicable legislation.
- Positions in Public Works would need to continue to be devoted to water and wastewater and waste management if the corporation intends to continue to leverage the rate budget as a funding source.
- Positions in Economic Development would need to be devoted to continued external investment attraction marketing, and closely aligned with the Region's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Strategy to achieve mandates related to business attraction.

# 5.0 Proposed Guiding Principles

As stated in section 1.0, this report is not a comprehensive review and analysis of communications models.  It is a point in time snapshot with operational considerations, collected and reported over a six-day time period.  Should Regional Council wish to proceed with comprehensive review, guiding principles are recommended below as the basis for further analysis, recognizing that the preferred model, and its associated design, implementation processes and procedures, should be based on the following success factors:

## 5.1.  Niagara Region as a Leader

The preferred model should be the model that provides the most opportunity to position Niagara Region as a recognized, best-in-class leader in public sector communications, contributing to the advancement of both corporate-wide and operational objectives.

## 5.2.  Value for Money

The preferred model should maintain or enhance Niagara Region's ability to make efficient and effective use of communications resources across the corporation, demonstrating value for money consistent with each funding source.  This principle also considers flexibility in allocating resources, particularly during emergencies.

## 5.3.  Consistency from the Corporation

Communications collateral, products, campaigns and messaging issued by Niagara Region should be clearly identifiable as coming from the organization, aligned with and in support of the organization's strategic plan and visual identity.  There may be exceptions in support of principle 5.4.

## 5.4.  Independent Voice for Medical Officer of Health

Consistent with the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*, and the findings within the *Campbell Commission Report* following the SARS epidemic, it is important to ensure an independent voice for Medical Officer of Health as it pertains to maintaining and enhancing public health for the residents of Niagara.  Regardless of the preferred model selected, or the location of communications in the corporation, processes, procedures, channels and support must be in place to maintain the capacity for the Medical Officer of Health to exercise this duty.

## 5.5. Timely and Dependable Information

Time is of the essence when it comes to providing the public with information, particularly when emergency communications, crisis communications and issues management are involved. The preferred model must facilitate quick distribution of communications products while maintaining the degree of quality control required for accurate and reliable government communications.

## 5.6. Notice to Regional Councillors

Elected officials are partners in providing accurate, reliable information to local residents and businesses. Niagara Region's communications model should facilitate clear, reliable, and consistent information channels with elected officials, providing advance notice and key messages on matters of high community interest. It should be noted that this principle does not provide for the ability of individual political officials to alter messages coming from the corporation, particularly those from the Medical Officer of Health.

## 5.7. External Partnership

Messages are most effective when they are consistent and coordinated across information sources. When there are matters of mutual interest with partner organizations, Niagara Region's communications model should maintain and/or enhance close collaboration with communications leads in partner organizations. Examples of Niagara Region's community partners include, but are not limited to, those outlined in Regional Council's April 24, 2021 motion: the 12 Local Area Municipalities, Niagara Health, Niagara College, Brock University, school boards, and private sector partners.

## 5.8. Honour Funding Sources

Many of the communications resources outlined in section 3.0 of this report are funded from sources other than the municipal tax levy and must be applied to work funded for those purposes. For example, in order to continue to receive 70 per cent contributions from the provincial government, public health resources must continue to be 100 per cent dedicated to the foundational and programmatic requirements within the *Ontario Public Health Standards*. Similarly, positions in Public Works funded through the rate budget must continue to be dedicated to those areas, namely, water and wastewater and waste management.

# 6.0 Potential Options

Should Regional Council wish to proceed with a detailed review the following potential options are suggested as a starting point for further analysis with a view to creating a unified strategic communications entity. A comprehensive review would research and assess each of the potential models below, and other options that may arise, against the guiding principles proposed in section 5.0 of this report.

## 6.1. Central Coordination with Some Decentralized Communications Resources

Under this model, there would be a centralized communications division with some decentralized roles across the corporation to assist with coordination, technical expertise and tactical implementation. A comprehensive analysis would assess this model against the guiding principles outlined in section 5.0, and investigate opportunities to support this model through processes, procedures and service levels.

## 6.2. Reporting Relationship Change Only

One option for structural consolidation of resources is to implement a change in reporting relationship for core communications resources, otherwise leaving roles, work locations, and teams (where communications teams exist), intact. A comprehensive review would assess the advantages and disadvantages of this model against the guiding principles.

## 6.3. Integration of Some Core Communications Roles into a Central Delivery Model

Niagara Region may wish to explore a model where some core communications roles are integrated while others are not included or considered at a later state. Examples of positions that could remain with the program areas they serve or be considered for integration in a future phase might include positions that are involved in programmatic community engagement for targeted audiences.

## 6.4. Integration of all Core Communications Roles into a Central Delivery Model

The final potential structural option is full integration of all roles involved in core communications functions into a centralized service delivery model.

# 7.0 Conditions for Success

Regardless of the model Niagara Region ultimately decides to pursue, success is contingent on the following assumptions and conditions:

1. **Further analysis and due diligence:** As stated in section 1.0, this report is not a comprehensive review. Further analysis is required to make evidence-based recommendations based on Niagara Region's specific context.

2. **Clear line of sight to funding obligations:** Communications leaders and client advisors must have an in-depth understanding of the funding obligations of operating departments, the role of communications and engagement in supporting these requirements, close and continuous contact with departmental staff involved in fulfilling these obligations, and specialized knowledge in the area to effectively support their success.

3. **Documented service agreements with internal clients:** Increased coordination and awareness of corporate initiatives, and greater integration of messages across the corporation is an important objective. However, coordination and integration cannot come at the expense of support for the programs and operational services that Niagara residents rely on every day. Written, agreed upon service agreements, clear access points and expectations are required to maintain operational support.

4. **Continuity in leadership philosophy:** Administrative leadership at Niagara Region is in transition. Should Niagara Region wish to pursue changes to the communications structure, the processes, procedures and commitments to support the guiding principles should remain in place regardless of any leadership changes that may occur.

5. **Minimize service disruption during third wave:** Structural changes often result in service reductions. With careful implementation strategies and change management practices, these service reductions can be temporary. Niagara Region will need to consider the potential for service level reductions, particular during the third wave and potential subsequent waves of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

6. **Careful attention to employee morale:** The effectiveness of a preferred model ultimately relies on communication staff who are engaged, empowered and feel valued in the workplace. Employee morale should be a priority throughout these discussions and any changes should involve intentional and considered change management processes to support employees through transition.

7. **Balance between strategy and implementation:** The preferred model should provide balance between strategic value-add and tactical resources required for implementation.

# 8.0 Appendix 1 – Regional Council Motion

Motion to Enhance and Support Niagara Region's Public Facing Communications

WHEREAS timely, accurate and effective two-way communications with elected officials and the public are of vital importance at all times;

WHEREAS the importance of these communications had been heightened since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic;

WHEREAS the provision of high-quality, exceptional communications between the Niagara Region and elected officials and members of public is dependent on internal coordination, information sharing and adherence to established strategies guiding all regional departments;

WHEREAS successful public communications are also dependent on strong relationships with external partners such as the Niagara Health, Brock University, Niagara College, the school boards, the provincial and federal government, the private sector and, most importantly, the 12 local area municipalities;

WHEREAS the Region's Strategic Communications and Public Affairs division provides a full suite of services to all Regional Departments (with the exception of Public Health) with a total staff compliment of 9 Full Time Equivalents (FTEs);

WHEREAS the Public Health Communications Team, whose services are limited to their department, has a current total staff compliment of 13 FTEs (with some of these positions being on contract for the duration of the pandemic);

WHEREAS a number of the communication positions in Public Health are funded all or in-part by provincial dollars;

WHEREAS Regional Council accepts the proposition that it is an important priority to ensure that communications with the public and other elected officials occur in the most efficient, effective and timely way possible;

WHEREAS Regional Council respects the need at times for all departments to be able to communicate in a confidential manner potentially sensitive information in the interest of the public's health, safety and general wellbeing;

WHEREAS it is critical during a time of pandemic that the messaging and communications emanating from all departments be aligned and respond to the need for the public and elected officials to receive timely, consistent, concise and comprehendible information;

WHEREAS the reporting structure of communications at Niagara Region can be rationalized without detrimentally affecting the ability of the Acting Medical Officer of Health to exercise his legislative authority under the Health Promotions and Protections Act; and

WHEREAS a reorganization of the Region's FTEs with a core public relations and communications responsibility into a consolidated department would enhance the objective of a strong communications team by allowing for a better sharing of resources, a reduction in silos within the organization thereby expediting the decision making process, a more streamlined interface for key stakeholders and partners, increased cooperation in regards to strategic planning and a strong potential for increased operational efficiency.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

1. That Niagara Regional Council/Board of Health DIRECTS the Acting Chief Administrative Officer and Acting Medical Officer of Health to ensure the immediate alignment of messaging and communications emanating from the Niagara Region Public Health Department and the Niagara Region on all matters related to the current COVID-19 pandemic and provide a progress report at the May 2021, Committee meetings; and

2. That Regional Council DIRECTS the Acting Chief Administrative Officer to:

a) Provide a report to the Corporate Services Committee for its May 12, 2021, meeting on the potential reorganization of the core communication resources found in all departments of Niagara Region, including Public Health, with a view to creating a unified strategic communications entity; and

b) Determine what memorandums of understanding and/or service level agreements may be necessary to satisfy the needs of provincial funders in regard to any communications positions in public Health paid for, wholly or partially, by the Ministry of Health.

*Boulevard Strategy Group was pleased to work with Niagara Region*
*to prepare this Communications Overview Report*

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