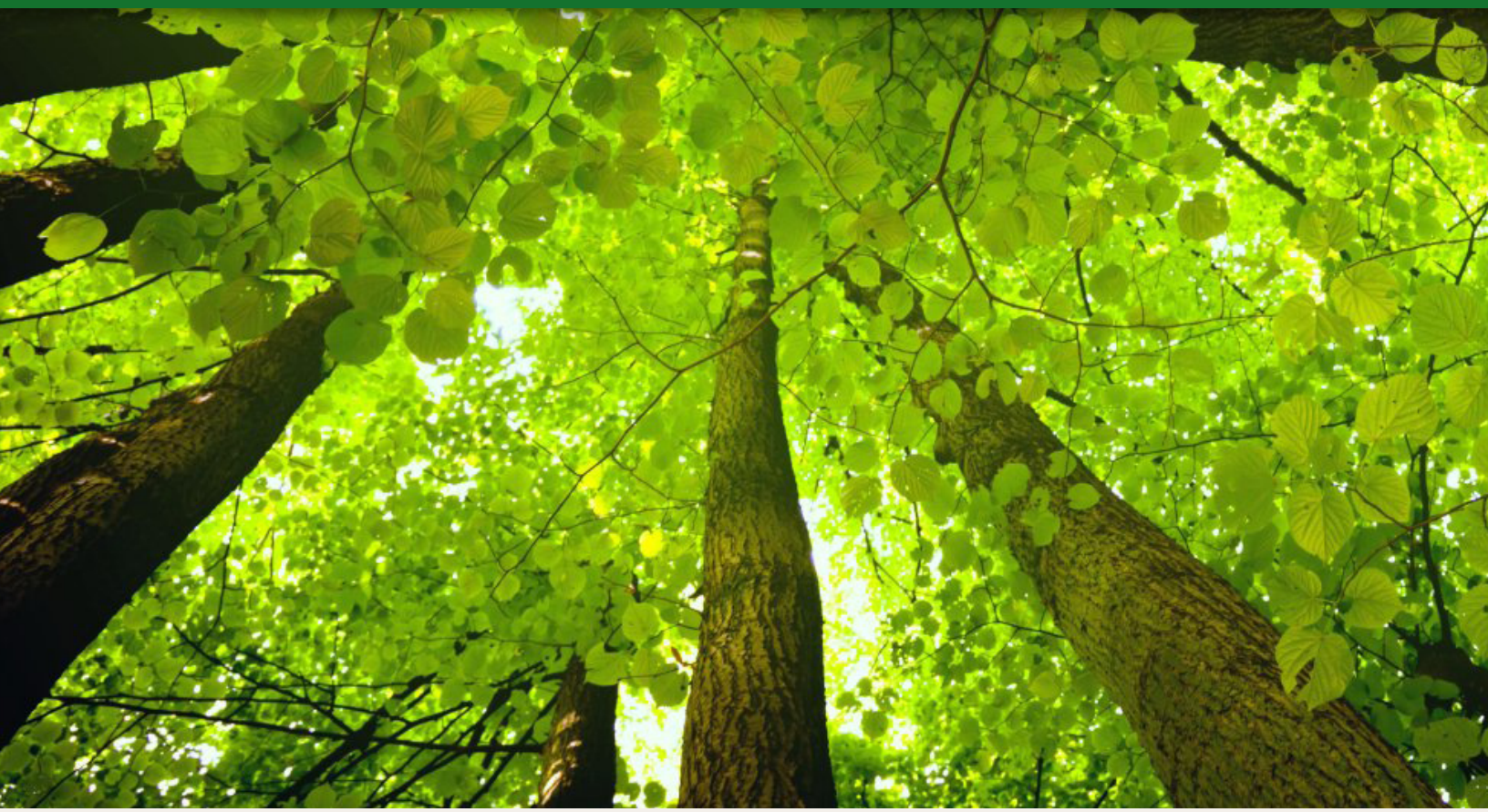
Township of Wilmot

Corporate Communications Strategy:

2024 – 2027



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TOWNSHIP OF Wilmot

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VISION:

A communications function that lays the foundation for success toward a more informed and engaged community.

MISSION:

We strengthen information sharing and understanding between the Township and the community. We communicate accurate and timely information, share our stories, celebrate our successes, and create opportunities for all voices to be heard.

Introduction and Background

This Communications Strategy represents a first for the Township of Wilmot. Both Council and Township leadership have recognized the critical role strong communications plays in meeting and achieving Township priorities and community needs. The community has also reported the desire for stronger communications and engagement from their local government.

Given the Township is in early stages of establishing an effective communications function, this strategy aims to provide direction and set priorities to help the municipality lay a solid foundation that will lead to a more informed and engaged community.

This strategy sets guiding principles to root communications efforts, and defines the scope of work for communications at the Township. It is informed by both quantitative and qualitative research including internal resources, the community and other leaders across the profession. Actions identified in this strategy are intended to set the municipality on a path to consistent and effective practices related to communications management and public engagement, and strengthen the way Wilmot Township promotes and shares its story with the community.

Community Context

Wilmot Township is a small municipality of approximately 22,000 residents in the Region of Waterloo. The majority of residents live in the towns of New Hamburg and Baden and in the 12 other smaller communities that make up Wilmot.

Wilmot has several sources of media: four local newspapers, two television stations and several radio channels. The community is active on social media channels, especially Facebook. Many community members are highly engaged and vocal on key issues.

From a communications resourcing and management perspective, Wilmot is in early stages of development. The Township started with its first part-time communications coordinator in 2019. That position became full time in 2020. Shortly after, the COVID-19 pandemic began, so all efforts focused on keeping the community informed, safe and healthy.

In late 2021, the coordinator position was changed to a digital media coordinator and website administrator role to help meet growing needs in the online communications space. While the role ensured the Township's social media channels and website were kept current and active, Council and leadership recognized the need for more robust and strategic competency in communications to help the organization effectively position and inform the community about highly sensitive and complex matters.

At this point, the coordinator/administrator role is under review. Recruitment is underway for a Manager of Communications and Strategic Initiatives and the Township is assessing its future communications needs. In the meantime, the municipality has engaged third-party expertise to help fill gaps and meet daily communications needs.

This strategy will be the starting point and set a clear course ahead for when the new position is hired.

Communications Overview

Guiding Principles

The following principles for effective communications and engagement guide the Township:

- Timely
- Positive
- Transparent, respectful and inclusive
- Consistent and collaborative
- Accessible and clear

Core services

All Township employees communicate and engage with people in the community through the delivery of programs and services. The communications function is focused on supporting the organization to communicate and engage effectively by providing:

- Strategic communications research, planning, implementation, and evaluation
- Reputation and issues management planning and response
- Strategic advice and counsel
- Crisis and emergency communications planning and response
- Digital communications and engagement
- Media relations, including spokesperson support and coaching
- General daily creative and graphic design services
- Employee communications planning and implementation

Target Audiences

- Residents
- Staff
- Council
- Businesses
- Local Indigenous Communities
- Community organizations and agencies
- Diverse communities in Wilmot
- Potential investors and newcomers
- Media (web, print, radio, TV)

Research

Methodology

This strategy is informed by the following research inputs:

- Facilitated meeting with the Corporate Leadership Team
- Meetings with the CAO
- Interviews with the former Digital Media Coordinator and Website Administrator
- Internal interviews with 10 representatives from across each department
- Internal staff survey: 41 responses
- Individual interviews with each member of Council (both past and present)
- Online public survey: 89 responses
- Four stakeholder meetings with individuals representing 14 community organizations
- Trends for the future of communications and public relations
- Municipal communications best practices – drawn from Redbrick Communications' 20-year history and expertise working in the sector and recent consultations on past projects with municipalities across Ontario and Canada

Key Themes: What We Heard

Mayor and Council

In October 2022, an entirely new Council was elected for the Township of Wilmot. This strategy was informed by interviews with the 2016-2022 and 2022-2026 Councils. Both groups expressed a strong desire for more consistent and timely communication with elected officials. They recognize the importance of effective communications in building a strong relationship with staff and improving the Township's relationship with the broader community.

Key themes from interviews with the previous and current Council:

- Formal processes for Council would improve the Township's communications function and increase understanding of appropriate roles and responsibilities of staff and elected officials.
- Desire for consistent training on policies and procedures for all elected officials.
- Strong desire for more high-quality, timely information from staff to support informed decision making, issues management, and interactions with constituents.
- Desire for dedicated communications support for Council to facilitate effective communication with constituents.
- Priority for a more planned and strategic approach to communications and public engagement, including less reliance on digital communications, to achieve a broader reach and increase community knowledge of the Township's work.
- Increased public communications and engagement is needed to help strengthen community trust and confidence in local government.
- There are opportunities to strengthen positive storytelling about Township accomplishments.
- An improved website would make information easier to find.
- Need for a stronger and more cohesive social media presence with a consistent brand and messaging.
- Belief that elected officials should be able to get information from all levels of staff, not just the department director, to save time and ensure efficient use of staff resources.

Township Staff

Over the last two years the Corporation of the Township of Wilmot has experienced significant change in leadership roles across the organization. Overall, staff recognize that the CAO is committed to improving the Township's communications function, both internally with staff and Council and externally with residents and stakeholders. However, current staff capacity is limited across the organization, leading to challenges in meeting expectations around clear, timely and consistent communications.

Survey responses and interviews revealed several key themes:

- Staff have a strong desire for more regular and consistent communications from leadership, including key decisions at Council and project updates.
- Need for clearer communications processes, roles, priorities and expectations.
- Staff want to have a voice in decisions that impact them.
- There are opportunities to strengthen positive storytelling about Township accomplishments.
- Staff capacity is limited, which is a barrier to improving the communications function.
- Belief that the community is highly engaged. However, staff also indicated that they do not believe residents receive enough information from the Township. There is a mismatch between residents' desire to engage and their level of knowledge about Township matters.
- Desire to rebuild community trust.

Stakeholder Groups

Several local stakeholder groups are highly engaged with Township matters. Participants in focus groups recognized that the Township is moving in a positive direction and that staff are responsive, caring and helpful. This feedback indicates an opportunity to leverage stakeholder groups and create community champions who can play a key role in broadening engagement with residents. It is important to note that people who choose to participate in focus groups are likely to be highly engaged and interested in Township matters.

Several key themes were identified through focus groups with local stakeholder groups:

- The Township could do more to celebrate community success, volunteerism and quality of life in Wilmot.
- Desire for more consistent information about Township matters. It is not always clear who to contact for accurate information. There can be conflicting information delivered by different people.
- Key places to get information include the Township Facebook page, Facebook groups not run by the Township, website, word of mouth and other community groups.
- Desire for more consistent and high-quality social media content.
- The website can be challenging to navigate.
- The Township does not have a reputation for being helpful. A positive culture shift is needed.
- Desire for more formalized approaches to engagement with equity seeking groups and the inclusion of diverse voices in engagement processes.

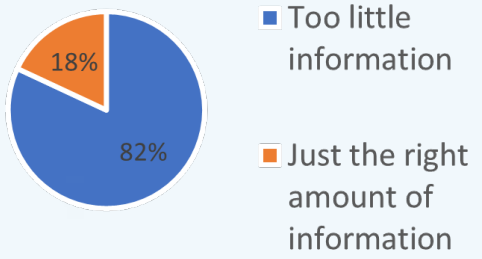
Community Survey

An online survey was conducted to learn more about residents' perceptions about how the Township communicates.

Number of respondents: 89 total. 65% female, 55% long-time residents (16+ years), 53% age 35-54, 35% age 55+

Key takeaways from the community survey:

- Residents do not receive enough information from the Township

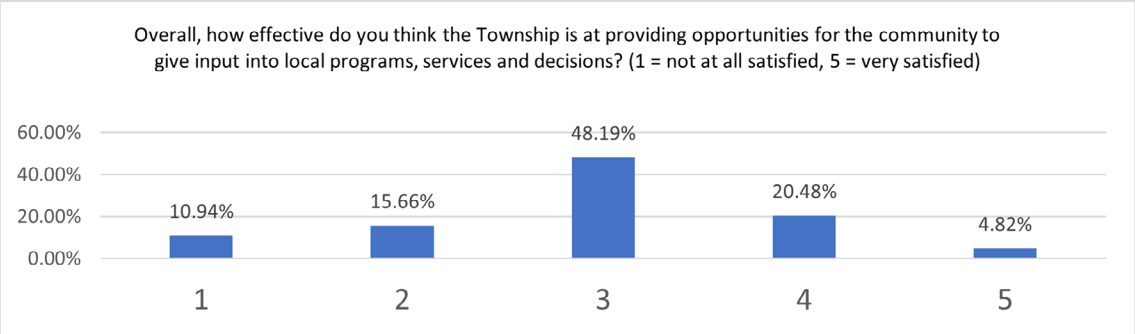


Top three ways residents stay informed about Township matters:

1. Wilmot.ca website (1/3 of respondents say content is hard to find)
2. Official Township Facebook Page
3. Social media not run by the Township

77% of respondents said they are active on social media

Almost half of respondents say they are moderately satisfied with the opportunities provided to give input into local programs, services and decisions.



Comparator Municipalities

Over the past four years alone, Redbrick has held in-depth interviews with 38 municipal communications leaders to understand how they operate, structure their teams and lessons they have learned along the way.

The following key themes emerged from interviews with comparator municipalities:

- A centralized approach to communications is most common with a strong relationship between the communications manager and senior leadership. Most comparable municipalities have at least one dedicated communications practitioner at the management level who oversees the overall communications function and develops a strategic approach, along with additional support provided by a communications or digital coordinator to implement the strategy.
- Strong relationship between senior leadership and Council with clear roles for staff and elected officials. Communications staff help ensure that Council receives timely, accurate information about Township matters and are kept "in the loop." Communications managers often provide support that helps elected officials deliver high-quality, accurate corporate information and manage issues.
- A strategic approach to communications means planning ahead and building trust internally. Communications initiatives are driven by the strategy and all connect back to the municipality's vision, mission and values. For the most part, initiatives are proactive, not reactive.

- Clear processes for when and how to communicate. Knowing who is doing what and when helps to build confidence in the communications function across the organization.
- There is no magic bullet to reach everyone. Diverse audiences require diverse approaches and there is no one method to reach every audience. No matter how strong a municipality's communications function, there are always individuals and groups that will be difficult to reach. All communications should be tailored to meet audience needs.

Top Themes

Across all groups consulted for this strategy, the following key themes were most prominent:

1. Council, staff, stakeholder groups and the broader community **do not receive enough information** from the Township.
2. **Traditional communications tactics are needed** to reach the community's broad audience groups. The Township relies heavily on digital formats (website, social media, online surveys, etc.).
3. **Clear communications processes** can help build trust in the communications function.
4. There is an **opportunity for the Township to do a better job telling its own story** and sharing success.
5. **Stronger social media content** is needed, including regular posting and a consistent brand and tone.
6. The **website can be difficult to navigate**.
7. A more **formalized and strategic approach to community engagement** may encourage greater participation.

Trends for the future of the profession

Recent communications and public relations research provide important insights into the challenges, opportunities and trends related to the profession. As Wilmot Township considers the way forward, it is important to consider this rapidly changing landscape.

Top 5 areas of concern

1. Staff turnover and burnout
2. Lack of advancement opportunities
3. Communications perceived as a "soft service" by senior leaders
4. Ongoing changes in the media landscape
5. Digital overload, misinformation and disinformation

Key opportunities for the profession

1. Internal engagement and connection
2. Bringing strengthened strategic value during times of issues and crisis
3. Becoming a more inclusive and diverse profession
4. Digital transformation

Megatrends for public relations

Higher stakes and rising value of reputation

Decline of journalism

Empowered audiences

A gap in wealth and trust

Content shock and disinformation

AI comes to PR

Many speak, few listen

What these mean for communications leaders

- Focus on relationships and community building
- Play a central role to define and demonstrate the organization's character, values and purpose at senior table
- Earn trust through inclusive listening
- Leverage data on publics, attitudes and behaviours
- Align communication planning with strategy and purpose
- Become organizational storytellers

[1] *Looking back – Looking forward: Insights from Communications Leaders into the future of Public Relations*, Dr. Terry Flynn, Director Master of Communications Management, McMaster University

[2] *The Elevation of Public Relations, A discussion paper on a profession's present – and its possible future*, Dan Tisch, APR, FCPRS, President and CEO for Argyle Public Relationship and past chair of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management

Overarching best practices

To achieve the greatest benefits and respond to the changing communications landscape, there are several communications best practices that are ideally in place.

1. **Trusted Strategic Advisor:** Effective corporate communications teams are highly trusted and integrated within the corporation. They have a seat at leadership tables. They are considered strategists, not simply tacticians. They are consulted regularly for strategic advice and input for key decisions. They play a role in business strategy and can help craft the narrative when issues arise. As such, they can respond quickly and with quality when issues arise or advise when not to engage. They play a critical role in the organization's risk management team.

2. **Aligned with corporate goals and strategic plans:** Communications work should be guided by a corporate strategic communications plan (including a social media and public engagement strategies) that aligns with corporate priorities and sets clear direction to teams. These plans are ideally endorsed by Council and allow communications to support every department in achieving their priorities, actions and objectives.

3. **Supported by strong internal processes:** Every department across an organization should understand the role of communications, how and when to engage them and the policies that guide them. Strong processes instill a communications mindset that means communications is brought in early to project, is seen as a priority, and there is recognition that everyone has a role to play as a communicator for the municipality. Communicators are highly collaborative and should work hand in hand with every department and division.

4. **Consistent corporate story/brand:** A brand speaks to who the organization is and what it stands for. A strong brand is achieved through consistency: in the messaging and story, and the look and feel of all materials. A strong brand has a clear voice and tone that comes through in every interaction. This is where communications overlaps and aligns with customer service. Both play a significant role in listening and responding to those they serve, and they should be integrated to ensure they are telling the same story and supporting each other.

5. **Effective tools and Room for innovation:** Communication teams should be highly innovative, trying new approaches and technologies, pushing boundaries within their mandate and continuously improving. They should be on top of the latest trends (for example, with social media) and technologies and supported by a culture that is willing to step outside the box.

6. **Data and measurement for listening and proven outcomes:** Communicators should be driven by data and able to demonstrate the value they bring through measured outcomes, not simply outputs. For example, they should be listening to audiences to understand how they consume content and use that data to inform approaches. They should be able to show increased influence on social media and the ability to manage negativity and keep it at bay. They should have the ability to leverage media and increase coverage that is accurate and aligned with messaging. They should also be able to demonstrate how they have prevented an issue or managed it well before it became a crisis.

Analysis: (Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities and Risks)

Internal

Strengths	Challenges
• All members of Wilmot's Council are new this term (starting in 2022). Each ran on a platform to improve communications and engagement with the community, and are keen to move this work forward and elevate this function.	• There are no current dedicated communications resources at the Township. Recruitment for a manager has proven challenging. Third party resources are providing capacity support in the short term.
• The Township is investing in strategic planning, internal culture, including development of a communications strategy.	• Council would like this work to move more quickly. They would also like to be better informed about upcoming staff reports and project status across departments. Quick wins are needed to demonstrate to the community that communications is a priority. However, elevating the communications function at a municipality takes time, especially when resources are scarce.
• Management report feeling overall well informed.	• Township community communications are inconsistent. Because the Township has had transition in communications, the function of the role, expectations and priorities, as well as lack of policies/ procedures make it hard to be consis-tent.
• CAO is relatively new and making positive changes, and laying a strong foundation for future success inside the organization.	• Currently communications are reactive, lacking a strategic approach.
	• Staffing levels at the Township are currently lean. Many key positions are vacant. However, staff want to be more engaged / feel involved. Ensuring ca-pacity for internal communications will be challenging for the foreseeable future.
	• Beyond a new manager, additional resources will be required to improve quality and consistency of communications and meet Council and leadership expectations.

External

Opportunities	Risks
• Robust group of existing community stakeholders are engaged, ready to participate.	• Residents feel they get too little information from the Township and that communications is inconsistent.
• The public recognizes and values staff commitment to the community.	• Multiple media outlets can make traditional media relations more challenging.
• Multiple print newspapers provide options for reaching different audiences.	• Community reports that the website is difficult to navigate.
• Social media is an effective tool (esp. Facebook); significant opportunity to strengthen presence and increase value.	• Community stakeholders misunderstand some policies and procedures.
• Wilmot will soon be launching a new engagement hub, leveraging an online platform through the Region of Waterloo.	• Past council divisions contributed to community feelings of mistrust. Some members of the community are putting pressure on the new Council to communicate better.
	• The Community reports getting much of its information from groups not run by the Township. High participation in local Facebook groups can contribute to the spread of misinformation.
	• Long history of negative reputation ("Wilnot").
	• Relationship building with equity-seeking groups will take time and commitment.

Strategic Communications Priorities

Based on the research, findings, best practice, future trends and analysis, this strategy includes six strategic communications priorities for the Township.

The strategic priorities form the basis of this Communications Plan and will guide communications activities from late 2023 to 2027. Each priority includes objectives and actions to achieve them, with high-level timelines to ensure progress.

1 Invest in communications: Effective communications and public engagement can only be achieved with sufficient resourcing, and setting it as a strategic priority across the organization. Investment in communications means skilled staff are in place with the appropriate tools at their disposal to proactively plan and implement strategies, reach audiences, monitor attitudes and reactions and measure success. To meet the growing needs at the Township, additional staff resources should be considered to support the manager once in place.

2 Establish a strong proactive and strategic function: Building a strong communications culture at the Township starts from the inside out. The communications manager will need to establish effective processes, policies and tools to build and strengthen a communications mindset across the organization and communicate more efficiently and quickly with key audiences, especially when issues arise. Everyone has a role to play. Goal setting with departments and communications calendars play a key role in focusing communications efforts so that the Township can engage effectively with its audience and build a stronger relationship with residents.

3 Improve alignment with Council: Elected officials are important influencers in the community. They engage with constituents daily and can be leveraged as a key channel to share information broadly. They can also be a conduit to share information back to staff. Establishing effective processes for Council to stay informed, including between Council meetings, is critical to success. It also builds trust and helps ensure consistency of messages and helps mitigate misinformation in the community.

4 Strengthen positive story telling: We engage people and build trust and understanding by sharing authentic, human stories that resonate. Strengthening storytelling will help draw people in, demonstrate value for taxpayers' dollars and build a captive audience when the Township needs to share information. Storytelling includes both the narrative aspect as well as visual elements, and celebrates what makes the municipality unique. This includes strengthening the Township's social media presence, showing progress on key projects and profiling staff working to improve the quality of life in Wilmot everyday.

5 Increase the Township's visibility in the community: Effective communications are easy to find, understand and share. Effective community engagement ensures there are opportunities for everyone to have a voice. The Township needs to be seen through all its channels, and leverage community influencers, like the media or community groups, to help tell its story.

6 Enhance public engagement efforts: Wilmot is rich with stakeholder groups that want to have a say in Township matters. Committing to guiding principles for engagement, developing an overarching framework and toolkit for staff, and closing then loop with the community following engagement will help streamline the Township's approach and improve its engagement efforts with residents.

Objectives and Action Plan

To achieve communications objectives and improve Wilmot's communications function, the Township should begin to implement deliberate, measured actions over time. These actions will be phased-in beginning in late 2023 and early 2024.

Priority 1: Invest in Communications

Objective: Meet current, basic communications needs and roll out first phases of the communications strategy

	Action	Year
☐	Continue leveraging third-party expertise and resources to support capacity and provide strategic communications counsel.	2023-2024 *(as needed)*
☐	Hire and onboard a communications manager. Manager should sit at the senior leadership table as an advisor, to flag potential issues and to proactively plan and prepare communications.	2023 *(in progress)*
☐	Change the digital media/website position to a Communications Coordinator and fill the position.	2023-2024
☐	Talk to departments and identify quick and low risk communications tactics. Develop templates for departments to ensure brand consistency while alleviating pressure on the limited communications resources (e.g., posters, postcards).	2024
☐	Continue leveraging Canva for simple design and train identified staff for collaborative design with communications.	2024

Objective: Build on the communications foundation to enhance efforts

	Action	Year
☐	Review communications function and consider next steps for investment in communications and public engagement, such as additional staff and tools.	2026
☐	Include branding and communications in staff onboarding to ensure consistency – presentation from communications about what communications does, why, staff role as a brand ambassador.	2026
☐	Increase communications and writing skillset across the organization • Plain language writing • Writing effective council reports • Writing for the web • Using AI tools	2024
☐	Investigate the use of Artificial Intelligence tools to support communications (e.g., can pilot using ChatGPT).	2026
☐	Establish an employee communications team with one person per department to identify problems, share what they hear from key audiences, problem solve etc.	2025

Priority 2: Establish a strong proactive and strategic function

Objective: Develop and implement effective policies and processes that instill a stronger communications mindset across the organization

	Action	Year
☐	Develop or update communications related policies: • Media relations: to identify organizational spokespeople and processes when media call (to go through communications) • Social media: corporate use and personal use by municipal staff, possible guidelines to Council (see Guelph) • Logo use policy • Paid advertising policy, including promotional items • Use of photography • Use of AI across the municipality	 2024 2024 2024 2025 2025 2025
☐	Develop communications channel timelines for departments to help set expectations and ensure proper notice (sample to be provided).	2024
☐	Develop a one-page cheat sheet on how to take a good photo and share with identified department staff to increase quality of photos for use on social media and other channels.	2024
☐	Roll out a 'communications roadshow' to introduce the strategy, how it will be implemented and to clarify roles and responsibilities of the new manager.	Once manager onboarded
☐	Add a Communications and / or Public Engagement section to the Council report template. Once Manager is onboarded, they should be consulted when departments complete this section.	2024
☐	Enhance the current Days of Recognition content calendar: reviewed by leadership, identifies unique vs. shared posts, and what content will be shared with staff/council and by whom (template to be provided).	2024
☐	As normal practice, conduct annual meetings between department leadership and communications following budget approval to plan the year ahead and align communications with business goals and objectives.	2025 and ongoing
☐	Develop a content calendar for corporate communications (internal and external) with planned initiatives, events etc., include timing and type of content, roles. *Redbrick recommends a 15-month calendar*	2025

	Action	Year
☐	Set up monthly or quarterly touchpoints with departments to track upcoming work and ensure continuous alignment with business goals.	2025 and ongoing
☐	Include communications manager in Council Agenda review to facilitate early issues mitigation and proactive communications.	Once recruited
☐	Communications identified as a step at the outset in project planning processes.	2025

Objective: Establish consistent processes for issues monitoring, flagging and reporting

	Action	Year
☐	Create a checklist of prompts for staff flagging issues.	2023
☐	Create an issues briefing note template, that includes communications and audiences (sample can be provided).	2023
☐	Establish a clear process and standards for information flow when issues arise. create feedback loops for follow up and issue closure.	2023

Objective: Develop proactive approaches and messaging for common issues

	Action	Year
☐	Develop standard key messaging related to high-profile issues, such as aggregates.	2024
☐	Identify the top 3 to 5 more common issues faced by the Township (e.g., watermain breaks, snow plowing).	2025
☐	Work with program area staff on consistent processes to alert communications and effectively manage these issues.	2025-2026
☐	Develop approved related key messaging and materials (media release, social media content etc.).	2025-2026

Objective: Establish processes and plans to support crisis communications

	Action	Year
☐	Review the current communications section of the Township's Emergency Operations Plan–update as needed with stakeholder contact lists, media, identify staff and backups etc.	2026

	Action	Year
☐	Enhance photo library with images of common cooling/warming centre locations, first responder vehicles, emergency home kit etc.	2026
☐	Create easy to read visual maps to locations above, for easy posting on social media.	2026

Objective: Increase measurement and evaluation of communications efforts and outcomes

	Action	Year
☐	Develop a template and process to monitor and report on media coverage for high-profile initiatives, include a content analysis (possible red/yellow/greenlight scale).	2025
☐	Establish methods of measurement and evaluation of communications campaigns at the outset of every project/initiative.	2025
☐	Present an annual communications report card to Council.	2025
☐	Create a campaign/project report back template to demonstrate success and identify lessons learned. Share / discuss with departments.	2026
☐	Track lessons learned in annual/seasonal/repeat initiatives to continuously improve.	2026
☐	Leverage technology to track communications requests and needs and improve ability to report back on workload *(e.g., Monday.com – as per Milton, Stouffville and Clarington).*	2026
☐	Conduct regular assessment of communications: • Annually assess value for taxpayer dollars for paid advertising and use data to focus advertising efforts on highest return channels. • Evaluate and adjust as needed. (e.g., number of participants, number of people who say they saw the ad). • Assess effectiveness of social media use. • Refresh full strategy.	2027 Annually 2027

Priority 3: Improve alignment with Council

Objective: Leverage Council as key influencers and ensure they are armed with up-to-date, factual and consistent information

	Action	Year
☐	Send press releases to Council before media.	2023
☐	CAO to continue weekly email status updates to Council.	2023 and ongoing
☐	Clerk and CAO to review Council package timing and distribution process for opportunities for Council to be aware of what's coming on the agenda sooner.	2024
☐	Provide media relations training to Council.	2024
☐	Provide key messages and suggested social media posts to Council for important projects to increase consistency and accuracy of messaging.	2024
☐	Provide briefing notes to Council on key issues – identify issue, actions taken, next steps, key messages, role of Council.	2024
☐	Develop and promote a Council Highlights newsletter to be sent after Council meetings to the media and community. This could also be a short video from the mayor, if desired	2024
☐	Departments to provide brief quarterly project outlooks to Council – what's coming and underway.	2025 and ongoing
☐	Communications to report annual report card of communications activities, success, lessons learned etc.	2026 and ongoing
☐	Consider an assistant resource for Council to help respond to correspondence, support councillor communications.	2025

Priority 4: Strengthened positive storytelling

Objective: Increase the visibility of daily Township work and staff

	Action	Year
☐	Create and implement a process to share Township accomplishments with the community, with clear criteria, a simple form etc.	2024
☐	Identify potential staff to showcase across the organization to help educate the public on roles and functions of the Township.	2024
☐	Look for opportunities to share “behind-the-scenes” stories and footage: e.g., “Touch a Truck” event or show firefighters in training.	2025
☐	Humanize staff: use them as storytellers on key projects with media or on social media; show staff at work for the community.	2026
☐	Establish key construction milestones when photos/updates to be provided (e.g., project initiation, half-way through, upon completion) and work with staff to ensure consistent communications.	2026

Objective: Increased positive storytelling and strengthened social media presence

	Action	Year
☐	Position Township updates based on the impact to residents – how a decision is good for the average resident, what the impact will be.	2023
☐	Create graphics that tell a simple story.	2023 and ongoing
☐	Provide media with information that is easy to “cut and paste” (e.g., plain language writing, quotes from elected officials, photos, graphics).	2024-2025
☐	Provide key messages and suggested social media posts to leverage councillors to help share stories.	2024
☐	Investigate using high-school interns for summer video projects.	2025
☐	Increase the use of video by creating and posting two new videos per year	2026
☐	Seek opportunities to continually improve graphics and visuals – reassess and evolve standards.	2026

Priority 5: Increase the Township's visibility with the community

Objective: Enhance media relations and audience reach

	Action	Year
☐	Provide media with plain language, news-style content that includes creative material (photos, graphics, videos, etc.).	2024
☐	Strengthen relationships with local reporters by engaging media early and often.	Once Manager onboarded
☐	Engage audiences who may not be online (or those who interact with them) to determine best approaches to reach them (e.g., older adults).	2025
☐	Investigate NextDoor as a possible tool to target audiences.	2025
☐	Consider establishing a stakeholder communications committee to build more advocates for the Township. Meet 3x/year (can be individuals who have served on past committees or boards) – educate them on Township business, help arm them with factual information and learn ideas for improved community engagement (example from Wentzville, Missouri).	2027

Objective: Enhance online tools for the community

	Action	Year
☐	Look at option for an online reporting portal and process for residents to submit issues, and for Councillors to direct residents to (e.g., Kitchener).	2026-2027
☐	Initiate a website review project to assess its ease of navigation and best practice design.	2026
☐	Implement a project to address findings from the website review.	2027

Priority 6: Enhance public engagement efforts

Objective: Establish a realistic promise the public for engagement

	Action	Year
☐	Develop and implement a communications and marketing plan to launch Wilmot's online engagement hub and attract subscribers, in collaboration with the other local municipalities.	2023-2024 (in progress)
☐	Develop and approve guiding engagement principles for the Township, with feedback from Council.	2023
☐	Develop an interim simple public engagement planning template for staff who initiate engagement projects.	2023
☐	Invite members of the community to inform a public engagement framework for the Township.	2025
☐	Based on feedback, develop the framework.	2025
☐	Build out a public engagement toolkit for staff.	2026
☐	Conduct an engagement roadshow with key staff to educate them on the toolkit and roles and responsibilities.	2026

Resourcing

Developing a strong corporate communications function requires staff who can effectively develop and implement strategic communications plans. Wilmot Township has had one full-time digital media coordinator/website administrator role (position currently vacant), but never dedicated support at the manager level. However, Council and staff rely on communications staff to provide the information they need to do their jobs effectively. In the age of easily accessible information, residents expect consistent and timely communication from their municipal government.

The Township's communications function is under-resourced limiting its ability to meet the expectations of Council, elected officials and the broader community. The Township is currently recruiting a manager of communications, and filling a supporting communications specialist role.

Communications resourcing among comparator municipalities:

Municipality	Population	Communications staff
Orangeville	30,167	3 (manager, coordinator, graphic designer – may turn to digital specialist)
Port Hope	17,294	3 (manager, coordinator, web and graphic designer)
Saugeen Shores	15,908	2 (manager and coordinator)
Midland	17,817	2 (manager of customer experience and communications coordinator)
New Tecumseth	45,588	2 (manager, coordinator – seeking third resource in next budget)
Georgina	47,642	4 (manager plus 3 others)
Oro-Medonte	23,017	3
Niagara-on-the-Lake	19,088	2.5 (looking for third full-time)

Tools

In addition to staff resources, a strong communications function requires the appropriate tools to be effective. The following is a list of communications tools that are widely used in the municipal sector:

Tool	Cost	Notes
Social Media and Content Creation		
Online graphic design platform (Canva, Piktochart, etc.).	Canva Pro gives access to premium stock content and templates for about $150/year.	Canva allows users to create professional-looking graphics quickly and easily. It is user friendly with built-in templates for all popular social media apps as well as posters, business cards, presentations, and more. Township currently uses Canva Free. Upgrade to Canva Pro is recommended.
Graphic design software (Adobe Creative Cloud)	$112/month for access to all apps (Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign, etc.) $47/month for one app	Professional graphic design software allows the user to create virtually any type of graphic or document, including newsletters, annual reports, advertisements, posters, etc. This software is especially useful for creating print-quality material and longer reports and documents. Training is required to use this software effectively.

Tool	Cost	Notes
Social media management platform (Hootsuite, Sprout Social, Monday.com, etc.).	Hootsuite Professional Subscription is about $100/ month. This is the recommended option.	Township currently uses Hootsuite Professional. This platform allows management of multiple social media accounts and access to extensive reports.
Tools to capture photo and video.	Costs will vary. This Equipment List includes several options.	Communicators should have access to a good quality smartphone to capture photos and video.
Community Engagement		
Online engagement platform, such as Bang the Table.	Costs vary and can be prohibitive for smaller municipalities.	Wilmot Township is currently working with the Region of Waterloo to develop an online engagement platform for the Township using the Region's subscription.
Staff training. It is recommended that at least one employee complete training through IAP2 – the International Association for Public Participation. This is the leading organization for public participation and engagement professionals. The following IAP2 courses are recommended: • Fundamentals of P2 and Engagement • Designing P2 and Engagement • Applying Methods	Fundamentals of P2 and Engagement = $395 (this is a prerequisite for the Designing and Applying training) Designing P2 and Engagement = $795 Applying Methods = $795	

Tool	Cost	Notes
SurveyMonkey – an online survey platform that is widely used by communications professionals.	Team plans start at $27/user/month. All plan levels allow users to create in-depth surveys and analyze and export results.	The Team Advantage Plan ($27/user/month) is recommended for the Township. It allows for 50,000 responses per year.
Traditional Communications Methods		
Local advertising	Will vary by media type, duration, timing, etc. Municipalities often set an advertising budget for the year (e.g., $10,000) and allocate it appropriately amongst prominent local publications.	
Household mailers (printing and distribution)	The cost for household mailers will vary depending on the number of mailers and printing costs. Expect to budget around $3,000 - $5,000 per mailer, including printing and delivery, for around 8,000 dwellings.	Household mailers should be reserved for important initiatives as costs can be prohibitive.
Rental signage (e.g., Curbex)	Around $300 - $400 per sign, depending on duration.	

Evaluation and Measurement

Evaluation and measurement play a key role in successful implementation of a strategic communications plan. Some initiatives will do a great deal to move the needle toward a more informed and engaged community. Others may fall flat. Regular evaluation and measurement allow staff to take stock of what's working, demonstrate results, and pivot to new tactics when needed.

Communications Objectives	**Measurement**
Meet current, basic communications needs and roll out first phases of the communications strategy	• Active social media presence • Key project communications delivered • Feedback from CAO and department staff • Manager hired • Budget submission
Build on the communications foundation to enhance efforts	• Communications review completed • Onboarding process includes communications • Staff complete training as appropriate • AI pilot initiated and evaluated • Employee communications team established • Community feedback • Consistency of logo use
Develop and implement effective policies and processes	• Communications policies in place and are being followed • Departments aware of communications timelines and providing effective advanced notice and information • Quality of Township photos has improved • Days of Recognition process and communications improved based on staff and Council feedback • Communications content calendar in place • Communications are more proactive and planned based on staff and Council feedback
Establish consistent processes for issues monitoring, flagging and reporting	• Issues management processes improved based on feed-back from staff and Council • Reduction in escalation of issues
Develop proactive approaches and messaging for common issues	• Common issues have effective processes and staff report understanding their role

Communications Objectives	Measurement
Establish processes and plans to support crisis communications	• Crisis communications plan in place and approved • Proactive photos taken and stored centrally for use
Increase measurement and evaluation of communications efforts and outcomes	• Amount of communications data increased • All communications campaigns include measurement • Communications reporting back to Council and departments regularly
Leverage Council as key influencers and ensure they are armed with up-to-date, factual and consistent information	• Council feedback • Media training completed • Community feedback
Increase the visibility of daily Township work and staff	• Increased number of positive stories shared • More consistent and improved messaging on construction projects • Community feedback
Increased positive storytelling and strengthen social media presence	• Media coverage and feedback from local reporters • Community feedback • Council feedback • Social media statistics
Enhance media relations and audience reach	• Media coverage and feedback from local reporters • Feedback from local stakeholders • Council feedback
Enhance online tools for the community	• Online portal investigated and potentially rolled out and used by the community • Website statistics
Establish a realistic promise the public for engagement	• Number of subscribers on new engagement hub • Participation numbers • Feedback from staff and Council • More planned and strategic engagement

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