

## FOCUS ON

### Communications Public Relations Team: Getting the word out

-July 2, 2015

Three complementary teams make up the Gwinnett County Communications Division: video production, website management, and public relations. The PR team is charged with developing and refining content for the County's various communications channels, including weekly email newsletters, the county's official website, and TVgwinnett government-access cable channel. Communications Director **Joe Sorenson** leads the division, and Public Relations Manager **Heather Sawyer** runs the PR team staffed by six communications professionals.

According to the Public Relations Society of America, public relations is "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics." In local government especially, building relationships with the public, in this case residents and business owners, also involves establishing trust. "Since taxpayer dollars fund many government services, it's essential that we have effective communication processes in place to foster trust and understanding of how and why those dollars are being spent," said Sorenson.

County departments are often called upon by local and national media outlets to answer specific questions about those dollars along with numerous other topics. While some of Gwinnett's 12 administrative departments, notably police and fire, have their own specialized staff to quickly provide information to reporters and the public, others rely on the Public Relations team to field media inquiries. Whenever a reporter requests a telephone or an on-camera interview, PR team members help the department representative prepare for the exchange.



*Since January, the Public Relations team has handled dozens of media inquiries on a multitude of subjects.*

Fielding media inquiries is only one of the Public Relations team's many functions. The team also serves as a full-service agency, fulfilling diverse communications needs from administrative departments, constitutional officers, and elected officials. On a typical day, you might find a member of the team working with the Transportation and Police departments to develop a communications plan in response to a change in the law affecting motorists. On the same day, you may see another team member finalizing an email campaign for a Human Resources wellness initiative. "Maintaining a consistent brand for both internal and external communications for a county government as large as Gwinnett's poses challenges, but with teamwork and a collaborative atmosphere, we consistently meet deadlines and disseminate interesting and reliable information about County services," said Sawyer.



*So far in 2015, the PR team has planned more than 10 groundbreakings, ribbon cuttings, and other special events.*

The team is also responsible for managing large-scale events. From ribbon cuttings and groundbreakings for new facilities like libraries and fire stations to annual commemorations for Veterans Day and Memorial Day, the Public Relations team handles logistics such as securing locations, developing scripts for speakers, designing and distributing invitations and programs, and following protocol for recognizing elected officials and other special guests. In addition, the team provides logistical and communications support for activities like town hall meetings or special events that are hosted by commissioners or departments.

Big-picture communications about the County long-range plans are also part of the mix. Often these messages are focused around the annual State of the County speech given by the Board of Commissioners Chairman or the year-long process behind preparing the annual budget.

In addition, Public Relations staff members work to keep voters informed about what their special purpose local option sales tax pennies are funding. Since 1985, Gwinnett voters have approved eight SPLOST

programs to help local governments make specified capital improvements. The current program is raising about \$450 million over three years for transportation, public safety, parks, libraries, and senior services projects. "People need to know that the County is delivering the results as promised," added Sorenson.

PR practices have evolved over the years to include the use of new tactics such as electronic newsletters and social media. Regular publications from the Communications Division include a bi-weekly newsletter called *News for Neighborhoods* sent to subscribers through email, the *Gwinnett County Connection* newsletter included in the monthly water bill and also distributed as an email newsletter, and *GC Insider News* for Gwinnett County employees. The entire Communications staff contributes to video productions like the bi-weekly television news program *Eye on Gwinnett* that airs on TVgwinnett.

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