



CITY OF HAMILTON
CITY MANAGER'S OFFICE
Communications and Strategic Initiatives

TO:	Mayor and Members General Issues Committee
COMMITTEE DATE:	January 18, 2023
SUBJECT/REPORT NO:	Media Relations Program Review – Update to Media Relations Policy (CM23007) (City Wide)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	City Wide
PREPARED BY:	Matthew Grant (905) 977-8045
SUBMITTED BY:	Matthew Grant Director, Communications and Strategic Initiatives, City Manager's Office
SIGNATURE:	

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (a) That the City of Hamilton's Revised Media Relations Policy, attached as Appendix "A" to Report CM23007, be approved for implementation on July 31st, 2023; and,
- (b) That Communications staff be directed to provide all needed training and support to implement updated policy provisions, prior to July 31st, 2023.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Hamilton is committed to openness, transparency, and informed residents and recognizes that the news media is essential in achieving those goals. City staff further acknowledge that openness and transparency are key priorities of Hamilton City Council and should make every effort to advance those priorities.

The recommended policy update and additional and reprioritized resources identified in this report are designed to address areas of concern raised by Hamilton-area media and to support Council's stated public transparency and accountability goals.

No changes to media or public access to existing Council proceedings or associated information are contemplated in this report.

Beginning in the summer of 2020, the City's Communications division started a comprehensive review of the City's overall communications program, including its media relations program, at the direction of the City Manager. Following a partial restructuring, the Communications division increased the focus of its review on its media relations program, a key component of the City's information-sharing efforts, as evidenced in the most recent survey of Hamilton residents in 2019 outlined in Appendix B.

The media relations portion of the review included several phases. It was designed to review and assess the services and service levels the division provides to the press, including a core function of helping media access public information and City subject matter experts.

Further, the review explored the impact of the physical infrastructure – specifically the media room on the second floor of City Hall - used to aid the media in their news-gathering efforts. Media-room-specific consultation and associated information will be presented to Council in a future report.

Updates to the Media Relations Policy are anticipated to improve overall media relations service levels in a number of areas, including increased access to City staff for interviews, clarity on how Freedom of Information processes are used in relation to media requests, and make content related to press conferences and City announcements more accessible to media as well as to members of the public.

It is anticipated that staff will need several months to implement the recommendations in this report. Therefore, the provisions serve as guidelines until full policy implementation recommended to come into force on January 1, 2024.

Alternatives for Consideration – Not Applicable

FINANCIAL – STAFFING – LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Financial: Training expenses, which are anticipated to come from existing operational budgets.

Staffing: No staffing implications beyond reprioritization of existing approved Full-Time Equivalent staffing

Legal: Legal Services reviewed the proposed policies and raised no legal concerns

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The City of Hamilton is committed to openness, transparency, and informed residents and recognizes that the news media is essential in achieving those goals.

The City's Communications and Strategic Initiatives division further recognizes the need for an inclusive policy framework concerning its media relations activities.

Beginning in the summer of 2020, the City's Communications division started a comprehensive review of its structure, processes, strategies, and overall work across all areas of its business. These areas include social media, internal communications, marketing, graphic design, advertising, public education and communication, and media relations.

This review was at the direction of the City Manager and began and continued at the time the division was also engaged in pandemic-related communications in addition to its regular work. The pandemic significantly increased the divisional workload in all areas, particularly in media relations.

After partially restructuring the division, Communications and Strategic Initiatives began increasing the focus of its review on its media relations function in late 2021. Media Relations generally include developing and distributing communications materials and updates to the media and connecting members of the press with City information and subject matter experts. The media relations portion of the review was conducted in two phases.

Phase One, the subject of this report, was a general assessment of media relations service levels and support for the media. Phase Two specially focused on amenities offered to the media at City Hall.

As part of its Phase One review, City staff used the resident 2019 Survey results as well as divisional records on media interactions (**Appendix C**) to inform its consultation plans and focused the portion of the review on media listed as most influential to the public in the Survey or residents as well as on media outlets that most access the City's core media relations services.

City staff held discussions with the leaders of CHCH News, the Hamilton Spectator, and Hamilton Community News, as well as CBC, Canada's public broadcaster (which syndicates online, on radio, and television) to learn about their experiences working with the City in their news gathering efforts.

Discussions were supplemented by the ongoing feedback the City received in their regular interactions with the media and ongoing feedback from other venues, particularly from social media.

In reviewing the feedback and opinions received, common themes were identified, including:

- the need to update the corporate website and make information easier to find;
- the need to improve video streaming quality and have better-archiving practices;

- the need to make staff more available for interviews in a timely manner and be less reliant on written responses to media questions often described as unhelpful;
- the need to clarify the City's use of the Freedom of Information processes as it relates to information requests from the media;
- that facilities made available for press members outside of Council Chambers were insufficient;

Improvements to the physical assets designed to assist the press in their work have broader security and policy implications. They are therefore subject to a separate report to Council in 2023 – City of Hamilton Media Accreditation Policies and Procedures.

The updated Media Relations Policy is recommended to replace the current Communications and Mediation Relations Policy approved by the Senior Leadership Team in 2012 (**Appendix D**).

Council should also expect further improvements related to the City's media relations program in the coming year as a result of the program review, including the creation of dedicated media relations staff in the Communications division as a result of a reprioritization of resources, the completion of media training and education for staff in divisions of interest to the media, and the development of improved online resources for members of Hamilton's press community.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND LEGISLATED REQUIREMENTS

- The updated Media Relations Policy, as approved by Council, would replace the 2012 Media Relations Policy, as approved by the Senior Management Team;
- The updated Media Relations Policy is designed to complement the intent of The Routine Disclosure and Active Dissemination Policy by providing clarity to the media on occasions when the City is unable to release City-owned information to them upon request.

RELEVANT CONSULTATION

City of Hamilton Corporate Communications Staff

Interviews with corporate communications staff responsible for media relations provided an overview of their experience serving members of the press and confirmed the validity of concerns expressed by the media.

Hamilton-Area Media

Hamilton area media were invited to participate in several rounds of consultation in the Media Relations Program Review. An initial contingent of media – CHCH, Hamilton Spectator, Hamilton Community News, and CBC - was invited to participate in the

program review of the media relations program's core services and associated service levels.

ANALYSIS AND RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Staff members have included an analysis for each recommendation contained in this report.

Recommendation One - *That Council Adopt a Revised Media Relations Policy to Address the Feedback and Concerns Provided to the City of Hamilton by Hamilton Media:*

A comprehensive review of the City's media relations program identified a number of areas for improvement in how City staff service the media.

The review included media interviews, a review of the ongoing feedback received from members of the press, as well as input received from other methods such as social media, and identified a number of areas for improvement. Areas for improvement include the need to make staff more available to the media for interviews, better and more predictable use of streaming technology, better prioritization of media requests in staff's daily work, and making information more accessible online.

Upon review, City Communications staff, as well as the Senior Leadership Team, agreed with the majority of feedback received from members of the press and believes enshrining these improvements in policy will better help staff meet the needs of the press and to meet Council's stated goals of public accountability and transparency.

Recommendation Two - *That Council Approve a six-month delay in Full Policy Implementation to Allow Communications Staff to Provide All Necessary Training and Support Necessary to Implement Updated Policy Provisions.*

In achieving the policy objectives outlined in Appendix A to report CM23007, it will be necessary to engage in staff training and education related to roles and responsibilities in media relations and City responsibilities related to transparency and open government.

Staff in communications will develop and implement a corporate-wide media education program to support the new policy adopted by Council.

Staff anticipates completing the above training for the top 10 divisions that receive approximately 80% of media inquiries and information requests. These divisions include Planning, Transportation Operations and Maintenance, Licensing and Bylaw Services, Housing, Hamilton Water, Tourism and Culture, Transit, Public Health Services, Environmental Services, and Energy, Fleet, and Facilities Management. In addition,

media training will be made available to other senior leaders in the organization upon request in 2023, such as the LRT Office and Senior Leadership, with further training anticipated in 2024.

ALTERNATIVES FOR CONSIDERATION

N/A

ALIGNMENT TO THE 2016 – 2025 STRATEGIC PLAN

Our People and Performance

Hamiltonians have a high level of trust and confidence in their City government.

APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED

Appendix “A” – Proposed City of Hamilton Media Relations Policy updated from 2012

Appendix “B” – Overview of citizen information preferences taken from most recent Citizen Survey

Appendix “C” – Statistics taken from City of Hamilton’s Media Call Log (2021 and 2022)

Appendix “D” – 2012 Communications and Media Relations Policy approved by Senior Leadership