

PUBLIC INFORMATION, NOT PUBLICITY

An editorial standard for city of Bloomington government communications

The mission

Tell residents what their government is doing, why it matters, what it costs, what the consequences are and how they can participate.

City communications staff work for the municipal government, not as the personal publicity staff of elected or appointed officials or for city departments. Their work should meet the basic editorial standards expected of a conscientious local journalist: factual accuracy, public relevance, appropriate context, fair presentation and restraint.

The city need not be embarrassed by its accomplishments. Neither does it need to manufacture applause for them.

Five tests before you publish

1. The subtraction test. Remove the mayor's name, photograph and quotation. Does the communication still give residents everything they need to know? If yes, leave those elements out. If the mayor personally proposed, ordered or decided something consequential, identifying that responsibility is important. Credit and accountability go together.
2. The news judgment test. Imagine handing the underlying set of facts to an old grouchy newspaper editor. What would that editor consider the actual news? A completed sidewalk, or a photograph of the mayor standing on it? A change in utility rates, or a quotation praising the administration's commitment to residents? Lead with the actual news.
3. The evidence test. Is every factual assertion plainly true? Or do you have to later construct a whole storyline around selected facts to explain why the wording in the assertion might be considered true? Are adjectives doing work that numbers and facts ought to do? If something is described as historic, transformative, unprecedented, major, or successful, what independently checkable evidence supports that description?
4. The missing-facts test. What would an alert reader reasonably want to know that hasn't been included? Cost? Delays? Trade-offs? Funding source? Eligibility? A dissenting vote? A limitation? Don't omit material facts simply because they complicate an upbeat announcement.
5. The campaign brochure test. Could this material appear essentially unchanged in an incumbent's campaign literature? If so, reconsider its purpose, framing and presentation. Same point from a different angle: Five years from now, after the people holding office have changed, will this communication still read like a useful public record of what the city did? Or will it read like a page torn from someone's campaign brochure?

Apply ordinary newsroom standards

Headline: Describe the government action or outcome. Don't congratulate the person who is responsible.

Lede: Put the most useful fact first. Don't bury the news beneath a ceremonial appearance or quotation.

Photographs: Show the thing residents need to know about. Include elected officials when their participation is substantively relevant, not merely because they attended. Consider the cumulative effect of editorial choices over time. A photograph that is reasonable in isolation might contribute to a pattern of promotional coverage when similar choices are made repeatedly.

Quotations: Use quotes that explain a decision, provide context, establish accountability or convey substantive information. Generic expressions of pride and excitement are expendable.

Claims: Attribute opinions and interpretations. Provide underlying figures, dates and records whenever possible.

Links: Prefer primary public documents. Select any links to news outlets based on their informational value, not their friendliness toward the administration. If you link to one news outlet's coverage of a subject, is there an editorial reason for not linking to another outlet's coverage of the same subject?

Examples

- A new playground opens.

Not: "Mayor Smith celebrates another milestone in her commitment to Bloomington families," accompanied by a ribbon-cutting photograph.

Instead: "New playground at Bryan Park opens Saturday; accessible equipment added." Show the playground. Include its cost, funding source and hours.

- A major budget proposal is announced.

It is entirely appropriate to identify the mayor as its author, explain the administration's priorities and quote the mayor's rationale. But it is more important to first describe the facts of the proposed spending, funding sources, significant changes and next opportunities for public participation. Distinguish what the mayor claims about what the budget will do or what the budget signifies, from the facts of the budget. If the mayor makes claims about the significance of the budget, those should be attributed as claims: "According to Bloomington mayor Smith, the budget will support the consensus priorities of the Bloomington community."

- A news outlet publishes a piece based on an exclusive interview with the mayor.

Don't automatically amplify it through official city channels by linking to it. In particular, don't always link to favorable coverage from a single outlet that has been given routine interview

access, while ignoring reporting from other news outlets covering the same topics in the interview. If an external article adds substantial public information, there should be an identifiable editorial reason for linking to it, with selection criteria applied consistently independent of how it reflects on city officials. Whenever possible, send residents directly to the underlying city records.

- The mayor visits a city work crew.

If the actual news is the ongoing street repair, show the crew and explain the work, schedule and traffic impacts. The mayor's visit does not turn routine maintenance into a mayoral accomplishment story.

The final check

Before publishing, ask three final questions:

1. Is this written primarily for city residents who need information to help understand their town or to help their town thrive, or for someone else, who will feel better about being recognized?
2. Have we given the reader enough facts to reach a conclusion without telling them what conclusion to reach?
3. Could we defend every editorial choice (headline, photograph, quotation and omission) to a skeptical but fair-minded newspaper editor?

The governing principle: Report what the city does. Explain why it does it. Show residents how it affects them. Give appropriate credit, establish responsibility and document results.

Leave the applause to somebody else.