

HOPKINTON COMMUNICATION COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES
JUNE 30, 2022

The meeting was held at the Hopkinton Town Hall, 1 Town House Road, Hopkinton, RI 02833. The meeting was a hybrid meeting; in-person and on Zoom.

Present: Etta Zasloff, Sarah Steverman, Caleb Grant, Council Liaison Robert Marvel, and Town Clerk Elizabeth Cook-Martin.

Call to Order:

The meeting was called to order at 4:07 pm with a moment of silence and a salute to the Flag.

Approval of June 16, 2022 Meeting Minutes:

A motion was made by Sarah Steverman to accept the 6/16/22 minutes as written, which was seconded by Caleb Grant. The motion passed unanimously.

Report on definition of quorum:

Elizabeth Cook-Martin reported that she consulted with the town solicitor and, currently, two members would represent a quorum. That number would rise if more members are appointed to the committee.

Adoption of Vision Statement:

A motion was made by Caleb Grant to vote on adopting the committee's vision statement, seconded by Etta Zasloff. During discussion, the language was changed to read:

"The Hopkinton Communications Committee will serve in an advisory role to the Hopkinton Town Council to promote community engagement."

The motion to adopt this version passed unanimously.

Brief Summary of Social Media responses:

Sarah Steverman reported that she received about 15 responses in total, all of which fell pretty equally into three main categories: (1) the importance of communication with senior citizens, (2) the need for a better town website, and (3) the need for more and/or better forms of communication from the town to its citizens ("...more than just putting the info on a new website").

Public Comment:

Joe Moreau of Hopkinton thanked the committee members for their service and shared his personal experience of having trouble knowing what was happening in town unless he was actively going to multiple town meetings. And he expressed he would like to be involved more

with the committee but cannot since he is serving as the elected Public Welfare Director for the town.

As a private citizen, he reported that his biggest concerns are the historical lack of communication and the current issues around using technology like the town website to communicate with citizens today, which is often ineffective. Joe made the following four suggestions: (1) that the director of public welfare should be involved in whatever new communication system is developed, (2) that there should be an up-to-date alphabetical list of town employees that is easy for citizens to locate, (3) that there should be a town website that is user friendly, and (4) that the town should use more methods of communication that aren't web-based, such as print media, physical community bulletin boards, and face-to-face interactions. Joe agreed to be available to work with the committee, providing feedback and input as a private citizen and provided his email to the committee: ussmars6466@gmail.com

Preliminary Report on the town's current communication system:

Etta shared copies of her report, based on her meeting with the town clerk and assistant town clerk, that outlines the 12 different communication tools currently being used by the town. These are: Tax bill, town website, Hopkinton Facebook page, Recreation Department website, Recreation Facebook page, Code Red calls, Emergency Management Facebook page, Vote Today signs, Referendum notices, Proposed Budget notices, Town Council Meetings (incl public comment), and the Agenda, Minutes, and recordings of the town council meetings.

This report was opened for discussion. Sarah Steverman commented that information delivery seems like a major problem, with no singular system and no consistent schedule. Bob Marvel offered that his key takeaway was the importance of (at least once per year) giving all town residents the chance to opt in to receive direct communication from the town. One avenue for this might be a notice that accompanies the tax bill sent to all residents. Etta Zasloff added that she explored this idea with the town clerk and learned that the tax letter, as a budgeted item, is set as a one-page mailing. So the notice would have to be on the same piece of paper as the tax bill (for example on the back side) or further funding would have to be approved and allocated. For residents renting in town, the language of the notice could be copied to a flyer distributed to community bulletin boards, shared on community facebook pages, etc. Caleb Grant commented that there is a need for a central repository to combine and condense all the currently "fractured" pieces of communication between citizens and various town departments, and that preferably this would be an online system where the contents was pdf ready; available to be easily printed, posted, and shared in physical locations throughout the town.

Etta Zasloff emphasized the scale of work indicated by the discussion, and she suggested one recommendation to the town council could be to hire a communications director.

Sarah Steverman agreed with the scale of the problem but respectfully disagreed with recommending the hire of a new position.

There was general discussion of developing a system in the (new) town website that could be maintained and monitored by an existing town employee. One example would be to have it monitored by the assistant town clerk.

Bob Marvel shared that his initial intent in creating this temporary communication committee was to establish a communication commission to continually monitor and improve communication between the town and its residents.

Sarah Steverman emphasized the potential problems with the current communication system, where there is no central document even for outlining channels of communication between the town and residents. There are simply a few very smart, talented, dedicated town employees. If/when these staff leave there is essentially no "system" of communication.

Discussion of town website:

Jeff Frenette was unable to attend.

Bob Marvel reported that the town's website re-design is in the RFP process. Jeff Frenette and Brian Russo, town manager, will review applications and are going to make recommendations to the town council. No decision has been made yet on who will re-design the town's site, but this decision will likely be made "soon."

There was general discussion on the importance of having the new website (1) be mobile friendly, (2) be able to blast to social media and email, (3) be google and apple friendly (multiple browsers), (4) include the ability to easily print pdf versions of posts, and (5) have an intuitive system for authorized website managers to post and edit information, including updating information in a way that re-populates other areas of the website where the same information needs to be updated.

Bob Marvel will follow up with Jeff Frenette on these points.

There was also general discussion of what a town "newsletter" might look like and how it might be designed, created, and managed as an element of the new town website.

Consider voting on recommendations to town council:

There was general agreement that there is no need to vote on specific recommendations at this time.

The primary recommendation areas being explored by this committee are:

(1) The job qualifications and duties of a point person for a central communication system (such as competency with web publishing and web communications, to include social media, web development, newsletters, mail merge, etc, PR/marketing skills or background, understanding of the needs of the community, and regular involvement in town affairs).

(2) Using the yearly tax bill to let people opt in to a communication system.

(3) Having the director of public welfare involved in developing and running the communication system, especially for non-web modes of communication.

(4) Having this committee play a long-term role (per Bob Marvel's original intention) in building, executing, and monitoring a central communication system.

It was generally agreed that it would be important to have specific recommendations ready to present to the town council for their meetings on August 1st and August 15th.

Future Agenda Items:

- Use of an opt-in flyer to use as a stand alone mailing or include as part of a tax letter.
- Potential formats for a newsletter (short, condensed (with hyperlinks), and pdf-ready)
- Report from meeting with Town Manager Brian Russo.

Schedule for next meetings:

- The communications committee will meet at 9:30 am on 7/22 and 8/5 at the town hall.
- Members of the communication committee will be available to report to the town council at their meetings on 8/1 and 8/15, and Bob Marvel will put a report from the communications committee on the agenda for those meetings.

Adjournment:

Meeting was adjourned at 5:52pm (motion by Caleb Grant, second by Sarah Steverman).