



Communications and Engagement Audit

PEACE RIVER REGIONAL DISTRICT

September 16, 2013

Submitted by:

ACUMEN COMMUNICATIONS GROUP INC.
201-4489 Viewmont Avenue
Victoria, BC, V8Z 5K8
www.acumencommunications.ca

Prepared by: Shawn Robins
Communications Associate
shawn@acumenpr.ca

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Methodology.....	9
Findings.....	11
<i>Employee Interviews.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Board of Directors Interviews.....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Stakeholder Interviews.....</i>	<i>23</i>
Recommendations.....	26
<i>Internal Communications.....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Board of Directors Communications.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Stakeholder Communications.....</i>	<i>32</i>
Conclusion.....	34

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Peace River Regional District (PRRD) is the largest of British Columbia's 27 regional districts, encompassing 120,000 square kilometres situated in the north-eastern portion of the province. Despite this enormous area the region has fewer than 60,000 residents. Two-thirds of the residents live in one of the seven member municipalities: District of Chetwynd; City of Dawson Creek; City of Fort St. John; District of Hudson's Hope; Village of Pouce Coupe; District of Taylor and; District of Tumbler Ridge. The remaining 21,000 residents reside in the unincorporated area represented by the member electoral areas B, C, D and E.

Regional Districts provide services both inside and outside municipalities and ensure that the region works together to provide services identified and asked for by their members. The Peace River Regional District is governed by a Board of 12 directors consisting of appointed elected officials from each of the seven municipalities (the largest Municipality, Fort St. John, has two) and one elected director from each of the four electoral areas.

Working in partnership with local municipalities and rural areas as a federation the Regional District provides local governance to the unincorporated regions of the district and as well provides a range of regional and sub-regional services throughout the region including:

- 911 call answer emergency service;
- regional solid waste management
- management and development of noxious weed control;
- land use planning;
- regional and community recreation facilities;
- fire protection;
- rural water and sewer;
- parks;
- bylaw enforcement; and
- building inspection.

Despite the fact that area residents have had a regional level of government since 1967, and given the broad mandate for delivering services and representation to the district's residents, the public awareness and understanding of the PRRD is low. This has led to significant confusion regarding the Regional District's role and mandate, low confidence in its decision-making processes, and significant challenges in correcting misinformation related to controversial decisions. There is a growing need for strategic communications and engagement with external and internal audiences.

This audit, conducted by Acumen Communications Group, identifies key issues and recommendations to assist the district in opening a number of engagement channels and adopting dynamic communications tools to connect with target audiences. This summary provides an overview of the findings reported through quantitative and qualitative research with employees, the board of directors and stakeholders.

FINDINGS FROM EMPLOYEE INTERVIEWS

Internal communications

- Internal communications good but could improve – Overall 80 per cent of staff rated internal communications on a colleague to colleague basis as fair to excellent, with 50 per cent rating it as good. There were numerous suggestions for improving the consistency of communications and for providing greater context for initiatives, decisions and changes within the organization.
- Internal communication between the Dawson Creek and other PRRD offices – Due to physical separation there has been a continuing lack of information sharing and ongoing two-way communications between the offices. This leads to inconsistent application of policy and program delivery. Staff said more effort needs to be made to connect and include all offices in building a corporate culture.

All employees interviewed said the PRRD is a good place to work and that internal issues can be resolved.

- All Staff meetings – While most employees report receiving briefings and updates from management they also felt there would be some benefit to holding periodic all staff meetings that would serve to provide a broader context for the District's activities as well as serve to create a common sense of team among staff. Staff felt they would like to hear more often and directly from the CAO.
- What employees want from their supervisors (CAO or manager) – From their direct supervisor employees want more information on other departments' activities and a greater sense of the overall initiatives and challenges the Regional District is facing.
- Information flow – Managers reported a high degree of satisfaction with the regular managers' meetings. They expressed an appreciation for the open exchange of information and views

from other managers. A number of managers recognized that they needed to do a more consistent job of sharing info from these managers' meetings with their respective staffs. A number of managers felt that communications and information flow among departments remained siloed.

- Consultation and feedback – Employees reported no formal internal processes here, but said they do have the opportunity to provide feedback and are regularly asked to provide their opinions.
- More training and use of computer-based info sharing – Overwhelmingly employees said they felt the District had all the tools it needed for excellent internal communications but that not all employees were familiar with the range of tools available. Inconsistent use of such tools as “Basecamp,” lack of time and resources for training and a need to keep common data updated regularly and consistently are common frustrations for staff in using computer-based info sharing.
- Face-to-face is best – Staff reported that the small staff complement in the District led to a high degree of face-to-face interaction and info sharing. Yet many also indicated that they were not always aware of staff changes and initiatives in other departments. A number suggested a staff newsletter as a means of updating all staff on District news.

External communications

- The what? The who? – Employees described the PRRD's public profile as disorganized, distant and perceived as either competent or failing. Most were in agreement that the public had little understanding of the role of the Regional District or how the PRRD was different from other levels of government. They all believed that there was overall public satisfaction with the quality of customer service and service delivery but also agreed that a number of recent bylaw and policy initiatives had been poorly communicated with a resulting lack of confidence developing between the public and the District.
- Reactive not proactive – The audit found the greatest amount of the district's communications is statutory. Public meetings are also used as a communications tool as well as news releases. While some of the District's planning processes are well communicated, and public receive the necessary notices of meetings, service changes and other key information, there is very little cohesive communication providing the public with a sense of how the District is working to meet their needs. Many staff saw the District reacting in response to criticism or public misinformation rather than planning in advance for effective communication with the public.
- No consistency in visual identity - A review of communications materials produced by the District as well as comments from staff reveal an overall lack of consistency in the use and application of corporate visual identity on the part of the district. This applies to all areas of

communication from advertising, mailings and brochures to signage and web based communications. A number of staff believe the District would benefit from a "branding" exercise that would establish a single common visual identity that supports the District's communications goals and objectives and expresses the modern, customer-focused organization district staff believe it to be. Many felt the District's current logo was outdated and didn't accurately reflect the District's image.

- What employees are looking for – Employees would like to see the District more engaged with the public it serves. They cited participation in trade shows and community events as key opportunities for the District to be seen as working on behalf of residents. They called for more general information about the District's services and activities to be shared with the public through regular features in local newspapers, a regular District newsletter and better use of community forums and town hall meetings. One suggestion was to feature a regular column focused on District news and activities in local newspapers.
- Challenges of Time and Distance – Many staff pointed to the very real challenges of communicating with all residents in the region. Small rural communities are often poorly serviced by telecom and internet, postal distribution is slow and doesn't guarantee recipients are reading materials and managing face-to-face communications is time-consuming, costly and difficult. Staff said a better understanding of the best vehicles for communicating effectively with residents is needed.

Stakeholder communications

- Overview – Seventy-one percent of employees rated their relations with stakeholders as good or excellent. They commented that for the most part relations are respectful, cooperative and effective.
- What stakeholders want from employees – Employees said the main thing required of them is excellent customer service. This was reflected in timely responses, resolution of customer issues and provision of accurate and timely information.
- Consultation and feedback – Employees reported few structured consultation processes with stakeholders. The development of Official Community Plans, agricultural and parks and trails plans and community specific initiatives has resulted in some good community consultation in recent years.

FINDINGS FROM BOARD OF DIRECTORS INTERVIEWS

- Balancing Competing Demands – The challenge of providing a voice and fair representation for their constituents and balancing the needs of the District for administrative progress, efficiency and consistency was raised several times. Residents living in unincorporated areas represent

one-third of the region's populace and rely solely on the PRRD Board for local governance while other residents have locally elected municipal councils. As a result some rural residents and Directors feel PRRD decisions are often weighted to the greater common interest dominated by the seven municipal governments. As a consequence rural residents do not see their voice or views reflected in some District decisions. As the pace of economic growth, development and land-based conflict increases, so too does the mistrust among the District's municipal and rural residents.

- Need for administrative and communications support – Some directors requested better administrative support from the PRRD prior to meetings and also more comprehensive communications support in reaching out to their constituents.
- Need to create a common understanding among directors – Several Directors pointed out the lack of unstructured meeting time Directors have available to discuss issues of common concern and interest. They called for regular opportunities for Directors to gather without the presence of District staff – this they believe will help Directors to identify problems and issues of contention before they arise at Board meetings.
- Consultation and feedback – Directors said town hall meetings, information sessions and surveys (if they are well focussed) should be considered as consultation and feedback mechanisms. Current consultation efforts through Community Conversations are a step in the right direction and such efforts should be ongoing not just used to try and repair damaged relations.
- External communications and engagement – Directors reported the need for an increase in external public education and communication with stakeholders and the general public due to the low public profile of the district overall. Directors would like to see contemporary and proactive communications strategies and tactics.
- In an ideal world – Directors said that in order to achieve the best communications and engagement, people need to feel listened to and see that their local government is taking action in response to what they hear. Further, they reported that the public and stakeholders need to see the relevance of the district in their lives. This will require greater efforts to engage and educate the general public. “We are attracting the same small group of individuals to every meeting – there are a lot of people we are not reaching.”

FINDINGS FROM STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

- External Communications – In one-on-one interviews a number of stakeholders said they would like to see more initiative on the part of the District in establishing and maintaining engagement. They reported that they did not receive communications from the District that was not specific

to their formal engagement or referral processes. As a result they did not have a comprehensive understanding of the District's priorities, challenges or initiatives.

- Information flow – Most stakeholders reported positively on information flow, saying it was project specific, and that while the project is active they receive communication from the PRRD.
- Consultation and feedback – Stakeholders reported an absence of structured channels for consultation and feedback. Some pointed out that effective stakeholder engagement required follow up and follow through on the part of the District. They felt the District needed to do more to initiate dialogue around a variety of issues. They also felt the District needed to do more to develop a working dialogue directly with industry – particularly the oil and gas industry.
- In an ideal world – Stakeholders said to deliver high quality communications and engagement the PRRD would need to actively build relationships of value that recognize all parties at the table and that recognize communications is a two-way process. Further they said excellence will be achieved in this area when effective dialogue is taking place where information is being received by the district from its stakeholders, and in turn, used to its highest potential.

Methodology

On behalf of the Peace River Regional District (PRRD), Acumen Communications Group conducted qualitative and quantitative research between July 2013 and September 2013. Qualitative analysis consisted of face-to-face and phone interviews with a total of 7 Regional District employees, 10 PRRD Directors and 11 stakeholders for a total of 28 interviews. Before the interviews took place, comprehensive discussion guides were developed for each group.

To ensure as much input and engagement as possible two quantitative online surveys were also conducted; one for employees and one for stakeholders. The employee survey was sent to a total of 32 employees of which 29 chose to respond for a response rate of 96 per cent. The stakeholder survey was sent to a total of 42 stakeholders of which 13 chose to respond for a response rate of 39 per cent.

Taken together, a total of 70 individuals provided feedback during this consultation process.

Participants were informed that all responses would be kept confidential within the report, and that summary findings and recommendations would be shared with them when the report was complete.

Upon the conclusion of the interviews and online surveys all data was analysed and assembled into this report.

Internal interviews were conducted with employees from the following PRRD departments:

- Financial Services
- Corporate Services
- Community Services
- Development Services
- Environmental Services

Director interviews were conducted with the following board members:

- Karen Goodings, Chair and Director Electoral Area B
- Arthur Hadland, Director Electoral Area C
- Wayne Hiebert, Director, Electoral Area D
- Jerrilynn Schembri, Director, Electoral Area E
- Cheryl Shuman, Director, Dawson Creek
- Lori Ackerman, Mayor, Fort St. John
- Bruce Christensen, Director, Fort St. John
- Gwen Johansson, Mayor, Hudson's Hope
- Fred Jarvis, Mayor, District of Taylor
- Mike Caisley, Director, District of Tumbler Ridge

*Merlin Nichols, Mayor District of Chetwynd and Larry Fynn, Mayor, Village of Pouce Coupe were unavailable at the time the audit was being conducted.

Qualitative stakeholder interviews were conducted with the following organizations:

- BC Oil and Gas Commission (2)
- District of Tumbler Ridge
- District of Taylor
- BC Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, Invasive Plant Mgmt. Program
- Buick Arena
- Rolla Hall and Rolla Ratepayers Assoc. (2)
- Moberly Lake Community Assoc.
- Farmington Community Assoc.
- District of Chetwynd, Parks and Recreation Dept.

Quantitative stakeholder interviews were conducted with the following groups and organizations:

- BC Government
- Chetwynd and District Rod and Gun Club
- North Peace Regional Airport
- Sunset Prairie Recreation Commission
- Fort St. John Community Arts Council
- Doe River Recreation Commission
- BC Hydro
- Toms Lake and District Volunteer Fire Department
- Emergency Social Services and Search and Rescue
- District of Hudson's Hope
- City of Fort St. John
- Clearview Arena
- Golata Creek Rec. Society

Please note that stakeholder interviews were sought from a broad range of sectors, however only those mentioned above chose to participate.

Findings

Employee interviews

Overview

The Peace River Regional District employs 40 people who work to provide the residents of the district with a wide range of services including:

- Land use planning
- Zoning bylaw reviews and implementation, ALR applications
- Development of Official Community Plans and Local Area Plans
- Issuance and enforcement of building permits
- Park planning and management
- Emergency programs and preparedness planning
- Community wildfire planning
- Community recreation services
- 911 Emergency service
- Volunteer Fire Services
- Community Grants
- Solid Waste Management
- Rural Water and Sewage Services
- Environmental Services
- Invasive Plant Management
- Regional Agricultural Planning
- Bylaw Enforcement

Employees work in a number of locations:

1. Peace River Regional District Corporate office – Dawson Creek (32 employees)
2. Peace River Regional District – Fort St. John Office (six employees)
3. Charlie Lake Fire Department (two employees)

During this audit process seven qualitative employee interviews and 29 quantitative employee interviews were conducted. Employees from all program areas were engaged.

To measure engagement for each business, as part of the survey respondents were asked to identify which program area they represented.

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

Program area	Number of employees interviewed
Financial Services	1
Corporate Services	3
Community Services	1
Environmental Services	1
Development Services	1
Total	7

ONLINE SURVEY

Program area	Percentage who responded	Number who took survey
Environmental Services	10 per cent	3
Financial Services	24 per cent	7
Corporate Services/ Admin	31 per cent	9
Community Services	7 per cent	2
Development Services	28 per cent	8
Total	100 per cent	29

The following analysis emerged and focuses mainly on areas for improvement, with reference to what is working well within the PRRD. Findings from these employee interviews make up the largest portion of the audit data and are divided into three main categories: internal communications, external communications and stakeholder engagement.

Internal Communications

Numerous locations

As would be expected, employees reported a disconnect between the PRRD Corporate Offices and staff at other PRRD offices, particularly the Fort St. John office, saying they felt more than just a geographic separation, with several employees reporting an “us and them” mentality. All employees expressed a genuine desire to improve relations between all the offices. Most employees felt there would be benefits to holding periodic all staff meetings that included all PRRD employees. They also indicated positive support for a Staff Newsletter that covered activities in all offices.

Through the online survey employees said they face the following challenges as a result of offices in various locations:

Lack of face to face contact	72 per cent
Not all employees are aware of PRRD programs	64 per cent
Information flow is challenged	60 per cent
People don't know each other	44 per cent

Internal relations

A good internal culture and a friendly work environment

All employees interviewed one-on-one reported good to excellent relations colleague to colleague at the district. Many said despite a high workload and competing deadlines the internal atmosphere is friendly and respectful. One employee described the PRRD offices as a “supportive community with many different ways to communicate.”

When asked to describe internal communications practices at the PRRD 54 per cent of employees responding to the online survey said relations were good to excellent.

“There needs to be more structure and support around information sharing from Managers on down, not just left to when Manager has time.”
PRRD Employee

Room for improvement in three areas:

1. Cross communication between departments

Employees at the PRRD feel that for the most part critical issues are communicated with staff, however there is very little overall awareness of the District’s goals and initiatives among all employees. Work practices and information remain siloed within the culture and processes developed by each department. Sharing across departments occurs at weekly Management Meetings, however this does not get shared effectively down through the organization. Uneven awareness of and inconsistent use of common software such as Basecamp contributes to the lack of info sharing. While there is an existing employee intranet it is underutilized and holds common forms only. This also prevents the District from developing more seamless administrative processes and records management practices. More interdepartmental communication means:

- Understanding the work each does.
- Responding to requests in a timely manner.
- Utilizing structured project management procedures to reduce stress and ensure timeliness.
- Working horizontally, with staff at all levels engaging seamlessly with each other.

2. Manager to employee communications

Employee response to satisfaction with Manager to employee communications varied according to the department. Some felt well served by current practices, others called for more regularity and consistency of meetings. Many felt the best timing for staff briefings was following regularly scheduled

weekly Management Meetings. Weekly Management Meetings occur whether all Managers can attend or not – this ensures they are held regularly.

3. Internal communication between the Dawson Creek and other PRRD offices

Both Management and staff acknowledged ongoing communication problems between the PRRD offices. Efforts to create a common corporate culture have not been successful and staff has expressed frustration at the inability to resolve longstanding issues between the offices. There is however an acknowledgement of the issue and a desire to make efforts to get all offices on the same page both operationally and from a team perspective. All staff meetings and briefings are seen as one way to bring all staff together for a common event. It was felt these could provide opportunities to share information of corporate interest and to answer employee concerns and questions. It was felt these meetings should be led by the CAO.

When asked how they would like to see communications flow within the district employees said:

- “All departments staff meeting to avoid incorrect information or rumours on a quarterly basis or as needed. This will help us if we receive a phone call from the public – we will know who to direct it to.”
- “Weekly meetings for each department to gather information and for senior managers to relay to other managers in their weekly round table.”
- “Electronic filing system so anyone at any time can access information rather than have to go through staff responsible for it.”
- “An internal newsletter.”
- “Periodic general staff meetings where managers give an overview of what is happening within their program so other staff know what’s going on in the organization instead of feeling isolated within the scope of their own job. Meetings will also provide an opportunity for staff to make suggestions on how to improve services.”

While 54 per cent of employees surveyed online report good to excellent internal communications, 46 per cent reported fair (27 per cent) to weak (15 per cent) internal communications practices. These numbers are important to note and signal areas within the organization that require attention and resolution.

Of particular importance was the belief by *all* employees interviewed one-on-one that the PRRD is good place to work. Employees spoke openly about the high calibre, friendliness and professionalism of their colleagues.

“This is a small community and word travels fast.”
PRRD employee

What employees want from their direct supervisor

When asked what they want from their director supervisor that they are not now getting a number of employees stated they wanted to have more information about changes corporately and updates on what is happening in other departments.

Most employees stated they were satisfied that they are receiving the information they need within their own department.

Employees said:

- “I would like more information about workload and projects happening in other departments. If you know more background information it’s easier to understand why changes may be taking place”
- “Things are posted on Basecamp but are not directly spoken about or discussed so we understand where the project is going or what the actual importance of the project/task is.”
- “My Manager is great for passing info regarding our department but we often feel out of the loop with major building announcements i.e. staff coming/going, policy changes or public issues. I often hear in the community before I hear at work.”

Information flow

Currently e-mail is used to distribute the majority of information at the PRRD. During one-on-one interviews PRRD employees reported this method worked well, but requested a better understanding of the organization’s workflow at any given time. For instance, employees stated they did not have comprehensive knowledge of PRRD projects and initiatives beyond what they are working on, and therefore have little understanding of how their projects fit into the work flow of other program areas.

Many staff indicated they were satisfied with receiving information via email but felt face-to-face was more effective and more opportunities should be made to enable face-to face meetings.

Some staff indicated that short, regular staff meetings would be the most effective for engaging and updating staff.

Consultation and feedback

There are no formal processes for internal feedback but most employees reported having the opportunity to provide input on various projects and initiatives. Several more said they are regularly asked to provide their opinion.

In an ideal world...

In one-on-one interviews employees were asked to name one thing that could be accomplished that would have the biggest impact on communications among colleagues:

- “All staff meetings.”
- “Management needs to share its perspective –get info down through organization.”
- “Do something about the historic disconnect with office in Fort St. John.”
- “Regular updates for staff in any form- share what the district is doing.”
- “A communications tool that travels up and down throughout the whole organization”

External Communications

A formal communications process and dedicated communications management are still relatively new developments at the PRRD. Communications planning is only beginning to be linked to corporate strategic planning, communications budgets are still largely project specific, issues management is largely ad hoc and visual identity standards are disparate and not cohesive. This is beginning to change as communications processes are incorporated into strategic and program planning and new communications tools and processes are developed for use within the District.

The what? The who?

When asked to describe the district’s reputation with external audiences, employees provided words describing two very different faces of the organization. When asked how stakeholders and partners that worked regularly with the District would view them employees were most likely to use words like: responsive, supportive, and cooperative. When asked the same question in terms of how the general public were likely to describe the District they chose words like: disorganized, distant, and directive. Many felt the public had a poor or no knowledge of the Regional District’s role and responsibilities – and indicated that most residents had contact with the District only around a specific service need.

Others felt members of the public displayed a lack of trust around the District’s efforts at meaningful consultation related to key issues and policy changes.

Overall employees in one-on-one interviews were aware of the difficulties they face in engaging the public. A number said until recently, avoiding public engagement and maintaining a low profile characterized the District’s management style. This is beginning to change and employees recognize the value of strategic and proactive communications.

Improving external communications

While a great deal of the district’s external communications is statutory, including notices of Board meetings or public meetings on various community projects, there has been some communications produced in support of various planning processes – Agriculture Plan, Parks and Trails Plan, Official

Community Plans as well as initiatives to promote recycling and emergency preparedness. Public meetings constitute an important communications method particularly in small rural communities.

Nearly all collateral is developed in-house and often off the side of people's desks, or through departmentally managed contractual arrangements and includes basic brochures, posters, event calendars and schedules, newsletters and bulletins. Board meetings are covered by local media and minutes of the meeting are distributed widely via Board News published following the District Board meeting every two weeks.

By far the most common means of distribution is through mail. The District maintains an up-to-date web site and a Facebook page. However, access to computers, particularly in rural areas is very inconsistent. Rural mail delivery is relatively slow and rural residents do not pick up mail frequently. Certain geographic areas are not serviced by cellular phone service. This very uneven delivery capacity presents significant problems in ensuring all residents receive information in a timely way. This calls for good planning, long lead times and use of multiple delivery mechanisms including newspaper, television and radio. Radio has the most effective penetration in these areas followed by various print media.

What employees are looking for

Employees felt that the most effective communications occurred face-to face. District residents, they stated, are suspicious of slick, over-produced communications materials. They are looking for timely information, delivered in a straightforward way. They also felt that District staff having a presence at trade shows and community events was effective but had not been used extensively by the District.

Many employees referred to the web site as an effective communications tool. They also recognized the current site is a starting point and that it will need to evolve - presenting a more customer service focused face. The website is managed by an internal web management committee with representatives from all departments. An outside supplier was used to develop the site and provides ongoing technical and design support.

Few employees expressed satisfaction with the visual identity and branding presented by the District through its variety of communications products. Some suggested a branding exercise should be undertaken to identify a new visual identity more consistent with the District's new management style and objectives. Most identified a lack of consistency and quality and called for visual identity standards to be developed for all communications materials and signage.

According to many employees the District's greatest communications strength is its friendly and knowledgeable staff. Staff is responsive and committed to helping residents meet their needs and understand service changes and address service problems. They wanted to see these values reflected in a more modern brand image for the District.

Respondents to the online employee survey provided the following suggestions as tools to improve external communications and boost engagement with stakeholders.

Statistics from this survey are as follows:

Early and ongoing communications on issues	75 per cent
Consistent and regular communications	67 per cent
More collateral material	46 per cent
Increased PRRD presence at community events	42 per cent
Regular community meetings/town halls	42 per cent
Improved connections with local media	38 per cent

Stakeholder Engagement

Overview

When asked about engagement with stakeholders, Peace River Regional District employees reported positive results, with most identifying good relationships.

96 per cent of employees answering the online survey stated that stakeholder relations are fair to good for the PRRD. Seventy-one per cent of online respondents rated engagement with their stakeholders as medium to high.

When asked what the key stakeholder issues are for the district, employees identified an overall lack of awareness regarding the PRRD. The following issues were also identified:

- Solid waste and landfill rules and fees
- Recent introduction of changes to building bylaws
- ATVs on public lands
- Recycling and waste diversion programs
- Environmental concerns related to proposed Site C dam and oil and gas industry activities
- Issues related to Office of the Farmer's Advocate
- Invasive Plant program
- District role in Emergency Planning and Emergency Response
- Wildfire Management
- Lack of resources to handle referrals from oil and gas industry and related approving agencies
- Agricultural Land Commission
- Canada Post/ BC Assessment address issues
- Site C Legacy Agreement

“The public is demanding new levels of involvement and accountability.”

PRRD employee on External engagement.

When asked for ideas to improve stakeholder engagement all employees said the district needs a more coordinated and strategic communications presence so that initiatives and programs can be promoted across the region. When asked which group they would like to see improved engagement and communications from, online respondents said the following:

Electoral Area residents	50 per cent
First Nations	33 per cent
Construction and Development	33 per cent
Small Business	33 per cent
Resource Sector (oil, gas, forestry mining)	25 per cent
Tourism	21 per cent
Environmental groups	17 per cent
Parks and Recreation	12 per cent

What stakeholders want from the PRRD

Employees said the main things stakeholders are looking for from them is assistance, excellent customer service reflected in resolution to the issues they bring forward, accurate information on district programs and bylaws, an up-to-date and informative website, and most importantly “that we do what we say we will do and fulfill our obligations.”

Consultation and feedback

Regarding consultation, employees in one-on-one interviews stated that no formal, consistent consultation is being done with stakeholders. More regular consultation occurs with stakeholders who serve on joint committees and planning bodies or who have contractual relationships with the District.

“How do we best meet divergent expectations of the public, the Board and stakeholders.”
PRRD employee on External engagement.

Board of Directors interviews

Overview

Qualitative interviews were conducted with ten of the Directors of the Peace River Regional District board. This included the four Regional Area Directors.

When asked what words best describe the district’s reputation with its stakeholders, Directors’ views mostly favoured such words as: responsive, valuable, well organized and respectful. When asked what words would best describe the general public’s view the choice of words was somewhat more divided between words like distant, not trusted and failing to satisfactory, adequate and respectful. Directors’ impressions overwhelmingly are that stakeholders hold a more positive view of the PRRD than does the general public. Many pointed to recent controversial issues which generated a negative backlash, particularly from rural residents as the cause for negative public perception of the PRRD.

Federation

The Directors interviewed represent both the Municipal governments and the unincorporated region within the Regional District. Unincorporated areas represent about one-third of the District’s population. While municipal residents have local municipal governments and representatives, residents in the unincorporated areas rely solely on the PRRD Board for local governance and are most reliant on the Regional District for direct delivery of key services. While there is general agreement and a shared understanding among Directors of the importance of the PRRD Board speaking with a united voice, Directors feels they must also speak out for the needs of their Area’s or Municipality’s constituents. Directors pointed out that this is the most significant challenge of providing regional leadership. As the region’s economy grows, issues become more complex and impacts, particularly as they relate to resource extraction and land use, affect greater numbers of residents. These increased pressures are challenging the PRRD’s staff and resource capacities and the PRRD Board’s ability to deal in an informed way with increasingly complex decision-making. The challenge to operate in a federated manner is exacerbated by the long-standing tension between rural and Municipal Directors and the continued suspicion that Board decisions overwhelmingly reflect the interests of the District’s municipal governments and residents. Some Directors suggested that the structure of the Regional model of governance needs to be re-examined in light of changing regional realities. However, that is a matter for broader discussion at the provincial level.

Board support

The majority of Directors were very satisfied with the support and information they receive from District staff. Most saw PRRD staff as knowledgeable and skilled and talked about the quality and comprehensiveness of reports, evaluations and recommendations. One Area Director stated they could use some administrative support to assist in communicating more frequently and effectively with Area constituents. Another requested that District staff be more forthcoming in sharing information gathered in community consultations.

“It is difficult to be in public service these days – we all need to work together rather than compete with one another”

PRRD Director

One Director pointed out that due to time and work pressures Directors seldom met outside of regularly scheduled District Board meetings. As a result Directors did not get to know one another or get to engage in unstructured discussions around common issues and concerns. Many Directors expressed concerns about the apparent rural/municipal split on the Board and felt this issue needed to be addressed in a positive way.

Information flow

When asked about information flow directors identified the local media as the main channel to report on PRRD business. Several directors said they would like to see board meetings take place in a different community each month and for a report of regional district business to be published in the local paper. One director said that members of the public should have more flexible options to be able to participate in board meetings. One Director recommended hosting Community conversations in municipalities on a regular basis.

Consultation and channels for feedback

To create opportunities for stakeholders and the public to consult with the PRRD and provide feedback, Directors felt town hall meetings and public information sessions similar to the Community Conversations now underway should be used on a regular and consistent basis. A number of Directors felt that if the PRRD had been using this consultation approach current controversies could have been addressed earlier.

Positive comments were reported from current consultation efforts the district is conducting including the Charlie Lake sewer upgrade, Official Community Planning and the District Agricultural Plan.

External communications and engagement

When asked about how well the PRRD communicated with its stakeholders and the general public, Directors were divided, with some thinking the PRRD was doing an effective job, but most suggesting there was room for expanded effort and a more proactive approach to communications. All agreed that external audiences have little knowledge of the district and the services it provides. Most importantly, Directors felt the District must be more open and consultative and look at new ways to better engage a broader public. Directors acknowledged that the strategic planning process they have started to use has been useful in keeping the Board and District staff on the same page and helpful in better focusing discussion and agenda development. They also acknowledged, particularly at the Electoral Areas Directors level, they still need some help with communications planning.

“The big challenge is how to get information out to everyone about what the district is doing. We tend to get the same group of people attending everything. There are a large group of residents we aren’t reaching.”

PRRD Director

In the future, Directors would like to see the PRRD increase its profile with stakeholders and the public, utilizing a broader range of communications tools to support initiatives that make it clear who the PRRD is and what it does.

In an ideal world...

More effective public and stakeholder engagement could be accomplished through:

- “Greater clarity around what taxpayers are funding. Municipal residents and rural residents engage in a constant debate about who pays the most for PRRD services.”
- “Staff need to develop a greater understanding that local people and their views are important.”
- “The community conversations we are now undertaking are not perfect, but they are starting to unfold.”
- “Would like to see a quarterly article in local papers talking about issues facing residents in my local area.”
- “Would like to see a newsletter from District Area Directors.”
- “We need to get out in the community more and invite the community to events.”
- “The District needs to go through a rebranding exercise. The current visual identity does not say anything about us and is not catchy.”

Stakeholder interviews

Overview

Stakeholder interviews revealed a range of impressions regarding engagement with the PRRD. In discussions with smaller organizations and communities the feedback was largely positive, while feedback from larger organizations like the BC Oil and Gas Commission identified room for improvement. Feedback from some rural communities reflected the current tensions between rural residents and the District Board and suggested the PRRD was in crisis mode. In all 22 stakeholders provided feedback through either qualitative (10 interviews) or quantitative (12 online surveys) feedback. Identifying an accurate and up-to-date list of stakeholders proved to be difficult. This reflects on the state of the District’s current stakeholder database and a lack of central management of this responsibility. Many staff and stakeholders commented on the high rate of turnover of staff and stakeholder contacts across the District.

Most stakeholders chose terms like: cooperative, organized and supportive to describe the district’s reputation with stakeholders while choosing terms like muddled, fractured and failing to describe the district’s reputation with the general public. Almost all stakeholders commented positively regarding PRRD employees.

75 per cent of stakeholders responding to the online survey rated their organization's relationship with the PRRD as good to very good, with 42 per cent saying they were very engaged and 25 per cent saying they were engaged with the organization.

External Communications

While issue specific communications with stakeholders is generally effective the district's broader communications messages and strategies are not clear to their stakeholders. Overall they said they would like to see more two-way and face-to-face communication with the District. They would like to see the District initiate engagement more often and would welcome opportunities to collaborate with the District.

Online respondents were also asked to identify the top three things the PRRD could do to improve stakeholder engagement and communications. Answers were as follows:

- "Continue to be accessible – very much appreciated."
- "Timely notice for meetings/open houses. People in our District use every method from smoke signals to smart phones and everything in between. We need to have the notices for more than two weeks before a consultation/meeting. It has created problems getting the information out."
- "I think things are generally working very well. PRRD staff are friendly and approachable. Inquiries, concerns and issues are dealt with in a professional, timely, proactive and constructive manner."
- "Do consultation BEFORE making a change, not after. Current model is to make the change and then go 'explain it to the public'. Public understandably gets angry."
- "Develop a communications strategy. Allow additional time for local governments to comment on PRRD questions that are posed."
- "As a rural resident I appreciate the mail outs I get on issues that affect me such as a zoning amendment. Although I recognize the mail outs are costly in comparison to sending an email"

Information flow

The majority of online respondents (75 per cent) reported positively on information flow, saying that it was project specific and while a project was active they received communication from the PRRD. As would be expected, channels for information flow are basic, including heavy use of e-mail, phone and in many cases face-to-face meetings. 92 per cent of online respondents reported e-mail as the most used channel to exchange information. Further 75 per cent felt this method of communication was effective, and 75 per cent said they receive information from the SRD in a timely manner when a project is active.

Online respondents focused on communications with their specific organizations and said, overwhelmingly, that e-mail (92 per cent), telephone (83 per cent) and face-to-face meetings (75 per cent) are the best methods for communication.

Consultation and feedback

"There are always opportunities to collaborate and grow. We should do more."

PRRD Stakeholder

During one-on-one interviews stakeholders reported an absence of consistent or structured channels for feedback or consultation. Even though the district does not conduct regular consultation through a structured process 75 *per cent* of stakeholders said they felt the PRRD is providing opportunities to consult with them. To improve consultation efforts, online respondents offered:

- “The representative for our area could attend one club meeting annually.”
- “Keep in touch on a regular basis.”
- “Provide information in a timely manner. Public consultation meetings very seldom get the publicity needed for local people to participate.”

“In an ideal world...”

As a final question respondents were asked to imagine a stakeholder meeting in 2015 where everyone is speaking positively about the PRRD, and identify what has occurred to cause such affirmative discussion. The following is a summary of stakeholder comments:

- “People are talking about what makes effective communications, sharing issues and having discussions around how to coordinate activities and notify public.”
- “Timely and updated info is available.”
- “Our joint efforts to better educate the public about the Regional District are starting to show results.”
- “Both sides are seeing issues from the others perspective. There is respectful consideration of each other’s views”
- “We are making progress. There is forward momentum.”
- “District is making an effort to hear people and acting on what they hear. People are willing to work together.”
- “People are discussing what we can do to get the Regional District governance system to work more effectively.”

Recommendations

The following pages detail recommendations to:

- Improve internal communications with employees.
- Improve communications within and to the Board of Directors.
- Improve external communications and engagement with stakeholders and the general public.

Internal communications

Key issue – Several locations

Recommendation #1 – Increase contact between all employees

As would be expected findings revealed a disconnect between employees working in the Dawson Creek Corporate Office and those at the PRRD's other locations, particularly its Fort St. John office. This divide includes employees not knowing each other, different understandings when preparing work (one office for the other), and an "us and them" mentality. However, all employees strongly expressed the desire to remove barriers between the groups and improve work flow. Recommendations to achieve this are as follows:

- Develop and implement periodic all staff meetings – these events would gather all employees together in one location for engagement and conversation. Agendas for such events could include:
 - A keynote address from a hired speaker that inspires and motivates.
 - A speech from the CAO to outline the year ahead and state the importance of "coming together and rowing together."
 - An overview of the organization's big picture and vision.
 - Program or project overviews from managers.
 - Group games or exercises to bring people together.
 - A follow up coffee or lunch to further improve engagement.
- Conduct learning sessions for employees in other locations– This will assist all employees in gaining understanding around what the Corporate Office expects with regard to document preparation, work processes and customer service. These sessions will also work to bring employees together to form solid professional relationships. These sessions could alternate between offices.
- Staff Newsletter – A bi-monthly newsletter (e-bulletin and in print for posting in lunch rooms and lounges) reporting on staff activities. New staff hires, retirements, personal milestones, accomplishments, and achievements, and notice of upcoming opportunities,

training and learning opportunities could be shared with all staff. The existing web management committee could be asked to coordinate content and ensure posting to all employees.

- Establish video conference calls so people can see each other (or set up skype calls). This is used successfully by BC Oil and Gas Commission where they have similar issues with various offices to connect employees.
- Employee intranet that incorporates the Basecamp as the repository for documents, but does more by providing place for latest staff news (HR), latest 'in the news' (media feed/corporate communications), health and wellness tips and other relevant policy changes.

Key issue – Internal relations

Manager to employee relations

The majority of employees reported excellent relations with their managers; however a number of employees felt that meetings with staff could be held more regularly and could broaden their agenda to include information on corporate initiatives and other departments. Managers need to take responsibility for ensuring information is flowing down through the organization.

Key issue – Staff meetings

Recommendation #2 – Change staff meeting format

In one-on-one interviews and the online survey employees stated they would like to see changes to the staff meeting format to make agendas more comprehensive and increase their understanding of the organization and the work of their colleagues. Many also stated they would like a better understanding of the district's big picture and vision moving forward and felt this forum would be a good place for learning in these areas. As such the following is recommended:

Activity	Corporate Offices
Create agendas well ahead of each meeting and request employee input.	✓
Create meeting notes that are distributed to all staff and include a list of 'to dos', action items or next steps.	✓
Include a new section to the meeting that provides time for the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff presentations on district projects or initiatives. 	✓

Key issue – Information flow

Recommendation #3 – Increase training and use of corporate information sharing software tools

Employees reported a variety of workflow challenges, duplicative effort and poor records management resulting from inconsistent use of common information sharing software tools such as Basecamp.

- Build consensus within the organization on a common information sharing software tool (intranet).
- Ensure all staff has access to training on the common tool.
- Discourage use of other similar tools.
- Provide sufficient IT support to ensure that common tool operates effectively throughout organization.
- Develop protocols for keeping information consistent and up-to-date.
- Have the intranet as the default opening when employees go to use the internet, so there is a daily check in.

Key issue – More effective external communications

Recommendation #4 – Build a foundation of communications planning processes

The District has taken a number of positive steps toward improving its external communications. The establishment of a dedicated Communications Manager position is one positive step and the other is adoption of a strategic planning process for both the Board and the District.

- Develop an Annual Corporate Communications Strategy linked to the District's Annual Strategic Plan. The Plan identifies key communications objectives, overarching messaging and communications activities in support of the Strategic Plan. Communications planning, issue identification and identification of communication challenges and obstacles should constitute part of the strategic planning process.
- Develop a Communications Calendar for the District and share with key staff. A Communications Calendar identifies key communication activities, opportunities and events in a single calendarized format. The Communications calendar is an ideal mechanism for planning purposes. It captures key announcements, consultation processes, advertising and District Events and constitutes an effective discussion document for Management meetings.
- Develop an Issues Management identification and tracking process. Identifying potential issues and developing strategies to address them is critical to effective communications planning. An

issues tracking document identifies the key issue, clarifies which department or individual has responsibility, provides a brief background and outlines the District's position on the issue. The Issues tracking document also details what actions have been taken in response to the issue and sets out a timeline for future actions. The Issues Tracking document is also an effective discussion tool for Management planning. The Issues Tracking document is shared with key management staff.

- Ensure Communications is a standing item on the Management Committee Agenda. The Communications Manager can use this opportunity to provide updates on and discuss the Communications Calendar and Issues Tracking Document as well as provide a communications lens to other District initiatives.
- Communications Templates for all outward facing documents coming from the district with consistent look and feel.

Recommendation #5 – Develop visual identity guidelines for District

The PRRD produces a wide range of communication materials for distribution to stakeholders and the public. They also maintain a web site and Facebook presence for the District. Each Department pursues their respective objectives and takes responsibility for budgeting and producing materials that are distributed to the public. There are no consistent policies and guidelines in place to ensure that materials are produced with a consistent look and feel. No single Department or individual has responsibility for final approval of all materials prior to public dissemination or acting as 'brand ambassador' for the District.

Development and maintenance of common visual identity standards and approvals should be the responsibility of the Communications Manager operating under delegated authority from the CAO. All management and staff should be aware of the standards and guidelines and any necessary approval and sign-off processes.

The Communications Manager should maintain a roster of approved contracted graphic design agencies and professionals to assist departments with design needs and ensure standard and quality of all communications materials.

Recommendation #6 – Engage District staff and Board in branding exercise

The PRRD should consider the value of engaging outside professional expertise to assist in developing a "brand" for the Regional District that is consistent with modern, dynamic and customer focused organization. Such an exercise can serve to bring the Regional Board and District staff together to identify a common vision for the Regional District and instill a greater sense of pride and purpose among District staff.

Board of Directors Communications

Key issue – Lack of a federated approach

Recommendation #1 – Grow understanding of the importance of rowing together

Above all else, the absence of federation within the PRRD board has recently begun to define this group. Directors spoke openly about this issue, some expressing frustration and a desire to shift the group to become more connected and supportive of each other and to restore trust with rural residents. All Directors need to make time for broader discussions of common issues and sharing of regional differences and perspectives. Directors also need to be able to engage in discussions that do not include District staff and are not bound by an agenda. Opportunities should be made throughout the year for Board discussions with the focus of fostering internal Board communications and strengthening federation among Directors. It is essential that Directors develop a greater understanding of their respective perspectives and a higher level of collegiality. Given time pressures and travel challenges this will require a commitment on the part of all Directors to ensure this occurs.

- Hire a facilitator to engage the Directors in a team-building exercise to begin to bridge the growing gap of misunderstanding and fractured approaches of the Directors. Facilitator will be tasked with finding the common ground and teaching techniques to help Directors to come to common ground in future when faced with decisions that could become fractured.
- Bring in legal counsel that can provide “refresher” on Director’s understanding of the role they play in regional governance and balancing the administrative responsibilities with political realities.

Key issue – Board support

Recommendation #2 – Provide increased communications support

As discussed in research findings, board members would like more comprehensive administrative support prior to board meetings and more communication support in general. As such the following is recommended:

- Ensure that communications considerations constitute part of the planning and discussion for all items under consideration by the Board. Efforts need to be made reach out to board members to identify the communications needs for their community/area in advance of Board of Directors discussions and votes and provide as much support as possible to assist Directors in eliciting community feedback.
- Consider the benefit of creating a page on the website for each Electoral Area and encourage directors to provide material for these pages.

-
- Ensure that administrative support is available to Directors to assist with preparation of communications materials.
 - Develop a newsletter template and monthly column format for publishing in local papers and distributing to regional constituents Directors to consult with Communications Manager on content.

Stakeholder Communications

This section provides recommendations in response to feedback around stakeholder engagement and communications as provided by employees, the Board of Directors, and stakeholders.

Key issue –Ad hoc external and stakeholder communications and engagement

Recommendation #1 – Implement strategic communications and engagement plan

To help grow PRRD communications and engagement the development and implementation of a strategic communications and engagement plan is recommended that includes the following tactics:

- Conduct a brand workshop that fully explores the PRRD brand and examines who the organization is and what it does. Look closely at how the brand will interface with stakeholders.
- Better utilization of social media channels including Facebook and Twitter, and grow networks through each.
- Develop a quarterly online stakeholder/general public newsletter that provides:
 - Message from the CAO and board,
 - updates on projects and initiatives,
 - success stories on completed projects,
 - photos of various projects, park sites, recreation programs,
 - and other interesting community PRRD initiatives.
- Develop a PRRD foundational collateral package that provides fact sheets and information on the District's programs and services under a consistent brand.
- Development of up-to-date and accurate stakeholder database:
 - Each Department needs to take responsibility for ensuring the corporate stakeholder database is comprehensive, complete and current. Maintaining effective two-way communications with stakeholders requires that the District initiate contact and direct key communications materials to this key audience.
- Conduct stakeholder focus sessions on key areas of contact or concern or new and emerging topics. Sessions can feature expert speakers and allow for discussions that can identify new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration.
- Develop a Regional District page or column for publication in local newspapers. The RD page can focus on key initiatives, new services and service changes, ongoing consultation opportunities and events of interest.

Key issue – Need for regular consultation and engagement

Recommendation #2 – Develop annual stakeholder consultation processes and grow engagement through improved communications overall

The PRRD does not currently have a formal consistent consultation process with stakeholders. It should be noted that very successful consultation and engagement has been occurring with stakeholders on a project specific basis. Building on this success, it is recommended that an annual stakeholder consultation survey is developed that helps the district track progress in this area from year to year, assess service gaps and the effectiveness of information channels and the success of communications efforts. This research should include both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Conclusion

The Peace River Regional District has many positive indicators internally and externally, and should view these as a source of pride. District employees are a strongly positive group who believe internal issues can be overcome as the organization grows and develops.

District employees are viewed as friendly, helpful and knowledgeable. They represent the District's strongest asset in communicating with stakeholders and the public. Wherever possible, PRRD should endeavour to acknowledge this very human asset in its communications materials. In the end the public want to feel that their needs are being addressed and that the District is listening and cares about their concerns – it's really all about providing the best possible service to the people of the PRRD.

Building a strategic communications and engagement plan with new planning processes will help ensure more buy in and more consistent communications materials at all levels of the Regional District.

A focus on more interdepartmental information sharing will help engage all employees in supporting the District's corporate goals.

The District will continue to have very real challenges in terms of ensuring communications materials and messages are distributed consistently and in a timely way throughout the District. Developing effective tools and vehicles will require consulting with communities, enlisting the assistance of stakeholders and other potential partners and follow up to measure whether or not communications materials are effectively disseminated.

Continued strong economic growth in the region, driven by increased resource activity, will place greater challenges on the resources and capacity of the PRRD. Increased activity will also lead to more conflicts between residents and industry. It is increasingly important that the PRRD ensure effective public consultation processes are in place and form an important component of all communications planning. Increasingly the public are calling for openness and transparency on the part of its representative bodies.

This need for public goodwill and trust – the social license that enables the PRRD to act on behalf of its constituents – underlines the importance of PRRD Board to speak and act with one voice. There is strength in federation and this collective strength will be required to address increasingly complex issues and pressures.

Recent communications challenges highlight the importance of communications planning, open and ongoing consultation and maintaining an ongoing presence in communities across the region. District staff and Directors share a common goal in seeking to better engage, educate and inform the public about the PRRD's programs and services. All need to shift the emphasis of communications efforts from reactive to proactive if those goals are to be achieved.

