



# Communications and Engagement Audit PEACE RIVER REGIONAL DISTRICT

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## Executive Summary

This communication audit was undertaken in August and September 2016 as part of the Peace River Regional District's three-year communication strategy cycle. This report outlines the methodology, findings and recommendations of the audit process. An updated three-year communication plan will be developed as a result of the findings of this audit, and will be presented to the PRRD Board in late November 2016.

In 2013, the PRRD's first communication audit was completed, which paved the way for the 2013-2016 Communication Strategy. The first audit was in-depth and focused on communication issues, as well as a number of internal and external general satisfaction areas.

This audit uses the objectives of the 2013-2016 Communication Strategy as a basis.

Overall, the PRRD is seen to be providing much improved communications, both internally and externally. Numerous initiatives, strategies and tools have been launched over the past three years and all are making a significant impact on how information is disseminated and received. As well, the PRRD has embraced International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) standards and guidelines for public engagement activities.

As many of these tools and strategies are new, some audience members are not yet tuned into the messaging, or finding the channels in which the information is conveyed. Through time and consistent use, these channels will see a continued increase in use and effectiveness.

2013	Aug 2016	Oct 2016	Nov 2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
First communication audit and strategy prepared	Second audit interviews begin	2016 Audit Report received by PRRD Board	2016 Audit and 2017-2020 Communication Plan received by PRRD Board	2017-2020 Communication Plan strategies implemented	2017-2020 Communication Plan strategies implemented	2017-2020 Communication Plan strategies implemented	Third communication audit process begins

## Background

The Peace River Regional District (PRRD) is committed to constant improvement of its communication and engagement with residents, stakeholders, Board members, and employees.

This audit was conducted by The Flow Communication Group through a contract with the PRRD and demonstrates its ongoing commitment to better communications. The goal of the audit is to determine the effectiveness of the previous strategy, build on the numerous communication initiatives and tactics that have been undertaken, uncover any perceptions or roadblocks that may inhibit good communications, and pave the way toward improved understanding and support of PRRD initiatives and communications.

In 2013 the PRRD contracted its first communications and engagement audit, and developed its first communication strategy for 2013-2016. This report outlines the audit findings and provides the foundation for the Peace River Regional District's 2017-2020 Communications Plan that will be presented to the Board later in 2016.

## About the Peace River Regional District

The Peace River Regional District is B.C.'s second largest regional district by land mass (119,200 square kilometres) and the fifth least densely populated (60,000 population, or 0.51 persons per square kilometre)<sup>1</sup>. It consists of seven urban municipalities, seven First Nation communities, and four rural 'electoral areas:'

### 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
- District of Tumbler Ridge

### Electoral Areas

- Electoral Area 'B'
- Electoral Area 'C'
- Electoral Area 'D'
- Electoral Area 'E'

Regional districts in B.C. have three basic roles. They provide a political and administrative framework<sup>2</sup> for:

1. Region-wide services such as regional parks and emergency telephone services such as 9-1-1;
2. Inter-municipal or sub-regional services such as recreation facilities where residents of a municipality and residents in areas outside the municipality benefit from the service; and,
3. Act as the general local government for the electoral areas and providing local services such as waterworks and fire protection to unincorporated communities within the electoral areas.

The PRRD provides the following services to its residents, some in partnership with municipalities:

- 9-1-1 emergency call service
- building inspection

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_regional\\_districts\\_of\\_British\\_Columbia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_regional_districts_of_British_Columbia)

<sup>2</sup> BC Ministry of Community, Sport, and Cultural Development <http://www.cscd.gov.bc.ca/lgd/pathfinder-rd.htm>

- bylaw compliance
- emergency planning and fire service
- land use planning
- noxious weed control and management
- regional parks and recreation amenities and facilities
- solid waste management
- water and sewer service (rural areas)

The PRRD is governed by a 12-member board of directors. Eight members are appointed from member municipalities, and citizens in each of the unincorporated rural Electoral Areas directly elect the remaining four directors, who then appoint their alternates.

## Methodology

This communications audit was conducted between August and October 2016. The process included feedback from PRRD staff, Directors, and stakeholders through face-to-face and phone interviews, online surveys for both staff and residents, as well as a review of the PRRD's communication materials (printed items such as brochures, form letters; advertisements; social media posts; and website content), and related policies and plans.

Invitations to participate in the external survey were distributed through the PRRD's normal channel mix: frequent social media posts with varying headlines and copy content, email fan-outs, posters, radio ads, web banner ads, media stories, website content, and through RSS feeds. The somewhat low response rate can be seen as indicative of overall communication concerns about low feedback on engagement and public participation: people generally won't respond to a request to participate unless there is either something wrong, or the issue directly affects them. Therefore there likely isn't a problem with the communication methods and channels; only that residents don't have any concerns that warrant their participation in a feedback survey.

Internal (staff and management) interviews: 9

Board of Directors interviews: 10 (two Directors were unavailable during the audit timeline)

Stakeholder interviews: 4

Survey (staff): 27

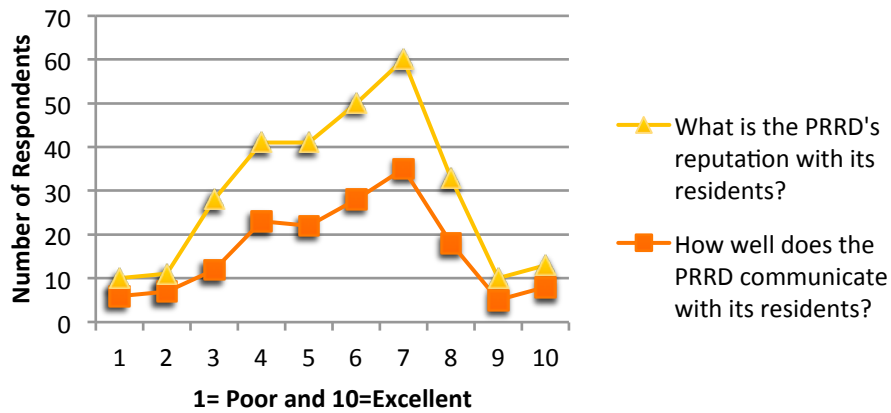
Survey (general public): 151

## General Findings

Most survey and interview participants indicated that the Peace River Regional District is doing a considerably better job on communication and audience engagement than in 2013 when the previous audit was conducted.

Both surveys (internal and external), as well as the interviews, asked respondents about their opinion on the overall effectiveness of the PRRD's communication efforts and the Regional District's reputation with residents. On average, responses were favourable on both questions, with employees giving the PRRD's communications efforts an average score of 5.7 and its reputation an average score of 6.7, with external audiences giving the PRRD's communications efforts an average score of 5.7 and its reputation an average score of 5.6.

**External survey:  
PRRD communication effectiveness and reputation**



**Internal (staff) survey:  
PRRD communication effectiveness and reputation**

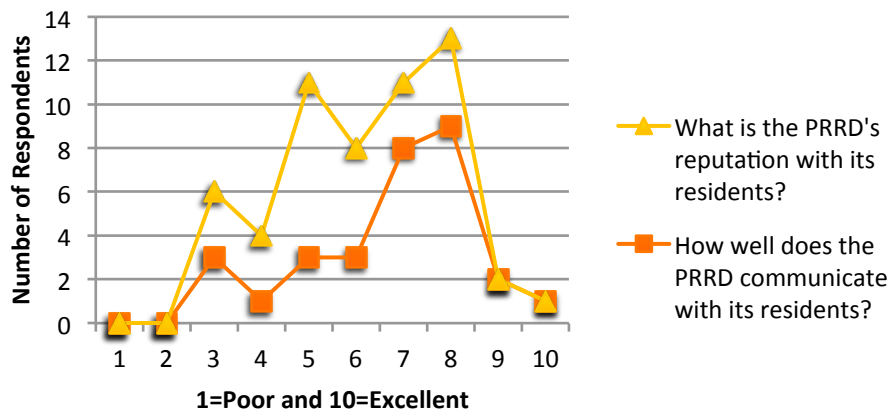


Figure 1 These charts show external (residents) and internal (staff) perceptions on the communication efforts of the PRRD and its reputation with that audience

While these two questions were not specifically asked as part of the 2013 audit, anecdotal evidence contained in the written report indicate that both internal and external respondents felt the PRRD’s communications efforts and its overall reputation were on the low side. The previous audit noted “employees described the PRRD’s public profile as disorganized, distant and perceived as either competent or failing.”

*“From when I started, communication between departments and our rural residents has improved 100%.”*

## Internal Findings



Twenty-eight employees completed the online survey and nine staff members participated in face-to-face interviews.

Administration/Corporate Services	25.0%		7
Community Services	7.1%		2
Development Services	21.4%		6
Finance	28.6%		8
Environmental Services	17.9%		5
<b>Total</b>			<b>28</b>

Figure 2: Internal survey responses, by department

11. Since the last audit, how has communication in the following areas improved or not improved:

	Better	No change	Worse
Between departments	5 18.5%	21 77.8%	1 3.7%
Manager to employee	5 18.5%	19 70.4%	3 11.1%
Between Dawson Creek and FSJ offices	3 11.5%	23 88.5%	0 0.0%

Figure 3 Staff report mostly an improvement or no change to communication between departments, manager-to-employee, and between offices.

A number of tools and initiatives aimed at creating a better flow of information amongst staff and departments are having the desired impact. Most employees report an increase in positive internal communication, and rated the efficiency as “better.” New online tools such as WINK and improved work templates were cited as benefits to improved internal communication.

**All-staff meetings:** All-staff meetings, held quarterly since 2014, have had the biggest impact on positive internal communication and inter-departmental information sharing.

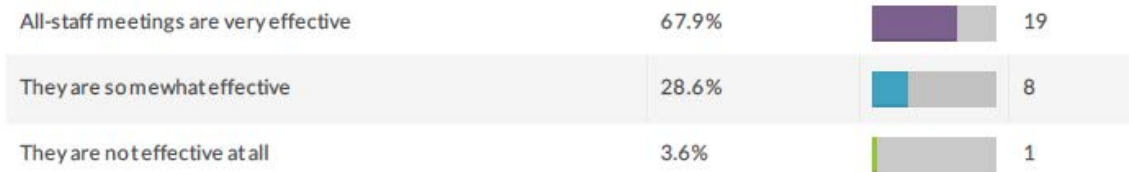


Figure 4 Almost all PRRD employees find quarterly all-staff meetings to be effective or very effective

Recently, staff from the Fort St John office have been attending all-staff meetings in person after attempts to be included via Skype or teleconferencing produced less desirable results.

Feedback from staff show that these meetings should definitely continue as they are a very good way to learn about projects going on in other departments and offer a chance to collaborate and align work plans. More meeting time should be allocated to this, and less time spent on routine housekeeping updates, such as kitchen etiquette.

*“They are wonderful.”*

*“I look forward to them.”*

**Up/down communication flow:** One area that could be improved is management to staff communication channels. Some staff indicate they don’t hear about projects or issues that are in early stages or occurring in other departments until the issue is in the local news or they hear about it by way of an enquiry from the general public. Staff felt they would benefit from learning about upcoming projects and initiatives sooner, and prefer to hear about it directly from a supervisor.

Senior managers meet weekly (Monday mornings). Middle managers and other staff have suggested agenda items from these meetings be shared with department and team members, as it would provide an opportunity to be up-to-date on pressing topics, new projects, and opportunities for collaboration. Another suggestion is to open the Senior Managers meeting up at the end to middle/operational managers, who can hear in roundtable fashion about some of the discussion items. Other staff indicated a desire to be briefed afterward by their managers on the high-level topics, which could help break down information silos.

*“As a manager myself I would like more information on what are the outcomes of the Senior Managers meetings and the effects the information has on our department.”*

12. Are you receiving timely corporate and/or Board information from your supervisor?

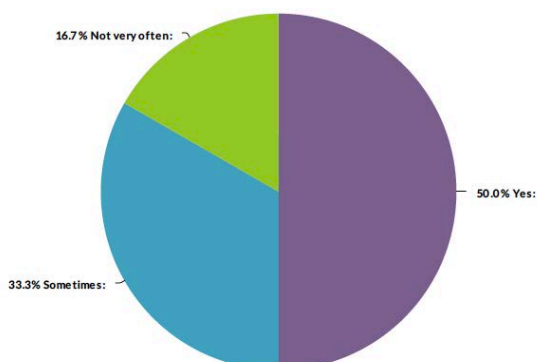


Figure 5 Internal survey results show one-half of employees are not getting regular information updates from their supervisor



One-half of staff report receiving timely information updates from their managers: and the other half report information is conveyed “sometimes” (33.3%) or “not very often” (16.7%). Staff that do report regular updates indicate their managers hold scheduled department/team meetings (usually weekly or biweekly) during which they are informed of project updates, upcoming issues, Board highlights, and routine administrative information.

*“My supervisor is very good and informing our department with information.”*

*“...it sometimes seems to be a ‘need-to-know’ system.”*

Staff also indicated a desire to better understand the PRRD’s strategic plan and how their department’s work fits within the scope of the plan.

13. How do you receive PRRD/Board information? Check all that apply.

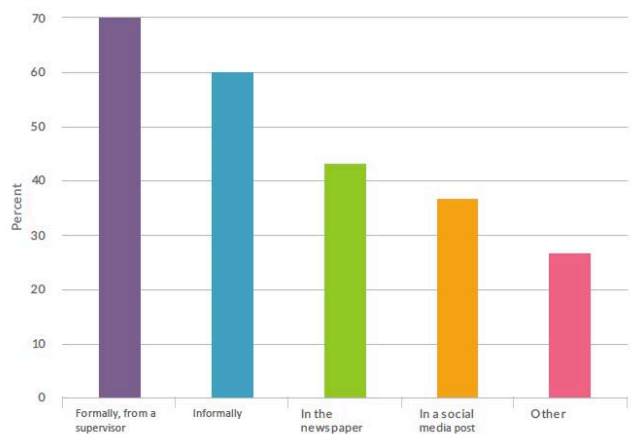


Figure 6: How PRRD staff learn about District and Board information

**Inter-office:** Effective communication between the Dawson Creek and Fort St John offices is still an issue, with Fort St John staff reporting that they are often “forgotten about” and left out of the loop on information flow. The Communication Manager works out of the Fort St John office a few days a week and uses that time to update office staff on key issues and initiatives, which staff there appreciate. Fort St John office staff are now attending the quarterly all-staff meetings, will likely have a positive impact in increased understanding and awareness of PRRD issues and initiatives.

**Employee toolbox:** Most employees report the new and improved tools, such as WINK and Office templates, are good and an effective way to share information and maintain consistency. Some staff noted that not all employees use the tools, and more effort needs to be undertaken in order to clarify which tools to use and when, why circumventing the process is wrong, and to ensure all staff use the tools consistently.

## Board of Directors Findings

Board members indicate they are satisfied with the level of information they receive. They have a high level of satisfaction with Board-to-staff communication flow, and most report that they prefer to contact a staff person for prompt access to information, rather than look for information on the PRRD website or social media channels. Several Directors said the biggest issue was the perceived imbalance between Electoral Area directors and directors from municipalities. This rural/municipal split was a significant issue addressed during the 2013 audit. It would

seem the imbalance of power is the nature of B.C.'s regional district structure, and not something unique to the PRRD board.

## External Communications Findings



Most survey and interview respondents concluded that the PRRD's external communications efforts have vastly improved since 2013. Many noted the numerous tactics and channels the PRRD employs in getting messages out (Facebook, RSS feeds, email newsletters, etc.) and that information is "out there" for those either proactively seeking the information, or being open to receiving the messages. A small handful of respondents said that information was not available, or not made available to them personally (such as a lack of internet connection, or difficulties with local newspaper distribution).

A large number of respondents, including Board members, staff, stakeholders and the general public, cited a lack of understanding of the function of the PRRD. Low voter turnout can be viewed as one indicator of a poor level of understanding of the regional district system by citizens, and is typical throughout B.C. This is significant as it can be seen as indicative of a limited understanding of the role, function and democratic process that drives much of the regional district's communication activities, and can affect the way in which messaging is received and lead to increased mistrust.

- Lack of understanding of electoral area (rural) versus municipal (urban) jurisdictional reach of district services
- Limited knowledge of the process by which engagement activities are undertaken, how feedback is used, and how final decisions are made

A Board member noted that during the 2014 water and sewer referendum the "No" side presented by the PRRD did not adequately outline the consequences of voting no, which led to confusion among residents.

*"I have only lived in BC for five years. I was unaware of what [the] PRRD even was until I got involved with some local organizations."*

*"I don't think the average person in the community knows what PRRD is or what it does, or how it is helpful to the community."*

*"I didn't know what the Regional District was or anything about it before the fires."*

*"People don't know who the PRRD was or what it is that this local government does."*

**Website:** The PRRD launched its new website in 2014 and reorganized and simplified the content on the site as part of the process. The website features a number of options for finding information, including an intuitive menu architecture, content location redundancy, and a large easy-to-find search box. An overwhelming 97.5 per cent of external survey respondents indicate they could find information on the PRRD’s website, with more than half of those saying the process was easy. Just three per cent said information was difficult to find.

5. Do you use the PRRD website?

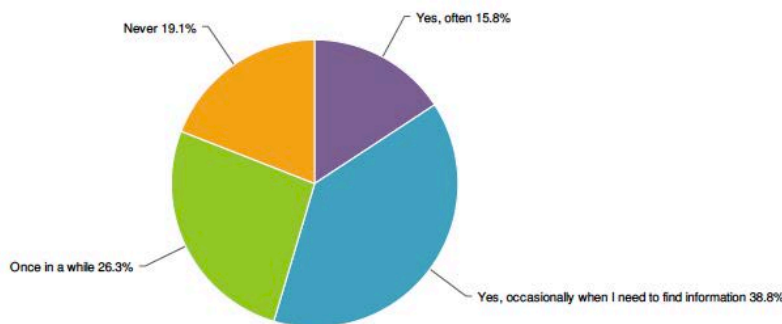


Figure 7 More than 80% of respondents report using the PRRD website, with more than half using it regularly

6. When you visited the PRRD website, did you easily find what you were looking for?

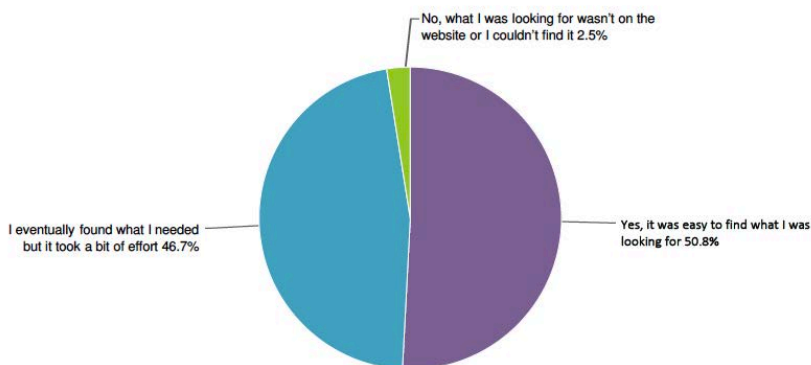


Figure 8 External survey data, 97.5% of respondents found what they were looking for on the PRRD website

A new website section entitled ‘Engage!’ was created in 2015 and serves as a single go-to location for all initiatives and projects that seek public engagement. Engage! has been widely publicized through postcards and advertising, and is consistently referenced each time public consultation is sought. The section contains a summary and timeline of current projects, links to relevant reports and documents, project contact information, and an online discussion forum. Past projects are archived. Feedback about this section has been positive and usage continues to increase with time.

*“Website is a nine out of 10 – often looking for info and it’s easy to find. Lots there!”*

**Consultation and engagement:** The PRRD has embraced IAP2 (International Association of Public Participation) principles and tactics for its consultation and engagement activities. The IAP2 spectrum of participation is a widely recognized benchmark in helping determine the level of engagement required for any given engagement process.

Most of the issues in which respondents had a negative opinion about the PRRD’s communications efforts took place prior to the district’s use of IAP2 methodology.

One significant issue – the building bylaw (2013) – was mentioned by both internal and external audiences as an ongoing source of mistrust of PRRD directors and staff by residents. The Engage! website section was created in part as a response to the building bylaw issue consultation and engagement process.

Consultation efforts have improved since 2013, with standardized procedures now being used to ensure notification and public input are consistent with similar projects and initiatives, and meet statutory regulations and IAP2 guidelines.

**Social media:** The PRRD maintains a Facebook page that is updated several times a week with timely news such as weather, public input opportunities, general information, and daily topic posts such as ‘Trashy Tuesday’ and ‘Weedy Wednesday.’ Over 2500 people “Like” the page. Several respondents said they enjoy the PRRD Facebook posts and frequently see them in their feeds.

7. I often learn information from the PRRD Facebook page

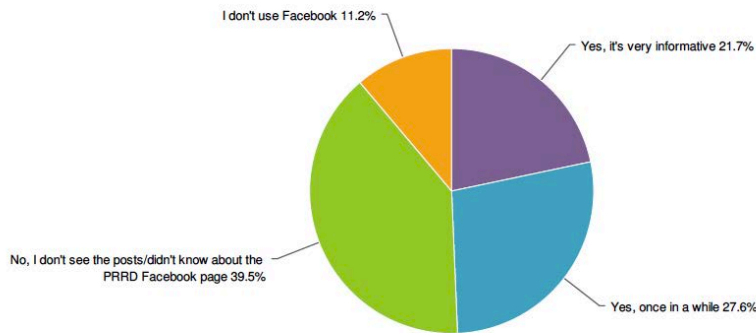


Figure 9 About half of respondents see the PRRD's Facebook posts

About 40 per cent of respondents indicate they either don't see the PRRD's Facebook posts, or were unaware the PRRD has an active page on the social media site. Some commented that they would start following the PRRD page.

*"Never knew about the [Facebook] page.... will join. Never knew about email newsletters.... will request."*

**Crisis Communication:** While the audit did not delve into crisis communication specifics around the fire and flood incidents of early 2016 (separate reports were conducted on these efforts), a number of survey and interview respondents mentioned these incidents. All comments were positive regarding how the PRRD communicated both critical and routine crisis information such as evacuation orders and clean up procedures.

*"Communication with people during emergencies was great in my opinion... people knew where to get the best information."*

*"Great social media coverage of the fires and evacuations this year."*

*"Specifically with the fires, I thought they did a good job communicating updates."*

*"Through the 2016 fire season Facebook was utilized and I was able to follow what was happening."*

**Visual identity:** Most respondents recognize the regional district’s visual identity, and the distinctive colours and “flag banner” are effectively gaining traction as a brand elements associated with the PRRD. Printed materials distributed at office and service locations have a cohesive look and are easily identified as information produced by and representing the PRRD.



Figure 10: A selection of printed materials found at Peace River Regional District office counters and brochure racks

A review of print materials reveal that information conveyed is thorough, the design fairly consistent and the type of publication suitable for the need. Some of the items were overly heavy on words and could benefit from using more images with captions, flow charts, bullet points, and use less text and simpler language.

**Communication channels:** The PRRD has developed a broad mix of channels that it uses to communicate its messaging. This mix includes:

- Printed materials (brochures, handouts)
- Website
- RSS feeds (subscription to webpage updates)
- Email newsletters
- YouTube channel videos (informational on services, areas)
- Social media (Facebook)
- Radio ads
- Newspaper ads (including monthly full page notices on the most recent news, events and projects)
- Website banner ads
- Posters
- Marketing materials (such as fridge magnets)

Many of the issues raised during the interviews and survey revolve around the rural/urban split in location, and the limited access to internet and regular newspaper delivery many rural residents encounter. A good mix of channels is critical to ensuring reach, in particular for those with limited access.

Printed newspaper publications and reliable delivery continue to evolve in the region as more and more media outlets reduce the frequency of printed newspapers. This is a challenge for the PRRD as it limits access to a consistent communication channel, in particular in areas without internet access or with less tech-savvy audiences. While there are some members of the public that still look to printed news as their main information source, more and more area residents are embracing online channels and discovering sources beyond the printed newspaper. Regional online news sources such as [alaskahighwaynews.ca](http://alaskahighwaynews.ca) and [energeticcity.ca](http://energeticcity.ca) continue to gain readership and reach.

*“Because I am rural, I'd still appreciate the occasional post mail to remind/advise me to check out what's happening or inform me in some way.”*

*“As a rural farmer, it's very important for us to be informed on all news/changes in PRRD. Thank you for keeping us all informed through your website/social media.”*

*“Radio ads are heard – good job!”*

*“Open houses at transfer stations – each Saturday with snacks, staff, NEAT, TREVITA. Least used stations have best turnout!”*

*“Email sign up is an eight or nine out of 10. Emails and Engage! are all good.”*

*“I like all the parks marketing materials. It's very friendly and easy to understand the amenities.”*

## Recommendations

### Internal communications

- Increase opportunities for employees to connect
  - **All staff meetings:**
    - Allow more agenda time for department roundtables, internal committee news; less time for housekeeping
    - Be aware of time spent on narrow discussions that impact few staff: park/sidebar these discussions to free up meeting time
  - Ensure managers are updating their staff through **regular (weekly) departmental meetings**
- Promote use of new and existing communication tools
  - Reinforce use of **WINK, templates, branding** through consistent reminders
  - Monitor template and brand use internally for proper use and consistency
  - Promote use of PRRD **visual standards** guide to all staff
- Use **communication section of board reports** to outline communication and engagement requirements
  - Prepopulate template with a simple example of what this could contain
  - Brief senior managers on utilizing this section, including outlining strategies, and using the Communications Manager as a resource
- Tie the PRRD **strategic plan** to current and upcoming projects, and to individual/departmental work plans
- Define internal **corporate values** and align with the PRRD's mission, vision and values in order to create a more accountable and transparent communication flow
- Develop a **response / follow up system** with citizens that allow for information sharing, input or to report an issue, such as a standardized “thank you” return email, an opportunity to receive future email updates, or other mechanism that shows feedback was received and heard

### Board communications

- Create a better understanding of roles of board, staff, and the regional district
  - Develop **new onboarding package** for next incoming elected board (2018)
- Continue existing level of information dissemination (administrative)
- Provide **‘Communication and Public Participation for Decision Makers’ training** for Directors with a focus on messaging, board roles and the IAP2 public participation spectrum

### Stakeholder communications

- **Increase attendance at business events**, community fairs, and other similar events, and use these events to showcase PRRD business

### External (general public) communications

- Create communication plan around governance literacy, or **“What is the Peace River Regional District?”**
  - Develop a campaign featuring a roster of PRRD informative topics and share on regular rotation (proactive) using social media, video, existing channels
  - Find opportunities for staff and board members to speak at community events, business forums and service club meetings to raise the awareness of PRRD business and current issues
  - Use key messaging from this campaign in other materials in order to support the PRRD role and administrative/engagement process
- Continue to strive for **proactive communication** tactics
- Continue with current **channel “mix”** to achieve maximum reach (monthly highlights in paper, radio ads, web banner ads, etc)
  - Fine-tune content and language to simplify message, underscore PRRD role and position
- Develop **language and tone guidelines** to simplify messaging (Grade 8 level)
  - Use these guidelines for new and reworked information materials
  - Revamp About Us, Director sections of website to simplify page layout and language, create clearer understanding of roles and responsibilities
- Create **feedback mechanism** for simple issues (such as with an online widget and/or an app)
- Support a **transparent and open Board**
  - Explore **taping/broadcasting board meetings**, and link video clips to minutes/decisions
  - Investigate offering **public input** at board meetings
- Continue to develop and formalize a network of **“Community Champions”** – local area volunteer “keeners” residing in remote or hard-to-reach areas of the PRRD that agree to fan-out communications information to their neighbours
  - Individuals who agree to forward PRRD information emails, put up posters, or other related activities in the local area that support PRRD communications
  - Community Facebook page (or other social media platforms) administrators that agree to share PRRD posts, either by ‘sharing’ or allowing PRRD communications staff access to post pertinent information on their pages

### Consultation and Engagement

- Continue to utilize **IAP2 principles** and PRRD engagement strategy process templates for notification and public consultation processes.
- **Look for opportunities to gain public trust** by identifying emerging issues and apply IAP2 principles to the engagement process. Discover the consensus and implement collaborative solutions in a timely fashion
- Develop a **consultation and engagement policy** to formalize the PRRD’s objectives and process
- Develop an **internal toolkit/toolbox** for staff to introduce the IAP2 principles to community groups

### Departmental Structure



Many of the recommendations are new or expanded tactics and strategies. Currently the Peace River Regional District employs one Communications Manager, who both oversees and undertakes all day-to-day work and long-range strategic planning. While this is currently a somewhat effective arrangement, the day-to-day expectations of the role often sidetrack the Communications Manager from more strategic and proactive work. The PRRD would benefit from the addition of a full time communications coordinator who could take over much of the day-to-day work, freeing the Communications Manager to focus on more strategic and long-range work. This position could also backfill the manager during vacations, as well as during emergencies such as fires and floods.

*“The issues with RDs are complex – a lot of their initiatives get hijacked by a misinformed minority.”*

“Board meetings should be taped! Minutes do not reflect the decisions and discussion. CJDE broadcasts [Dawson Creek] meetings.”

“Provide a feedback button or mechanism for questions, suggestions, etc”

“Reported a weed to the inspector by leaving a message and had no return call.”

“Development Services was very helpful in answering my questions.”

“[I know] that most of the residents do not read the information that is sent to them.”

## Conclusion

The Peace River Regional District has made vast strides over the past three years working toward a consistent and transparent communication model that serves to inform and consult with its many audiences. By all accounts, these efforts have been noticed and are welcome, both internally and externally.

The biggest gap is a lack of literacy around the function of the regional district with both municipal and rural residents. Many have commented that they weren't clear on the PRRD's role and there is confusion over what services and jurisdictional area the PRRD manages. More effort needs to be put into explaining the basics of what the PRRD does, how PRRD services impact its residents and stakeholders, and how public input is utilized by the Board of Directors and other decision makers in the organization.

The lack of trust of the PRRD and the Board is still evident three years after the disastrous building bylaw engagement issue. The PRRD has since embraced IAP2 processes for engagement and should continue to utilize this as a means to engage with residents and stakeholders on future projects and initiatives. Engagement planning should be started earlier in the process, and the objectives of the engagement process should be made clear at the beginning to ensure residents understand how their input will be used and how final decisions will be made.

The PRRD needs to formalize its consultation and engagement processes through policy, and be consistent with its use of public engagement in matters requiring public input. Opportunities to act on sought feedback should be embraced quickly; in fact, the PRRD should actively solicit input on even the most rudimentary issues, and take the opportunity to enact public feedback as part of current work plans.