

TRORC Outreach & Communications Plan

February 2022

DRAFT

I. Introduction and Purpose

This Outreach and Communications plan describes the approach to be used to communicate with and provide outreach to stakeholders related to the Two Rivers-Ottawquechee Regional Commission (TRORC). This plan will also serve as a basis for TRORC Staff for any outreach and communication activities outside of day-to-day project related communications by staff to participants. However, all communication is an opportunity to further relationships or hinder them, and given our public nature potentially public.

TRORC is an association of thirty municipalities in east-central Vermont. TRORC is governed by a Board of Representatives appointed by each of our member towns. Our primary goals are to advocate for the needs of our member towns, and to articulate a vision and work for its implementation for building a thriving regional economy while enhancing the region's quality of life. The Commission's staff provides technical services to local, state and federal levels of government and to the Region's non-profits and businesses.

Part of ensuring the success of TRORC's mission is using the best possible communications and outreach techniques to engage internal and external stakeholders. This plan's purpose is to help TRORC:

1. educate local official's and the public about planning topics and how they relate to their lives and concerns so that the approach of planning is embraced;
2. educate state and federal officials about local concerns so that these are best fitted to our communities;
3. Provide outreach about ongoing local and regional projects so that there is awareness and appreciation of the work of TRORC by community members and increased opportunity for citizen engagement with projects;
4. inform local officials about state and federal programs of interest and educate them on new laws and requirements so that opportunities can be taken advantage of well;
5. and expand the commission's support base by increasing stakeholder's knowledge of planning in Vermont.

This plan describes how TRORC will:

1. Define the communications strategy for this organization;
2. Identify roles and responsibilities;
3. Use communication tools for internal and external communications and outreach;
4. Broaden the general public's understanding of local and regional planning;
5. Develop educational engagement opportunities with municipal officials;
6. Provide stakeholders with the latest news and updates; and
7. Tactically handle crisis communications with municipalities and state agencies with prepare messages, protocols, and draft content for websites and social media releases to assist TRORC in responding quickly and effectively to natural disasters that hit this Region.

This outreach and communications plan includes static, dynamic, and multi-directional information exchanges with local, regional, and state stakeholders. These exchanges are aided by traditional and nontraditional communications tools such as the TRORC website, ECVEDD website, social media, and email-based tools. Crisis communications tactics and materials have also been prepared to help respond to any crisis that may arise.

An action plan and implementation schedule has been created to provide clear action items that identify the frequency of activities and the steps needed to prepare and maintain materials for future use and deployment to continue engaging stakeholders. Successful communication is nearly constant.

Goals and Objectives

Goals

- Enhance the visibility, impact, and brand recognition of TRORC in the Region.
- Increase the trust of stakeholders in the abilities of TRORC.
- Provide expertise on a variety of planning topics and issues.
- Improve internal coordination with TRORC Staff and externally with partners.

TRORC will achieve these goals by meeting the following objectives:

- Establish a consistent message platform that is flexible enough to be used through a variety of communications and outreach methods, including those for traditional media, social media, stakeholder support, local and regional education, public meetings, and related events and conferences.
- Create a reliable and recognized system for sharing information.
- Develop an action plan that is tailored toward the needs of target audiences to ensure the regular, consistent, and pertinent exchange of information.

Funding Sources

Increasing the consistency of outreach and communications by the commission requires additional costs. Current communications are not sufficient. Maintaining websites and social media, drafting and publishing press releases and other articles in the media, establishing media contacts, outreach to legislators, trainings, and general advertisements all come with a cost. Sufficient funds need to be budgeted and tracked to ensure communications are supported.

TRORC pays for these outreach services from a variety of sources:

- Indirect costs: expenses that cannot be tied to a specific project or are not allowable but still incurred when doing communications for TRORC in general.
- Individual projects: when specific line items in federal, state, or local project budgets are for engagement.
- Other funding: Costs for outreach and communication strategies for specific projects comes from that project's budget.

TRORC staff should, to the best of their ability, budget for communications and outreach in grant applications where allowed.

Roles and Responsibilities

The following describes the roles and responsibilities for the individuals involved in this Outreach and Communications Plan.

Executive Director

The TRORC Executive Director is the main 'face' of the organization in all communication matters. He/she is responsible for the following:

- Serves as the Public Information Officer
- Responds to media inquiries and other public communications requests
- Develops media contacts
- Develops and tracks the communications budget
- Develops policies and procedures
- Reviews press releases and the newsletter
- Oversees staff and their duties
- Monitors the implementation of this plan and its effect

Director of Planning

The Director of Planning works directly with the Executive Director to manage staff and communication. He/she shares the responsibility with the Executive Director as directed.

Communications Manager

A designated TRORC Staff Person will act as the communications manager for the organization. He/she is responsible for the following:

- Posts to the organization's social media accounts
- Drafts the monthly / bi-monthly newsletter
- Drafts press releases, advertisements, and other public notices
- Works with other staff to draft public announcements on projects
- Manages the TRORC website to include posting events, press releases, and other public notices

Program/Project Management Staff

Each individual TRORC Staff Person acts in one way or another as a program/project manager for all work that is performed by the organization. They are generally responsible for the following:

- Assists the Communications Manager with draft press releases, advertisements, and other public notices for specific projects
- Assists with the implementation of this plan

Finance Manager

The TRORC Finance Manager is generally responsible for the accounting and bookkeeping of the organization. He/she is responsible for the following:

- Tracks communications costs according to the budget and prepares cost reports

TRORC Executive Committee and Board of Directors

The TRORC Board of Directors consists of a main representative of a community, an optional alternative member from each community, and at-large members from regionally based initiatives to include the following; the Upper Valley Lake Sunapee Regional Planning Commission, agriculture sector, conservation sector, economic development sector, housing sector, and one representative representing youths. Commissioners are appointed by the Selectboard of their respective municipality.

The TRORC Executive Committee is an annually elected group of board members that are associated with a particular municipality to include a chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary, treasurer, and two at-large members. The Executive Committee is used to help formulate draft policy, for matters that do not require the full board's attention, and for urgent matters where the full board is not available.

While board members are not directly involved in undertaking TRORC programs and projects, and do not speak on behalf of the Commission, they should be aware of projects in their community and can provide the Commission with guidance on charting the best course forward in their communities toward goals that are important and unique to them. Knowledgeable commissioners are themselves a method of outreach and of feedback. Commissioners also ensure that the organization carries out its statutory responsibilities, fulfills contractual obligations, and are responsible for the fiscal integrity of the organization.

Target Audiences

Specific audiences will vary depending on individual situations, but TRORC will seek to reach out to and get input from the following priority audiences with outreach activities, as appropriate:

- General public
- Municipalities (to include staff and appointed officials)
- Local and regional private, public, and non-profit organizations
- Other Vermont regional planning commissions
- State departments
- State legislators
- Federal legislators
- Members of the media
- Other groups such as local businesses, farmers, conservationists, etc.

II. Current Outreach and Communication Activities/Tools

In order to effectively implement this plan, having a baseline of what current outreach and communication activities will inform our progress of this plan over time.

Baseline Metrics

Metrics can be thought of in three ways – the item being measured, a benchmark of that measurement that is desired or cautionary, and the actual data from the measurement. Metrics below include the item being measured and the measurement data from our websites, social media, and email-based communication tools have assisted in the development of this plan. A previous survey on outreach activities to municipalities was also used. The following sections

detail outreach metrics from these communication tools before this plan was implemented. Benchmarks have been established for these metrics and will be evaluated.

1. Website Metrics

a. TRORC Website

Timeline	Users	Page Views	Top Pages Visited
October 2020 – October 2021	9,300 unique users	81,000+	Home page, Member Towns, TRORC Staff, Calendar, and Maps

b. East Central Vermont Economic Development District (ECVEDD) Website

Timeline	Users	Page Views	Top Pages Visited
October 2021 – December 2021*	131 unique users	516	Home page, About, 3CVT, CEDS, and Economic Development Organizations

*Analytics was not set up for the ECVEDD Website until October 2021

c. Keys to the Valley (KTTV) Website

Timeline	Users	Page Views	Top Pages Visited
April 2021 – December 2021*	2,882 unique users	10,000+	Home page, 2030 Home Projections, Calendar, Toolbox Orientation, and About Us

*KTTV site did not launch until April 2021

2. Social Media Metrics

a. Facebook (28 day averages)

Page	Followers	Average Post Reach	Average Post Engagements
TRORC	333	71 profiles	11
Keys to the Valley	53	17 profiles	1
3CVT	227		

b. YouTube

Page	Subscribers	Number of Videos	Number of Views	Highest Viewed Video
TRORC	21	43	3,334	Essentials of Land Use Planning and Regulations – 1.1K views
Keys to the Valley	9	5	112	Building Smart for Stronger

				Communities – 36 views
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3. Email-Based Metrics

a. Robly

i. Newsletters (December 2020 – December 2021)

Subscribers	Average Open Rate	Click Rate
1,675 (as of December 2021)	15.6%	11%

ii. Trainings, webinars, meetings, and other information (December 2020 – December 2021)

Subscribers	Average Open Rate	Click Rate
n/a	31.4%	7.5%

b. TRORC Email Database

The Commission maintains a database of member town contacts, as well as local, regional, state, and federal organizations. This database is updated regularly after Town Meeting day in March, and on an as-needed basis.

As of December 2021, there were 830 contacts in the TRORC database. These contacts are organized into the following distribution groups:

- 3CVT – Cornerstone Creative Network Board
- Brownfield Consultants
- Chambers & RDCs
- Conservation Commissions
- Dev Review Chairs
- E&D Partners
- E911 Coordinators
- ECV EDD Board and Exec Comm
- ECVEDD Support Group
- Emergency Directors
- Energy Committee Chair
- Fire Chiefs
- Foundation
- Health Office
- Impersonation Group
- News
- Planning Commission Chair
- Post Master
- Press Release
- Regional Plan
- REMC
- Road Foreman
- RPC Staff
- Selectboard Chairs
- TAC
- Town Admin
- Town Clerks
- Town EM Contacts
- Town Manager
- Training
- TRORC Commissioners
- TRORC Energy Committee
- TRORC Exec Comm

- TRORC Staff
- TROR Foundation Board
- VAPDA Directors, Finance Staff, and Staff
- Village Trustees
- VT Legislators
- VTrans Districts
- Water Quality Advisory Group
- Windsor County Delegation
- Zoning Admins

4. Press Releases
Current Press Releases are published in local newspapers, on the TRORC website, and occasionally in local email listservs. Press releases are done sporadically, with no set schedule. Press Releases should become more regular, such as monthly.
5. Trainings / Webinars / Events
There is no set schedule for TRORC hosted trainings, webinars, and events. Under ACCD contract, staff are required to hold two trainings per fiscal year. These are not regularly schedules. Other trainings, webinars, and events are held in conjunction with current projects.
6. Municipal meetings
Most municipal meetings are related to a contracted project in that town. Every town should have a personal contact to a local official at least twice a year if there is not an active project in town.
7. One on one meetings
One on one meetings with new local officials and heads of partner organizations take place sporadically, but need to be done regularly.
8. State and federal contacts
The Executive Director reaches out to state and federal level contacts, typically most heavily leading up to and during the state legislative session. Staff interact with state level staff on projects.
9. Local, Regional, and State news
TRORC is often mentioned in local, regional, and state news sources for projects or are interviewed as subject matter experts.

Municipal Survey

A municipal survey on our communication strategies, as well as how TRORC can be more useful to towns, should be conducted in 2022.

III. Communication Tools, Strategies, and Tactics

Implementing the Plan

The identified tactics in the proceeding section will help TRORC to build support, open communication, and foster understanding with target audiences.

Staff Training

All TRORC staff should review this Outreach & Communications Plan and ensure it is being implemented to the best of their ability. This section details communications standards for large projects. These standards will be upheld by the responsible staff person for that project.

On an annual or as needed basis, staff will be reminded of the Commission’s communication standards.

Calendar of Routine Outreach/Content Management

A variety of materials and tools are used to meet the mission of TRORC. To better serve our member municipalities, the following tactics for each communication tool are intended to increase the public presence of TRORC.

Tool	Description	Audience	Content Creation Schedule
TRORC Website	Trorc.org	Member municipalities, organizations, agencies, general public	TRORC staff to go through all web pages quarterly for any updates. Post all public meetings TRORC is attending to calendar. Change the featured project quarterly.
ECVEDD Website	Ecvedd.org	Economic development districts, governmental organizations, general public	At least annually, go through and update every webpage. Post relevant news items and events. Change the featured project quarterly.
KTTV Website	Keystothevalley.com	Housing organizations, governmental organizations, communities, agencies, general public, contractors,	Update as needed.
TRORC Social Media	https://www.facebook.com/TRORC	General public, partners	Post 2-3 times per week.
3CVT Social Media	https://www.facebook.com/CornestoneCreativeCommunity	General public, creative economy, partners	Post once per week.
KTTV Social Media	https://www.facebook.com/KeysToTheValley	General public, housing organizations, housing stakeholders	Post once per week.
TRORC Newsletter	https://www.trorc.org/trorc-newsletter/	General public, member municipalities, governmental agencies, etc.	Send out at the beginning of each month, generally aim to do 10 newsletters per year.

Press Releases	Posted on TRORC Website, social media channels, and in local newspapers	General public, member municipalities, governmental agencies, etc.	Once every 4-6 weeks.
Trainings/ Webinars/ Events	Posted on TRORC Website, social media channels, and in local newspapers	Targeted audiences depending on subject matter	TRORC hosted trainings, webinars, and events should be held once per quarter. Two of these will be ACCD required trainings, with two additional trainings.

Project Specific Communications

TRORC typically has one to two large special projects per year. These projects are typically funded by federal agencies.

Large special project communications shall be managed by the lead staff person and must follow the *Calendar of Routine Outreach* above.

To aid in communications and outreach of special large projects, staff shall refer and use the *Special Projects Outreach and Communication Plan*, attached as an appendix.

Ad Hoc Presentations

TRORC Staff are often contacted to give ad hoc presentations on a variety of topics to the media, municipal committees and boards, conferences, and for other organizations.

All TRORC led presentations are an opportunity for outreach and will include a brief description of the Commission, map of the region, and staff contact information. Attached to this plan is the TRORC PowerPoint presentation template for staff use.

Personal Contact with Local Officials

TRORC staff are in contact with local officials on a daily basis. Whether this be over the phone, through email, or in person. A benchmark and metrics on contact with local officials should be developed.

IV. Disaster Communications

Disasters that impact the region the most are natural disasters. These often occur with some warning from the National Weather Service in Burlington, but typically the extent of these disasters is unknown. Disasters can affect commission operations themselves, but usually affect our communities. To successfully use communications to help the commission and our communities prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters, advance preparation and planning are critical.

Each situation is unique and should be handled accordingly. This plan outlines messages, protocols, draft content for websites and media releases, and objectives that will assist TRORC with responding quickly and effectively during a disaster.

Disaster Communication Principles

To maintain TRORC's reputation, staff and commissioners will abide by the following communication principles:

- Gather and share information as quickly and as accurately as possible, while acknowledging that disasters and other situations inherently involve fast moving events that sometimes make it difficult or impossible to share the entire story with absolute certainty.
- Refrain from speculation about the circumstances surrounding the disaster.
- Keep in mind and respect the people directly affected by the disaster.
- Respond quickly and consistently in coordination with others, such as Vermont Emergency Management and local EMDs.
- Review all events that took place leading up, and in response, to the disaster to learn from them and prevent them from occurring in the future.
- React to situations in a timely manner.
- Prepare for possible scenarios.
- Evaluate potential situations quickly and comprehensively, monitoring breaking news and events, alleviating confusion, and dispelling misinformation.

Disaster Communications Objectives

To maintain TRORC's standing and trusted reputation with local, regional, state, and federal organizations / agencies, we will use the materials outline in this section to:

- Respond consistently, effectively, honestly, and accurately to incoming inquiries
- Address the immediate needs of those affected
- Provide experts and resources proactively
- Communicate with priority audiences.

Public Information Office (PIO)

The Executive Director, with assistance from the Director of Planning, will serve as the PIO for the Commission. Their role will be to adhere to the principles and objectives above to the best of their ability.

The Executive Director and Director of Planning should take the FEMA Basic PIO training to better serve our communities in times of disaster.

Management Process

Local Liaison Process

TRORC has an active Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with Vermont Emergency Management (VEM) to act as Local Liaisons in times of disaster. When a disaster is predicted to occur, or when it occurs, VEM notifies TRORC that they are activated as Local Liaisons to collect information from its member municipalities.

Three staff are required to possess the training to become Local Liaisons as set by VEM. The responsibility of compiling information and sending it to the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) lies with them. Often, the entire TRORC office assists in data collection depending on the scale of the disaster.

Ceasing Work of the Commission

While most disasters that TRORC responds to do not inhibit the ability of the Commission or towns to continue working on its current contracts, some disasters are large enough in scale that all regular work must stop. Tropical Storm Irene in 2011 was Vermont's costliest disaster. The scale of this storm was so great that TRORC was unable to continue working on its current contracts.

The Executive Director has the sole responsibility to stop projects in the event of a large disaster. These may be at the town scale or regionwide. He or she will email the applicable participants regarding the suspension of projects as the Commission responds to assist its municipalities. If the Executive Director is unavailable to make this call, the Director of Planning assumes this responsibility.

Messaging Guidelines

The following are guidelines for messaging during a disaster

1. Review the messaging platform, and recommend changes to keep it up to date and relevant
2. Review statements, press releases, and other materials for message consistency
3. Stay up to date on emerging media reports, articles, and other information, as appropriate
4. Maintain and update relevant information on the TRORC website.

Disaster Messaging Schedule

Based on the experience of TRORC Staff, the following schedule is recommended for when disaster strikes (adjust dependent on the situation):

1. Send a 'head up' email notifying communities, agencies, and organizations that there is an impending disaster that may require the collection of information from Local Liaisons to the following email distribution groups:
 - a. Town EM Contacts
 - b. Town Admins
 - c. Town Managers
 - d. Town Clerks
 - e. Road Foreman
 - f. Selectboard Chairs
 - g. VTrans Districts
 - h. Agency of Natural Resources River Engineers (manually type those in)
2. After the disaster hits, send an additional email to the lists above asking for a status update from each community on known and perceived damages. Collect this information and input the data into the provided VEM document on SharePoint. Local Liaisons and

other staff will begin to call the three points of contacts for each town seeking information. These three points of contacts are located on the Local Emergency Management Plan (LEMP). These contacts are compiled into one single excel document, contact your Local Liaisons for this document. Share this information with Vtrans and the River Engineers and gather corroborating or conflicting data.

3. In the proceeding days, continue to collect more detailed information from communities. VEM will email a list of required information to be collected from each community. Continue to collect information until the deactivation notice from VEM.

Other Crisis Communication Principles

The Commission is occasionally involved in controversial projects, such as Act 250 or Section 248 projects that do not meet the policies set forth in the Regional Plan or that of the associated Town Plan. While controversial projects are generally unforeseen, the responsibility of responding to these controversies that may involve the Commission rests with the Executive Director.

V. Metrics and Reporting

To evaluate the success of this Plan, the Communications Manager will track and monitor communications, community outreach, and social media activity against benchmarks. Information will be made available to TRORC Staff and Commissioners on a quarterly basis.

The following metrics will be provided in a quarterly report to all staff and Commissioners:

- Number of new social media followers
- Number of social media posts, people they reached, and how many people they engaged
- Number of new newsletter subscribers
- Newsletter open and click rates
- Number of public meetings and attendance conducted by TRORC staff
- Number of trainings, webinars, and presentations conducted by TRORC staff
- Number of media inquiries, or mentions of TRORC in the media
- Number of press releases

Appendices

to be developed later

- Press Release Template
- Newsletter Template
- TRORC Fact Sheet and other handouts
- Outreach and Communication Plan template for large special projects
- TRORC PowerPoint Template
- Disaster Communication Email Template, Phone prompts