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A Municipal Public Relations Program that Works for Small & Medium-Sized Cities

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Municipal Technical Advisory Service

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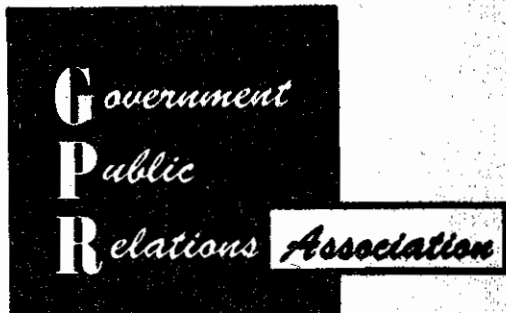


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a municipal public relations program
that works for small & medium-sized cities

by pan dodd wheeler



Public Relations-Municipal

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MAY 21 1958

Dear Mr. Public Official,

The response of governmental officials -- from communities throughout the United States, in Canada and five foreign countries -- to the first printing of "An MPR Program..." has made this, the second printing, necessary.

The Government Public Relations Association believes that this evidenced interest is due to the increasing awareness, on the part of you who are public officials, of what municipal public relations programming can do toward creating a dynamic, two-way relationship between citizens and government -- a relationship producing better government, better officials, and better citizens.

If you want to keep informed about developments in methods and tools of public relations; if you want to receive further studies like this one; if you want practical plans and down-to-earth PR ideas, you will want to join the Government Public Relations Association.

Write to: Government Public Relations Association,
(1313 E. 60th St.) Chicago (37) Illinois

Pub

This bulletin is the work of many people!

Specifically, it grew out of the request made to the Municipal Technical Advisory Service, on behalf of Tennessee cities, by the Tennessee Municipal League.

Its author is Mrs. Pan Dodd Wheeler, MTAS adviser on municipal information. Mrs. Wheeler is also executive director of the Government Public Relations Association and edits the monthly pages, "The City Tells Its Story," in The American City magazine.

P. Cliff Greenwood, consultant on municipal law, MTAS, developed the ordinance included in the bulletin.

Five public relations officials reviewed the manuscript and made suggestions, many of which were incorporated in this final version. These persons included: David Burkhalter, city manager of Elizabethton, Tenn.; E. Grant Meade, public relations officer, Supreme Allied Commander, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Norfolk, Va.; Henry Davis Nadig, public relations counselor and editor, Norwalk, Conn.; William W. Parrott, village clerk and public relations officer, Patchogue, N. Y.; and C. K. Priest, clerk and public relations officer, Newport Beach, Calif.

Valuable materials about the philosophy and work of a public relations unit in government were provided by: Mrs. Lee Jaffe, Director of Public Relations, The Port of New York Authority, N. Y. C.; William Kennedy, Kennedy Associates, Rockville Centre, N. Y.; and Hal Schneidman, chief, Bureau of Information and Service, City of Philadelphia, Pa.

Especially for the small city (under 10,000)

And for the medium-sized city (10,000-50,000)

A M U N I C I P A L
P U B L I C R E L A T I O N S P L A N
T H A T W O R K S !

(And An Ordinance To Put It In Effect)

What is MPR? MPR -- municipal public relations -- is a phrase every city official has heard often. What does it mean?

City officials, from communities scattered over the United States, were asked that question at a conference recently. One answered, "MPR is a term that means the relations between the city and its newspaper, TV, and radio." Another said, "It involves things like the mayor talking to clubs." A third replied, "It is issuing annual reports and having a complaint bureau for citizens." None of the answers is wrong. None is complete.

Municipal public relations includes the public expressions and public actions of the people who make up city government -- the top officials, the staff, the employees -- and the reaction to

these expressions and actions on the part of the people who make up the "public."¹ So, your city has had municipal public relations as long as there has been a city and people in it. The only new element is recognition by municipal leaders of the importance of these relations, and a subsequent attempt to improve them so that city government may function more democratically.

Webster defines "public relations" in this up-to-date sense, as "the activities...of a...government...in building and maintaining sound and productive relations with special publics... and with the public at large, so as to adapt itself to its environment and interpret itself to society." City recognition of the importance of relationships between the government and its people takes the form of policy and that policy is often given legal status as an ordinance. The municipal public relations ordinance sets up machinery -- a department or office of public relations -- through which the city government may devise and operate a municipal public relations program.²

The Philosophy of MPR

The basic aims of municipal public relations are fundamental to democratic municipal government. These involve letting more people know what the city is doing, what problems it is facing, and how it is planning...so that these people will take a

greater interest in municipal operations, will make their views known to city officials, and will actively participate in the municipal government.³

A municipal public relations program will not cover up government at city hall -- good or bad. It will turn a spotlight on government at city hall -- good or bad.

It follows that, where there is poor government and little knowledge about it...a city official who wants to "keep things as they are" should discourage any attempt to create an MPR program. MPR tends to make city government more democratic, more open and above-board, more businesslike. Where there is good government and little knowledge of it -- or inadequate government and an official desire to improve it -- the city officials should encourage formation of an MPR program.

However organized, an effective municipal public relations program must involve the groups that are "related" -- the general citizenry, the city officials, and all city employees. If the MPR program is to achieve desired results, it should be planned and continuing rather than haphazard and periodic.

The Work of MPR

Once organized, with policy, philosophy, and machinery on record, what do public relations departments do? Duties of a

public relations officer in cities over the country were enumerated by the Government Public Relations Association in the January 1955 American City, as follows: "...consulting with legislative and administrative officials and advising them on the public relations aspect of city policy; maintaining close relationships with media -- newspapers, TV, and radio -- making it easier for these public information agencies to obtain information from the city and preparing reports and programs for use by the media; arranging for citizen tours, meetings, surveys; supervising reports, letters, posters, forms and other educational material for citizens; handling complaints; arranging for open houses, dedications, displays, and other special events; planning and writing employee publications, handbooks, and PR-training materials.

"In some cities, the PR unit is also a municipal research and reference organization, collecting and making available data on city government to officials, employees, and citizens. In most of the reporting cities, the PR unit has a responsibility for developing or working with other agencies (Chambers of Commerce, trade and development commissions, etc.) to promote business in the city.⁴ In resort cities, the PR units -- with more money and larger staffs -- combine the functions of the usual municipal PR department with those of a tourist bureau and development organization. In these cases, the PR unit arranges for tourist and

trade advertising, fairs, displays, festivals, and special promotions designed to lure business and vacationers.

"All the public relations units, the survey reveals, spring into action when the city needs an educational campaign for any one of many municipal problems: annexation, bond issued, additional taxes, special assessments, planning and zoning matters, parking meters, changes in traffic regulations, and so forth. The city which does not have an operating PR unit to plan and present the informational material, must organize an education effort 'from scratch.' The city with a regular PR unit turns to it for prompt and experienced action along established channels."

Need for an MPR Program

Contrary to popular belief, problems in relations between municipal government and the citizens of municipalities are not confined to big cities. A mayor in a Tennessee community of 700 persons said that he guessed he had "more public relations problems than anybody" because "in a little town everybody thinks he knows what's going on...and is usually wrong."

Here is what the American Municipal Association says about the need for an MPR program: "A program of public relations is needed in each municipality to tell what the government and its employees do and why they deserve the respect and recognition

of the people whom they serve from day to day. A program of public relations must also keep the avenues of communication open so that appropriate municipal personnel may keep accurately informed concerning the desires and attitudes of the citizens whom they serve."

The need for a municipal public relations program in communities of smaller-than-"big city" size is pointed up in the projects and problems which come to the attention of consultants at the Municipal Technical Advisory Service. Here are some typical ones.

* "We want to get a factory in our city and need some help in going about it. We published a statement of economic data about the town but think industrial officials may want something more. What, how to prepare it, and to whom to send it is a problem." - Mayor, town of 1700

* "The people in this community are 'dead-set' against having to build an expensive sewage disposal plant. But, the health department of the State says we have a health menace here and has ordered us to build the plant. How can I explain the need and the project to the people?" - Recorder, town of 3700

* "We must sell some hospital bonds because we have had a referendum in which the people voted for

issuance of the bonds. What can we do to make the bonds attractive to prospective bond buyers?" - City Attorney, city of 6000

* "We've had to spend a lot of money lately but I'm pretty sure people know why. It would be all right to issue a report about city operations but most of the folks around here know what we're doing anyhow, without a report." - Finance Director, city of 7000. Note: The same year this official made the statement, he was defeated for re-election after serving the city efficiently but quietly for many years. Apparently "most people" didn't know what he was doing.

* "We've got excellent public relations in this town. No one calls city hall much about anything and I guess they like what we're doing because they keep re-electing me." - Mayor, city of less than 10,000. Note: Less than three weeks after this statement was made, a crisis arose in the city police department during which every member of the force resigned and the city administration faced heavy criticism.

* "The people in this town just don't like city hall. We have some terrific problems, accumulated over a long period of time. The problems have to

be faced. But, nothing can be done apparently unless the people are somehow presented with the facts."

City Manager, city of less than 50,000.

* "This city has spent a lot of money on schools, recently. We have issued bonds to finance the projects. Now I want to explain to people exactly what they have gotten for their money and how the bonds are to be paid off. The question is, how should we do this." - Commissioner, city of 33,000.

The Ordinance: Practical MPR

Since problems in public relations, as these examples indicate, do not respect a city's size, why then does this booklet identify itself "for a small or medium-sized city?" There are several reasons.

First, most available information about municipal public relations operations deals with public relations departments and staffs and appropriations necessary to a large city but prohibitive from point of size and cost for a smaller city.

Then, MTAS attempts to provide "practical solutions to everyday problems." For Tennessee cities most of which are "small and medium-sized," where the PR problems and projects are proportionately smaller and where the structure of government and money to operate it is scaled down, a practical MPR program

takes into consideration these facts.

So, this ordinance and the program it sets up, has been prepared especially for the small (under 10,000) or medium-sized (10,000 to 50,000) city. However, with some modifications, it is adaptable for cities outside these population classifications.

The ordinance is a synthesis of several now in operation in cities outside the State of Tennessee. Much of the language of this ordinance is that of the "Model MPR Ordinance" drawn by a class in municipal public relations at the New School for Social Research, New York City, under direction of public relations counselor Henry Davis Nadig.

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An Ordinance Creating

A Bureau		Research & Information
A Department	of	Public Relations
An Office		Information & Service

Be it ordained by the City Council of _____ that:

Section I. (Purpose) It is a duty of municipal government to maintain close, working relationships between the government and the citizens. Because the problems of municipal government are increasingly complex, and because understanding between citizens and the city government is increasingly necessary, a separate department of the city government is required to do these things:

1. Inform city officials on citizen opinion and citizen suggestions for the city government.
2. Inform the public clearly on city-government functions and activities.
3. Promote greater citizen participation in the city government.
4. Provide professional skill in assisting the city government and cooperating agencies in promoting the city to outside interests.
5. Assist in maintaining a cooperative spirit and good morale among all city-government officials and employees.

8. Prepare and disseminate information about the local city government to promotion groups such as Chambers of Commerce and industrial development committees, and cooperate with such groups in the interest of sound business, industrial, and residential development of the city.
9. Perform such other duties as may be assigned by the mayor or authorized by the city council in keeping with the purpose of this ordinance.

Section III. (Implementation) The mayor, (or city manager), with the consent of the council, shall appoint a person or persons who, in the opinion of the appointing officer, has the necessary education, background, and skill to perform the duties outlined in Section II, as the Director of the _____ . He shall devote full-time to the duties of the office.
(name of unit)

This Director shall:

1. Select personnel for his office appropriate to needs and the budget, and subject to approval of the mayor (city manager).
2. Supervise and control the activities of the _____
(name of unit)
3. Make necessary rules and schedules to perform the services outlined in this ordinance.

4. Submit budget requirements at the appropriate time to the proper officer of the city.

Section IV. (Appropriation) The City Council shall appropriate annually the necessary funds to provide for efficient operation of the _____ . The salary of the Director shall
(name of unit)
be fixed by the Council.

For the very small city, where a full-time "director" is not needed or, for the city with minimum funds, where full-time operations are not feasible, Sections III and IV of this ordinance can be revised accordingly.

For example, the work outlined in the ordinance might be done by any of the following municipal officials, providing the individual is qualified and can devote adequate time to the work.

1. City Recorder - (In Patchogue, N. Y. --8000-- the Village Clerk, a position corresponding to recorder in Tennessee municipal incorporations, performs the public relations function.)

2. Council member, commissioner, or department head - (In Richmond, Va., a councilman has the public relations responsibility; in Kansas City, Mo., the director of welfare is chairman of the city public relations committee.)

3. A private citizen - (In Teaneck, N. J. --34,000-- a private citizen whose business was that of public relations counseling, organized and directed the MPR activity of that

city, on a voluntary basis.)⁵

4. A committee of three to five persons - (In Norris, Tenn. --1100-- a 3-man citizen committee prepared an annual report of municipal operations performing, in this, one of the functions of an MPR operation. Conceivably, the committee might do other MPR work as well.)⁵

Qualified MPR Director Needed

The ordinance provides the legal framework for an MPR program. The man or woman who devises and carries out the program is important to its effective operation.

An MPR officer should have a sound general education. Some college background is desirable -- but not absolutely necessary. He should certainly know how to write clearly, how to express himself well, how to work with other people. Experience in: government, at municipal or other levels; industrial or business public relations; sales, sales management, or advertising; in newspaper, radio, or television work provides a good background for municipal public relations. Many PR officers come from the teaching profession.

Typical salaries for a full-time MPR officer -- for cities in the population class under discussion -- range from \$5,000 to \$12,000.⁶ Because aims and needs vary so greatly from municipality to municipality, there is no clear-cut pattern of the cost of MPR for a city of a given size.

The MPR program may be carried on by a private counseling firm as is the case in Rockville Centre, New York, (population 27,000), where the annual report, monthly citizen newsletter, and other MPR essentials are provided by Kennedy Associates, a public relations firm engaged by the city council. The cost to

this city is \$10,000, of which \$5000 is the agency fee. The other \$5000 is for printing, publishing and miscellaneous costs incurred by the agency on behalf of Rockville Centre, its client. A variation of the PR-counseling plan has been adopted by Norfolk, Va., and Memphis, Tenn., recently. Private firms in these cities were engaged to perform specific MPR duties -- rather than the overall job -- for their respective cities.

Where the MPR program is to be carried on with part-time direction of city officials who have other duties, it is necessary that such officials either have qualified advisers, or that they have experience or background in public relations or related fields. This "part-time" arrangement is used in cities of varying sizes throughout the country. In Newport Beach, California, (population 17,800), which has a much-publicized MPR program, the public relations director is the city clerk. Jackson, Miss., has assigned the PR responsibilities and duties to its director of personnel. In Grand Rapids, Mich., the city treasurer, a former newspaper editor, serves the city as treasurer and PRO.

MPR direction in a small community may come, under this ordinance, from an individual citizen, a committee of citizens, or a committee including both citizens and a city official (as suggested in the addenda to the ordinance). A housewife, with some spare time and a good background for the job, directs MPR in

one city. A teacher with time and "know-how" has done effective work in another community. A retired newspaper editor is a natural as municipal public relations officer in his town.

How This MPR Plan Works

Does this sample ordinance provide the machinery to solve real municipal problems?

Let's return to the Tennessee city problems which come to MTAS. By checking the specific problems against the MPR apparatus suggested by the ordinance we can see how it would have operated in the circumstances represented by the exemplary municipal projects.

* For the town of 1700 which wanted industrial development, the MPR official would have prepared and provided to city officials a report on the advantages of locating industry in the area. He would have worked with a development committee of citizens or, if such a committee was not in existence, might have spearheaded organization of such a group. To this group and to the mayor he would have provided professional know-how in the drafting of letters to, making contacts with, and preparing and publishing information for interested business enterprisers.

* The people in the town of 3700 persons, faced with the necessity of building a costly sewage disposal plant, would have been

kept periodically and factually informed about the growing threat to the public health (while the threat was developing); the reason for the state health department's concern; and the responsibility of the city for the health of the people in it. A citizen study-group might have been organized to issue much of this information -- with the guidance of the MPR officer. Research materials and factual information would have been developed and made available. If and when necessary, special publications and club programs about the problems and a solution, the latter advanced with the help of citizens in the community, would have been presented. An ultimatum from the State might never have been necessary!

* Assistance in the preparation of a bond brochure would have been available to the city attorney who needed buyers for hospital bonds in the town of 6000. Information in the files of the MPR department, data about the municipal government, and photographs would have been available for the preparation of the bond brochure. Details involved in the planning, writing, and publication of the bond prospectus would have been handled by the MPR department, in consultation with the city attorney.

* The finance commissioner who was defeated in the city of 7000 people, found out that a "good job" -- quietly done -- does not automatically "speak for itself."⁷ The MPR department would have kept people continuously informed about the "why" of

municipal expenditures when they were being made. People would have then had factual information, obtained over a period of time, (not just before elections!), on which to base their voting. When a good job is done by municipal officials, the MPR program makes this plain to people.

* "No calls at city hall" is seldom a sign that all is well. It may indicate dangerous apathy on the part of citizens. It may indicate brewing discontent, quiet at the moment, but ready to fizz up on slight pretense. In the town in question both internal (personnel) relations and external (public) relations apparently were given no attention or inadequate attention. An MPR program works in cooperation with those responsible for personnel, suggesting ways in which employees may be made happy, productive partners in municipal service. An MPR program builds up, externally, a reservoir of good will and understanding on which the city government may draw in times of crisis.

* For the city manager in a medium-sized city whose "people" did "not like city hall," a positive MPR program, contemplated in the ordinance, would have provided information to citizens on a continuous basis, and would have provided means for some key citizens to be a part of some city operations. Factual information and a feeling that "I am a part of the city" are important tools in getting and keeping citizens on the city hall team. Information would have been provided and citizen-

participation secured had an MPR program been in effect in this city.

* Finally, the commissioner in the city where a school bond story had to be told -- would have had the help and know-how of the MPR department. Preparing a fact sheet of information, news releases, and an exhibit showing how the bond money was used and how the bonds were to be repaid -- would have been a routine job for a qualified MPR officer.

MPR Gets "Seal of Approval"

What is the experience of a city which has had an MPR program in effect for a period of years? This is the question which was put to city officials in a survey by the Government Public Relations Association in 1954. Here are some typical replies from officials in municipalities of the medium and small-city classification:

"Previous administrations have had difficulty in carrying out good plans. The present administration has made more progress than any of the preceding ones...much of it due to the improved relations with the people." (West Coast city of 30,000)

"Since the inception of our public relations projects, the citizens of our community seem to

be better informed, complain less, and are more willing to cooperate." (Eastern village of 8000)

"Frequent expressions of approval of MPR program by residents -- especially on the annual report and monthly bulletins. The PR program began in 1945." (East Coast city, 25,000)

Here is how D. Lee Powell, mayor of Miami Beach (resident population under 50,000) describes the MPR experience in his city:

"The immediate reaction of the press to the creation of the Office of Public Relations was rather controversial. Many people were of the opinion that the public relations director was hired to publicize the city council and eulogize the actions of the government itself. However, this misconception was quickly corrected when the department commenced functioning and its work spoke for itself. The Office of Public Relations brought the facts of city operation to the public and interpreted the ideas and opinions of the citizenry to the city administration itself."

Certainly Miami Beach, as a resort community, had unique problems and has achieved spectacular success which is special to its ambitions and situation. Nevertheless, the way in which the MPR unit has "proved its value" over a period of years is of interest to city officials of small and medium-sized cities, each of which has ambitions and special situations which an MPR department can promote.

And, Finally...

Statements by two authorities in the public relations field summarize this presentation.

"Municipal size" writes Henry Davis Nadig, former public relations consultant in New York City, "should not be a factor in determining whether or not you should adopt a definite public relations policy and establish a working MPR unit within your municipal government. Basically...it is not a question of whether you can afford to...set a policy and carry out a program of municipal public relations; it is, rather, a question of whether you can afford not to as a matter of both simple expediency and long-range gain in the democratic and efficient management of your local government. That holds for any and all sizes and types of municipal government."

And Mrs. Lee Jaffe, Director of Public Relations for the Port of New York Authority, says this to city officials, "Of one thing I am certain. If your municipal government is good for the people, you and they would gain through a program that would furnish the greatest possible amount of information on the job you are doing."

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NOTES FROM OFFICIALS who reviewed this manuscript

1 In my opinion, this is one of the more important phases of a municipal public relations program, namely that every phase of municipal government should be studied by the public relations official -- from the point of view of good relations with the public. From such study, the PRO might suggest better ways of doing things -- from the point of view of good relations with the public. He should observe, for example, the way the telephone operator receives incoming calls; the way the police and other Village employees deal with citizens; the make-up of forms to be filled out by the public (are they easy to fill out ...or overly detailed and difficult?). I am sure you are aware that these things are an integral part of municipal public relations although the fact is not stressed in this manuscript. -- William W. Parrott, Village Clerk, Patchogue, N. Y.

2 The Bureau of Public Information and Service gives advice and counsel to all city officials and provides them public relations services and assistance..of many varieties.. But... we attempt to help the departments realize that the primary public relations responsibility resides within the department and that good public relations is based on the continuing courtesy, efficiency, and willingness to serve of the various units of our city government. We aid them...but our total effort is an adjunct to -- not in lieu of -- their good

performance! -- Hal Schneidman, Chief, Bureau of Information and Service, Philadelphia, Pa.

3 Isn't a most important reason for the establishment of a municipal public relations program the fact that it is a duty of responsible officials is to keep people informed?

-- E. Grant Meade, PRO, Supreme Allied Commander, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Norfolk, Va., (former professor, political science).

4 Many commissioners feel that their city should take a more active part in promoting industry and local tourist attractions...I have personally held the opinion that, as city manager, my job was to give the city a government, as good as possible, and thereby contribute to making the city attractive to industry. Elected officials here, however, and I am sure in many other cities, are constantly asked "what are you fellows doing to get us another plant?" In turn, the officials feel the city hall staff must leave no stone unturned to promote industrial expansion. Obviously, however, a city manager cannot devote himself to tax rate, budget, schools, and so on, and also be a traveling good will ambassador. Like ours, many cities are anxious to promote industry. This program might enable such promotion -- implementing, rather than interfering with essential management operations. -- David Burkhalter, City Manager, Elizabethton, Tenn.

5

Is the "something for nothing" system wise in the long run?

Does the "volunteer" deserve, at least, token fringe benefits? Otherwise, there is always the danger of assessing the program in terms of the salary. In other words -- since it costs nothing, it is worth just that. Also, I feel this makes the whole plantoo dependent on the volunteer. -- E. Grant Meade

6

The average salary of the municipal public relations officer, from \$5000 to \$12,000 as revealed in this (Government Public Relations Association, 1954) survey, is a small price to pay for these results. -- The American City, "The City Tells Its Story," January 1955

7

"Is it a desirable implication," one reviewer asked, "that MPR can help officials get re-elected?" The author answers, unequivocally, "Yes." A good job, -- with citizens as partners to it, (a partnership made possible by the information from and to city hall) -- should be the basis for re-election! MPR implements this partnership relationship.