



MetroWest Communications & Engagement Best Practices

MWRC Funding Request	\$35,000
Communities Involved	Learnings and recommendations for all MWRC communities, with four municipalities participating in pilot
Anticipated Deliverables	• Built relationships with 4-5 leaders / conveners within each participating municipality and identified future collaboration • Report indicating priority populations in each municipality and key considerations for engagement of each population • Digital database for replicable engagement activities • Summary of engagement conducted & recommendations for future engagement specifically when navigating budget constraints • Recommendations for digital/media communication and outreach, incl. template social media & digital database of community storytelling • Summary report and resources guide for MWRC member municipalities, with best practice examples from area municipalities and elsewhere. Recommendations will be for a variety of scenarios and for differently sized municipalities with different levels of staffing.

MWRC communities want to reach and engage more people, and frequently hear resident complaints of not having an opportunity to engage with town government. Communities are generally open to engaging more diverse audiences than they traditionally have, and they are in different stages of doing so. Often, without dedicated engagement staff and with budget constraints, many municipalities struggle to conduct meaningful and effective engagement. In a time of intense technology use, people are even more disconnected and less engaged in public process. For communication to be impactful, we must build relationships. Those relationships can then inform how we communicate.

Based in part upon the learnings and recommendations from the FY25 Communications Strategies and Opportunities study, MAPC proposes a project to work with four MWRC communities to strengthen their relationship-building and communication strategy. This project aims to explore how to establish relationship foundations with key populations so that municipalities can better share out information with those communities. This project has a particular focus on engaging populations who have historically been marginalized by or excluded from public process. This project will also approach engagement from an evaluation lens, setting specific metrics for success in reaching targeted populations through specific strategies. While the work of this project will be local to each of the four participating communities, the learnings will have regional implications, and the process documented so that other MWRC municipalities can replicate the approach.

A detailed scope of work is attached.

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Draft Scope

Project Overview:

MWRC communities feel hard-hit from the downfall of local newspapers. They want to reach and engage more people, and frequently hear resident complaints of not having an opportunity to engage with town government, but it's hard to fill the gaps. Communities are generally open to engaging more diverse audiences than they traditionally have, and they are in different stages of doing so. Often, without dedicated engagement staff and with budget constraints, many municipalities struggle to conduct meaningful and effective community engagement. In a time of intense technology use, people are even more disconnected from each other and less engaged in public process. For communication to be impactful, we must build relationships. Those relationships can then inform how we communicate.

MAPC proposes a project to work with 4 MWRC communities to strengthen their relationship-building and communication strategy. This project aims to explore how to establish relationship foundations with key populations so that municipalities can better share out information with those communities. This is with a particular focus on engaging populations who have historically been marginalized by or excluded from public process. This project will also approach engagement from an evaluation lens, setting specific metrics for success in reaching targeted populations through specific strategies. While the work of this project will be local to each of the 4 participating communities, the learnings will have regional implications, and the process will be documented along with examples so that other MWRC municipalities can replicate the approach.

Goals:

1. By the end of the project the municipal leaders and staff in participating communities will have an understanding of foundational community engagement practices and have expanded their capacity for Community Engagement.
2. By the end of the project the project team, consisting of MAPC and municipal partners, will have built and/or strengthened existing relationships with Community Based Organizations and/or local businesses, groups or other entities who play a convening role in MWRC communities and have identified opportunities for collaboration.

- a. These relationships could inform the starts of community liaison-related work.
3. By the end of the project, the project team will have successfully implemented targeted engagement to priority populations who have historically been excluded from public process. Successful implementation would mean that these engagements met people where they are, generated active participation from community members and connected them to additional resources, people or organizations in the network or future opportunities for engagement.
4. By the end of the project, the project team will have identified recommendations for digital/media communication and outreach to community members about planning processes and other aspects of municipal government. Recommendations could include: identifying proper channels and platforms for communication that people use, strategies for responding to misinformation and/or inflammatory social media and event outreach, strategies for writing in plain language and pushing out multilingual communication, and types of information that is helpful to share out with community members (i.e. notice about services or resources members could access)

Principles:

- Equity is at the foundation of our work;
- We strive to build relationships with and including the voices of those who are most impacted by lack of accessibility to and/or exclusion from public process;
- We aim to identify pathways for those community members to feel belonging to and power in public process;
- We take an evaluation-based approach to designing and conducting engagement;
- Relationship and trust-building are foundational to our engagement practice;
- Transparency and trust-building through regular communication and follow- up;
- Proactive communication with project partners.

Deliverables:

- Built relationships with 4-5 community leaders and/or conveners within each participating municipality and identified future opportunities for collaboration;
- Report indicating priority populations in each municipality and key considerations for engagement of each population;

- Digital database for replicable engagement activities;
- Summary of engagement conducted and recommendations for future engagement, specifically when navigating budget constraints;
- Recommendations for digital/media communication and outreach, including template social media posts and a digital database of community storytelling that can be used for communication & outreach in the future (includes prompts like: “What do you love about your community?” Or “What is the defining feature of your community?”)
- Summary report and resources guide for MWRC member municipalities, with best practice examples from area municipalities and elsewhere. Recommendations will be for a variety of scenarios and for differently sized municipalities with different levels of staffing. Recommendations will also include examples from strategies used throughout the project and results from those strategies (what worked, what didn’t, how many people were engaged, etc.) Document will include links and be in PDF format.

Amount Requested for October 2026 – September 2027: \$35,000

Activities:

- **Landscape Analysis:**
 - MAPC would conduct interviews with each of the participating municipalities to better understand the existing communities, institutions, community assets, social dynamics and gaps in knowledge or relationships.
 - MAPC would conduct a data analysis to better understand relevant demographic information to help identify priority community stakeholders.
- **Relationship Building & Engagement:**
 - MAPC would aim to build relationships with key community members or leaders through initial 1:1 conversations and/or attendance at community events.
 - Informed by those initial 1:1 conversations, MAPC would then design events that would intentionally bring together community members who historically have been hard to reach to identify pathways for future connection. These events would aim to be reciprocal and of benefit to the community members, rather than solely extracting information from them.
 - For any of these activities, MAPC would connect the people they’ve engaged with back to relevant municipal staff to nurture and maintain those

relationships long term.

- **Communications Research:**

- Through the relationship building & engagement, along with case study research, MAPC will identify recommendations for digital/media communication and outreach to community members about planning processes. This includes identifying proper channels and platforms for communication that people use, strategies for responding to misinformation and/or inflammatory social media and event outreach.

- **Final Report Writing:**

- All of this work will be summarized in a final report & digital database in the hopes of serving as a replicable toolkit for other communities to apply to their relationship building & communications work.

Timeline:

- **Project Management (Throughout Project) (40 hours)**

- Includes project team check ins
- Includes development of purpose of engagement

- **Purpose of Engagement (October 2025)**

- Develop a purpose of engagement through an evaluation framework that includes goals and metrics for potential target populations.
- **Project Team Kickoff Meeting (1):**
 - ♣ Project overview
 - ♣ Purpose of engagement discussion
 - ♣ Landscape Analysis strategy discussion

- **Landscape Analysis (October - December 2025) (30 hours)**

- **Project Team Meeting (2):** Landscape Analysis Meeting/Asset Mapping Activity:
 - ♣ Establish what communities already know and what datasets they already have
 - ♣ Identify any social fabric/infrastructure that would support outreach and relationship building efforts;

- ♣ Identify potential barriers that may hinder/challenge relationship building efforts;
- ♣ Identify the target populations you want to reach. (Try to be specific. Consider geographical priority areas, certain neighborhoods etc.)
- Collect data on community landscape in MWRC Communities: (20 hours)
 - ♣ Pull data from:
 - Census
 - Local municipal data
 - Schools
 - Local health institutions
 - Library
 - Local Community Based Organizations
 - ♣ In collaboration with MAPC's Data Services Department, pull data on:
 - Race
 - Wealth
 - Homeownership vs. renters
 - Age
 - Language and culture demographics
 - Immigration waves
 - Disability demographics
 - Literacy demographics
 - Red-lining maps history
 - Indigenous history/assets
 - Prior work MAPC has done
 - Data showcasing environmental justice communities and/or geographic areas vulnerable to extreme heat, flooding or other climate impacts.
- Analyze data and asset mapping activity (3 hours)
 - ♣ Includes revisiting initial purpose of engagement & evaluation framework to refine metrics for moving forward.
 - ♣ Some of this analysis will be informed by 1:1 conversations that we have, in which we may check for confirmation or understanding on

the data we've already pulled.

- o Develop list of initial 1:1 conversations (2 hours)
- o Compile Data & Recommendations Into Report (5 hours)
 - ♣ Summary & Visuals of Data (along with master workbook) and key takeaways
 - ♣ Recommendations for engagement and accessibility considerations;
 - ♣ Asset-mapping share-out;
 - ♣ Share initial list of recommendations back out with those we've engaged for input and feedback.
- o ***Project team meeting #3:*** Share outcomes from Landscape Analysis & Identified Next Steps for Relationship Building
- o **Building Relationships & Establishing Trust with Communities (January 2026 – July 2026)**
 - ♣ **Conduct an initial 1:1 conversation with community members,** leaders or representative of community based organizations, to get a better understanding of their role in their community, the community's priorities and best ways to potentially connect/conduct outreach. (40 hours)
 - 10 hours per community x 4 communities (Goal of 5 conversations per community, 2 hrs per conversation)
- o Conduct engagement opportunities (110 hours)
 - ♣ **Identify & design eight opportunities for engagement, 2 per community, designed to strengthen relationships between municipal staff & community members** (60 hours)
 - This includes:
 - o Setting date & time
 - o Outreach
 - o Designing activities
 - o Collaborating partners/collaborators for the events
 - o Day of tasks
 - o Food and other amenity costs

- Follow Up (Closing the triangle, applying learnings and evaluation)

- ♣ **Identify & attend 8 pop up opportunities for engagement, 2 per community, designed to strengthen relationships between municipal staff & community members (30 hours)**

- We propose to identify opportunities where people may already be gathering (that are open to participation) to further connect with them. This allows us to meet them where they are at, learn about them, connect with them on their terms, while potentially identifying future opportunities for further relationship building and connection.

- ♣ **Develop digital communications & storytelling tools (20 hours)**

Analyze & Finalize Report:

- **Analyzing What We Learned: (10 hours)**

- ♣ Based on the engagements & conversations develop recommendations for ongoing engagement and relationship building and add to report; (5 hours)
- ♣ When possible, we will try to conduct this via a co-analysis process, especially with any community partners who are more heavily engaged throughout the project.

- ♣ **Project Team Meeting #4:** MAPC Team to hold a conversation with municipal partners to go through the data collected from engagement and understand how that data can inform decisions and/or upcoming processes at municipal level. What next steps could be taken to strengthen relationships?

Across these activities, MAPC would work to build municipal staff capacity through hands-on collaboration, this could look like municipal staff joining engagement, debriefing an engagement activity with municipal staff afterwards to talk about best practices, incorporating templates from activities into the final report and/or other capacity building efforts as collaboratively identified.

- **Finalizing Report: (10 hours) (May – June 2026)**
 - Final content review;
 - Develop a final report with guidance and recommendations for engagement, including budget-constrained efforts;
 - Potential to share out with any partners we've established and get feedback;
 - Develop a blog post to share about effort and summary of lessons learned piloting relationship-rooted engagement strategy;
 - **Project Team Meeting #5:** Debrief session with project team.

Breakdown of Roles & Responsibilities:

- **MAPC:**
 - Conduct ongoing project management, including setting scope, providing regular bi-weekly project updates to partners, managing budget, etc.
 - Coordinate a shared folder for municipal partners to have as a reference and/or point of collaboration.
 - Coordinate quarterly check ins with municipal partners.
 - Conduct phases of the project, pulling municipal partners in as/when needed.
 - Report out on each phase of project and sharing about next steps.
 - Provide final deliverables as laid out in project scope.
- **Municipal Partners:**
 - Provide input on project material (scope, 1:1 questions, engagement activities, etc.) and/or insight into social and cultural dynamics within each of their communities;
 - Participate in relationship building opportunities as they are able to, with goal of holding relationships built from these efforts by the end of the project. This can look like joining in on 1:1 conversations or at pop-up engagement when capacity allows, this may also include responding to a warm hand-off from MAPC over email.
 - Convene quarterly to discuss project progress, learnings and considerations for moving forward.

Budget:

Activity	Number of Hrs/Activity	Cost
General Project Management & Purpose of Engagement	40 hours	\$4,500
Landscape Analysis	40 hours	\$4,500
1:1 Conversations	40 hours	\$4,500
Conduct Engagement Activities	110 hours	\$12,300
Analysis & Finalizing Project & Report	20 hours	\$2,200
Food, Language, Etc. Costs		\$7,000
Total Cost		\$35,000

Attachment: MWRC Communications Project FY25

Funded by the MetroWest Regional Collaborative in November 2024, the Communication Strategies and Opportunities in MetroWest project sought to understand how each city or town in the MWRC region is currently communicating with constituents and what challenges the staff face in reaching residents or particular populations. Senior Communications Specialist Tim Viall interviewed staff members in 9 of 10 MWRC municipalities who are responsible for communications, and analyzed responses. Recommendations are below, followed by more detailed findings.

Recommendations

Key recommendations surfaced to help MetroWest cities and towns best engage with residents for public communications. These are focused in 3 primary areas where future projects can improve communications in cities and towns:

1. Engaging hard to reach communities
2. Support with town-owned websites
3. Choices on access to information

1. Engaging with “hard to reach” communities

Nearly every community in the MWRC expressed difficulty in communicating with “hard to reach” communities. These communities could be ‘physical pockets’ of town separated geographically (e.g., a north or south side of town), by cultural or socioeconomic districts, or be categorized by demographics. For instance, many individuals interviewed said that mid-to-late 20s and early 30-year-olds, individuals who may be new to town, and young couples – not mutually exclusive – who may not have school-aged children yet are difficult to reach. Language barriers were a concern for a few of the communities, although not widespread.

Recommendation 1A: recruit city / town communications ambassadors

“Communications Ambassadors” can be structured similarly to “climate liaisons,” which were hired as part of the [MetroWest Climate Equity Project](#). The climate liaisons were residents of environmental justice neighborhoods who worked with cities and towns to support residents who are and will be hit hardest by climate change. Think of ambassadors as town influencers, who could be selected or chosen from populations that are historically marginalized (not limited to race, but it could be age).

Recommendation 1B: offer those communities more communications space

Most communities in the MWRC either have a town-run newsletter or were in the process of launching one. The towns that do have a newsletter expressed overall success in getting subscribers and improving communications. Newsletters have helped fill in gaps and voids left by newspapers closing. Producing newsletters takes time, effort, and potentially funding (i.e., if physical copies are printed). There is an opportunity to bring newsletters to the next level by including more in-depth, people-focused stories vs. only need-to-know information. Increasing print and physical collateral may be more equitable and help negate any digital divide.

2. Support with city- and town-owned websites

Recommendation 2A: Cities and towns in the MWRC expressed that they want more customization options for their websites. “We want to be like Boston,” said one community official. Another individual expressed frustration over spending thousands of dollars on website updates yet lacking the central control needed for key day-to-day operations. Most communities lack dedicated webmasters, and the responsibilities of upkeeping a website often fall on town IT staff and/or positions tasked with communications. To increase efficiencies, one staff member stated that if more people could utilize certain government services remotely, he could “free up a lot of availability” of resources and/or reduce costs. There is still a communication gap in getting people to understand that services can be done remotely.

3. Paradox of choices on access to information

Since the first social media platforms became mainstream more than a decade ago, there has been pressure and feeling of obligation for businesses, organizations, and government agencies to try to have a presence on every platform. Town staff members have expressed that they want to reach the “pockets” of residents that may be active on each platform; after all, we all have our own unique preferences and platforms when it comes to accessing information. There are fundamental problems with structuring communications efforts around that approach related to capacity, competition, sustainability, and budget, among other factors.

Recommendation 3A: bring residents to active, compelling content channels (with a new focus on videos)

Whether a city or town wants to scale back their social media channels, abandon certain platforms altogether, or develop a strategy or increase newsletter subscribers, content should remain a top focus. As one staffer said, “We should be a publishing kind of entity that puts out concise, informative content.” Many communities in the MWRC said that they have a need for “how-to” videos that instruct residents how to navigate complex processes in town, like opening

a new restaurant, small business, permitting, etc. With the number of colleges and universities in the MWRC, there should be pools of students who have the ability to help with such projects. However, as one MWRC community said, “...we don’t have the money or staffing for it.”

Recommendation 3B: support staff on the digital front lines

Misinformation is the #1 challenge that MWRC face when it comes to digital communications. One community employs an effective strategy of having a dedicated staff member spend each morning scanning social media groups and pages for questions related to the town, incorrect information, issues, etc. Social media monitoring could be a full-time job, and staff members tasked with those responsibilities need to be supported. When combating misinformation is siloed (i.e., an attitude of “social media is not my job”) it can quickly become overwhelming and cause burnout. Town partners, like libraries, schools, business groups, non-profits can help amplify and support messages, as well as provide a sounding board for city- or town-specific tactics and successes.

For some recommendations above, municipalities may consider hiring full-time staff to assist several municipalities through a shared services model, after piloting efforts under recommendations 1A. Examples of similar shared services include [regional public health](#), [climate resilience](#), [IT services](#), and conservation. Municipalities may also consider engaging school students for part-time social media work.

Findings

The SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) framework was used to analyze findings from the 9 transcribed interviews with staff in communications roles across the subregion.

Strengths

- Partnerships
 - Libraries, senior centers, local TV/cable access stations, some school districts
 - Other departments – most communications still run through a centralized structure, or hub & spoke model
- When municipal teams are local – can live in the community they serve
- Cultural Diversity
- Newsletters
- Technology expanding access; availability of information online
- “I know several people that have hearing loss, and let’s face it, some of our rooms are not great acoustically. We’ve got fans that blow, microphones that sometimes you can’t hear in the back of the room. That’s just the perspective of a few people that I know.”

- “They hear much better when they dial in on Zoom. So they’re engaged and listening to what the select board is saying. That’s something I hope that never goes away, basically a silver lining with COVID.”

Weaknesses

- Choices to access information
- Pockets of community that, no matter what, can’t be reached
- Not enough staff, or time; Web masters, communications director, HR responsibilities
- Shoestring budgets
- Websites
- Lack of local newspapers
- Not being customer friendly
- “It’s never enough. Not everyone gets information or wants the information in the same manner. You know some people don’t want you to clog up their inbox with a bunch of emails about what’s going on in the town. Some people are expecting that they’re going to get something mailed to them saying, you know, hey, there’s a meeting on Thursday, you should be aware of.”
- “Often times I feel like people want me to start a newspaper, and I’m like no, that’s not my job.”
- “There’s not a central gathering place intown. We’re a very residential community. There’s not a big business district, so there’s not really that like centralized place that the community has to go to, and get information. So, outside of going to every door in the community. We don’t really have that ability to get to where people are because there really isn’t a place where the people are.”

Threats

- Misinformation
- An “us vs. them” attitude
- Language barriers, lack of access to the internet, digital divide
- Social media
- Mandates, legal requirements, lack of internal support
- “People think they know everything. People who disagree only for the sake of arguing. Posting negative thoughts on our happy [social media] posts, even ones with kids. The negativity turns other people away, and people can spew whatever they want... It’s a microcosm of what’s wrong with social media.”

Opportunities and Recommendations

- Citizens academies
- Communications liaisons

- “How-to” videos
- Building relationships
- University, college, and high school interns
- Trainings
- Online tools
- Technical assistance for communication-focused projects
- Engage “younger” audiences
- Show the great work
- “I’m focused on figuring out how to build those relationships, not just with the organizations or the nonprofits, but the individual residents who can have this, like huge impact on the community.”