November 22, 2019

Dear Township Committee Members:

During the last ten months, the Communication Task Force established in January 2019 has completed the objectives that were set out for us by your resolution:

- Promoted the use of township communications
- Identified deficiencies in the current communications platform
- Made recommendations for improvement to township communications by presenting a Communication Report to the Township Committee.

As reported in our August 2019 report, we spent significant time assessing the current methods and styles for communication. We surveyed residents and evaluated their responses. We reviewed who was doing what, how they were doing it, and options to improve how the township communicates with Bernards Township residents.

Informational videos and “Did You Know?” flyers were circulated on social media platforms on issues we believed were timely and important to residents. They were generally well-received and stimulated conversation.

Regarding deficiencies, we believe there are a few that should be the focus of the Township Committee:

- Residents responding to the Communications Survey strongly supported the use of text messaging for communication. Our task force met with a representative from Swift 911 that has now merged and offers RAVE mobile alert. Bernards Township contracts and pays ($9500/yr.) for services that we are not utilizing. Staff training needs to be arranged (free of charge per contract) and there needs to be an effort to collect/update residents’ contact information, including cell phone numbers for the database. **We strongly recommend a coordinated effort to inform residents of the RAVE system, collect cell numbers, train staff and begin using the system.** There needs to be leadership assigned to this effort and a plan put in place to implement. It needs to be used to be worthwhile.

- The Bernards Township website is cluttered, hard to navigate, and dated. We learned that it was designed by internal IT staff who continue to manage it. Writing code and designing a new site would be time-intensive for staff and frankly, no longer practical. We propose that the township solicit bids for a new external web host/designer. There are web-designing firms that have developed other NJ municipal websites. Why reinvent the wheel? This should be included in the 2020 budget or the cost “found”. According to our research and in speaking to other towns that have used external web design teams, the cost should not exceed $25,000. Involve Township residents in the design and development. It is our hope that this would be a priority for the Township Committee and bids obtained in the first quarter of 2020. The goal should be to have a new website up and running before the end of 2020.

- Bernards Township currently uses in-house servers to store all its data and run its communications. Recent news reports highlight the vulnerability of municipal governments and school districts that rely on internal servers. Cloud based web services can provide data storage, security, free up staff, and office space. **We strongly recommend moving Bernards Township data to a cloud web service.**
“Agencies that run their own IT gear must deal with hardware, software, networking updates, patches, and data center security—all resource-intensive-but-important workloads that an outside cloud vendor like Amazon (AMZN) Web Services or Microsoft (MSFT) Azure handles on behalf of their customers. If an agency can offload all that, it can focus on the specific features and capabilities it needs to provide.”

- Residents asked for a Bernards Township Newsletter. **We recommend an electronic quarterly newsletter** that is apolitical, designed, and published by Township staff.
- The quality of the Bernards Township courtroom technology is poor. The podium is low and provides a microphone that never appears to be close enough to adequately capture a speaker’s voice. Alternating between online presentations and live Township Committee members and speakers is often awkward. **We suggest having IT re-evaluate the design of the podium/microphones and being present to assist in the quality of the presentations during meetings.** The Township Administrator should not have to do this while he is involved in the conversation and meeting details.
- Communication should be consistent and professionally presented across all platforms. Residents told us they want to receive information in a timely fashion. Specifically, utility alerts, police activity, and severe weather warnings should be communicated consistently. Depending on the topic, different staff members put out messages in different way. Department heads decide when to communicate and how to communicate with residents. Sometimes social media is utilized, sometimes not. Sometimes emailing is done, sometimes not. Some information is on the township website, other info is difficult to find. **We recommend better coordination and consistency in communication with residents. Hire a communications coordinator/liaison to establish a coordinated effort in this regard.** Immediately, they could spearhead the RAVE training and collection of cell numbers for the database, coordinate department communications, develop a template for an electronic newsletter, administer social media communications, and serve as the communications liaison for Bernards Township.

We, the Resident Members of the Communications Task Force, thank you for the opportunity to serve our township. We are grateful for the commitment and efforts of our task force colleagues, township administrators and staff that offered their time and expertise in this effort. Much time and research was put into this and we hope that our recommendations will be seriously considered as we close out 2019 and plan for 2020. “An engaged audience is a happy audience.”

Respectfully,
Rita Zarabara    Marie Young    Supreet Bains-Sharma    Julie Keating
Communications Task Force, Resident Members
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