

# Columbia Association Communications Strategy

## Introduction

**The purpose of the CA Communications Strategy is to positively impact the organization's brand and reputation through active engagement with the community, targeted messaging and in support of the organization's goals, and to provide access to relevant information about the organization, its programs and facilities.**

The Communications function has inherently responsive and reactive elements which are difficult if not impossible to anticipate. Recognizing those factors, we present this strategic framework that demonstrates the scope of the communications team's functions and the broad goals that this team has for delivering information and engaging with the community. Detailed implementation and operations plans will be created on a quarterly basis to remain as timely and relevant as possible while still being prepared. Processes and structures for implementing such activities are presented in this strategy document.

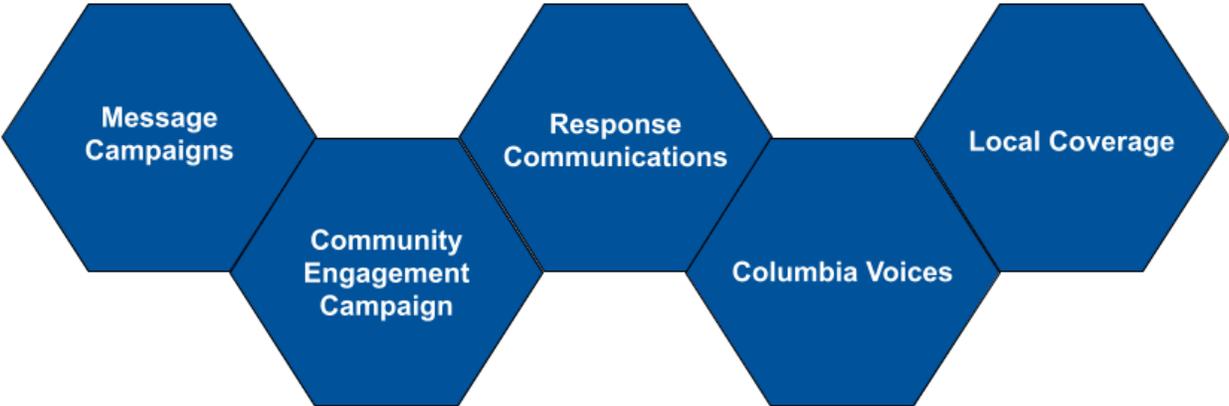
We propose the following strategic objectives for CA's Communications team to guide our planning and implementation of communications activities:

- 1. To continuously align Columbia Association with the expressed reasons that the Columbia community is a great place be.**
  - 2. To create and manage a longitudinal mechanism (twice yearly) to robustly assess sentiment, awareness and priorities in the community.**
  - 3. To establish and follow consistent principles for rapid, impactful and strategic response to issues of public interest and concern.**
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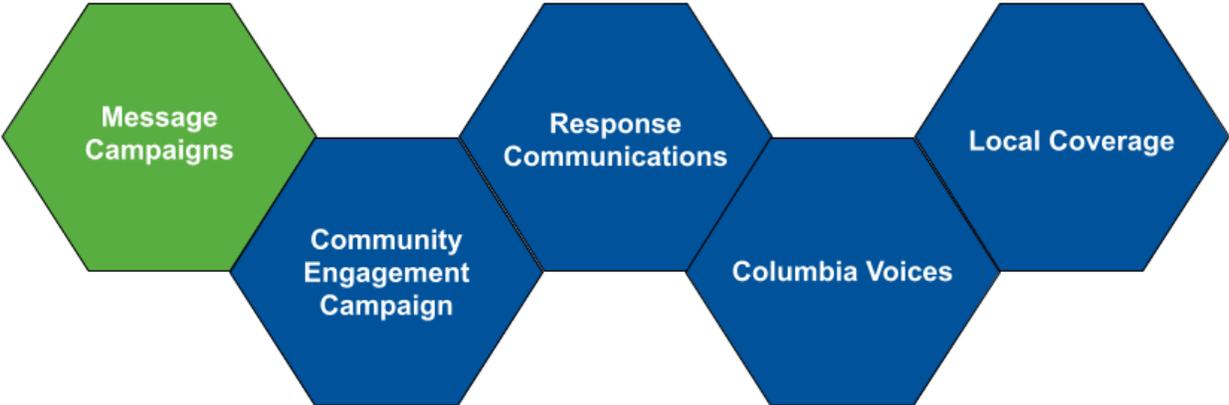
## Strategy Framework

The Communications Strategy is made of five core elements which can be considered separately but which have some clear areas of interdependence. Each element is introduced and broadly described below, with further details provided in the remainder of this document.



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## A. Message Campaigns

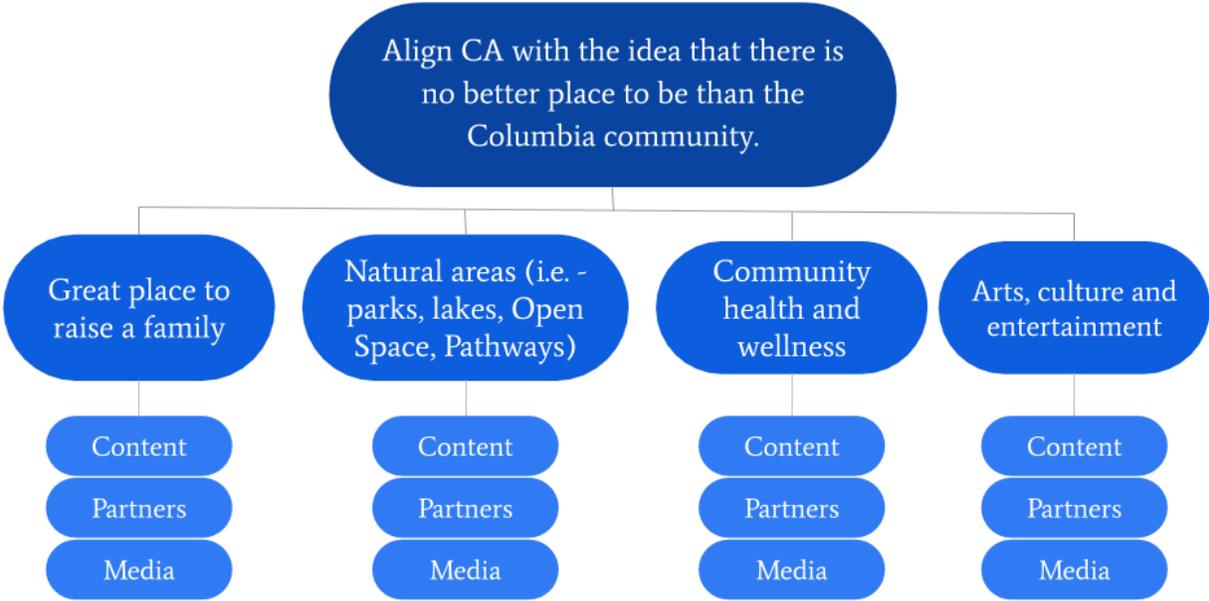


The purpose of the core Message Campaigns is to continuously align Columbia Association with the perception and belief that there is no better place to be than the Columbia community.

This strategy relies on the deep connection between the quality of life in Columbia for residents, visitors and employees and the range of assets, programs and facilities provided and managed by Columbia Association. It contends that Columbia’s quality of life is dependent on the existence and operation of CA, and that CA is built on the unique qualities, features and history of the area.

To achieve this, we identify several key features and reasons for this quality of life, and build a set of “Message Campaigns” (see below for structure and definition of these campaigns) that support this connection between the Columbia community as a place and CA as an organization. It does **not** require that every advantage Columbia has as a community is directly and wholly related to a tangible service or asset provided by CA. Rather, we seek to subtly and repetitively create such cognitive connections.

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For example, the notion that Columbia is an excellent place to raise a family is based on a range of factors, with the individual contribution of each of these factors resonating in a unique way with any given resident. Factors may include the general sense of safety, access to quality outdoor spaces, a variety of commercial establishments catering to family needs, excellent schools and cost of living. Our messaging campaign in this area focuses equally on the investments made by CA in tot lots and parks, the availability of school age programs (CA and others) and small businesses within village centers and shopping districts from ice cream vendors to indoor trampoline parks. We have an opportunity to highlight our own programs and facilities alongside others, continuously connecting such features of the community to the core quality of life reason, in this case - a great place to raise a family.

This messaging strategy is organized around these identified “reasons”, and we expect to have managed Message Campaigns for 3 to 5 of these reasons at any given time, which may be swapped out for the sake of maintaining freshness of content and connecting with the broadest possible audience over the long-term.

## Message Campaign Structure

Any given Message Campaign is structured according to three fundamental communications platforms available to us:

1. Direct Content
2. Partners

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## 3. Media

### Direct Content

Development and deployment of “content” directly to CA’s audiences is our primary communications tool that allows us to shape, define and deliver intentional messaging which informs and influences those target audiences.

Email, social media, direct mail, various forms of display (digital signage, physical signage, etc.) and our website (particularly blog content) constitute the primary vehicles for delivering content.

Content may be original and created wholly by ourselves, or it may be information and material provided by others and highlighted or amplified by CA.

### Partners

Columbia Association exists as part of a complex network of organizations including non-profits, government agencies and commercial entities that connect with our target audiences in a multitude of ways. Where there is alignment of objectives or coordination in the delivery of services, there is opportunity to enhance and increase the reach of our message campaigns. In addition, the reinforcement or amplification of our message by other parties increases trust and confidence.

### Media

Coverage of CA by media organizations is to be expected and generally welcomed, though is the channel that provides the least amount of message control. The definition of “media” for the purposes of this strategy includes traditional outlets (local and regional / newspaper, magazine, radio, television) as well as several blogs dedicated to coverage of the local community (Columbia and Howard County).

A proactive message strategy that seeks to use the extended reach of these channels and their independent voice involves relationship-building, story pitches and press releases, and in some cases the direct provision of content.

Management of media in response or reaction to their independent coverage (i.e. outside the scope of our intended messaging campaigns) is addressed in Section C - Response Communications.

### Planning and Implementation

Implementation of Message Campaigns is based around quarterly Plans (calendar year) that include message and content calendars, partner engagement and media pitches. The specific structural details for these quarterly Plans will be developed during the first

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quarter of 2021, with a proposed completion date of mid-February for the April to June 2021 Plan.

## Content Calendar

A social media, email, blog and digital signage calendar will include details of content to be developed and deployed through these channels, allowing the Communications team to work efficiently with support resources such as in-house graphic design and program / facility teams across the organization. All internal stakeholders will have access to this shared calendar to ensure clarity and coordination.

## Partner Engagements

For each “reason” (see above), a targeted group of partner organizations, or in some cases, individuals in the community, will be engaged in the planning phase of each quarterly Plan to determine shared goals and options for communications activities.

This may include exploration of new programmatic or event-based activities or simply the highlighting of such activities already in place. We will seek opportunities to overlap and reinforce content that is beneficial to both organizations.

## Media Pitches

Coverage of CA activities and programs by media organizations is not subject to our internal planning. However we are able to “pitch” stories and news to such organizations to increase the likelihood that stories and events that reflect CA in a positive light will be covered.

## January to March, 2021

In the absence of a structured plan for the first three months of 2021 (since the processes for creating such a plan will be under development during that time), the Communications team will work to reflect the approach described as far as possible. In fact, preliminary content calendars already exist to provide guidance to the publication of content through CA’s main social media and email channels.

Partner relationships have been established and we will explore opportunities in the first few months to cross-promote and share content and audiences. Equally, media relationships have been nurtured during the last few months of 2020, and opportunities do exist to pitch targeted stories at the beginning of 2021.

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## B. Community Engagement Campaign (Twice Yearly)



The purpose of the biannual Community Engagement Campaign is to create a well-resourced and well-planned survey (broadly defined) of community **sentiment**, **awareness** and **priorities**, which is repeated twice per year and therefore comparative from campaign to campaign.

This campaign will be formally implemented for a full calendar month, six months apart in April and October, though mechanisms will be created to allow for ongoing collection of input between campaigns.

The existence of this community engagement process on a regular basis provides CA with longitudinal data to determine trends and respond to changes in the community's understanding and awareness of CA's programs and resources.

By setting targets and goals for the number and diversity of respondents and participants, CA will ensure that insights that emerge from the campaign are representative of the views of the community. Participation will be sought from a cross-section of community members across:

- Age and other demographics
- Geography
- Stakeholder groups (residents, members / non-members, business owners, employees, non-profit organizations, etc.)

Input from the community will be collected via a standard long-form survey (larger number of participants) and a series of focus groups facilitated by CA's Communications team.

Results from the engagement campaign will go through appropriate analysis, and summaries and top-line results will be made public. Comprehensive results will provide

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a valuable input into organizational and programmatic decisions and Board deliberations.

The promotional strategy for inviting targeted audiences to participate in survey and focus group activities will be associated with the publication of a biannual “brochure” (printed and digitally distributed as demand and cost constraints allow), which will provide engaging highlights of the impact of CA in the Columbia community.

## Planning and Implementation

Each campaign will be implemented in three broad phases.

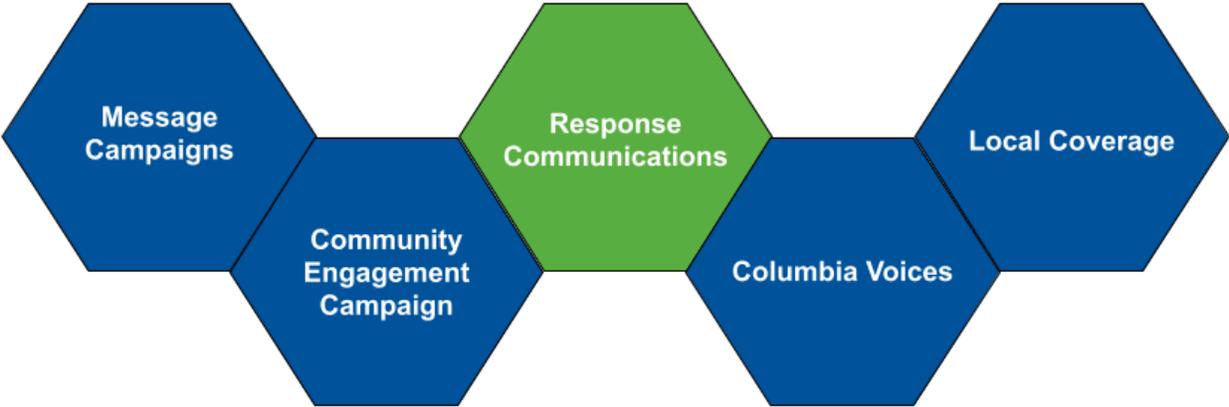
1. Development of published brochure
2. Survey collection and focus groups
3. Analysis and publication of results

It is anticipated that the first Community Engagement Campaign will take place in April 2021. As the first such event, projections around participation numbers and the promotion / logistics involved to achieve targeted outcomes are necessarily approximate. Statistically, a response rate of around 400 to 500 is sufficient to attain a representative sample, but our goal is to have up to 1,000 people complete the survey during any given cycle.

Focus groups provide an opportunity to engage in a more dynamic, detailed and nuanced way with representatives from the community. Our goal for the first event is to engage with up to 50 people from across the various geographic and demographic groups to ensure coverage.

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## C. Response Communications



For all the effort that goes into planning message campaigns and various forms of community engagement, there are many events and situations that are unanticipated, unplanned or unpredictable. Not all such unanticipated events have the potential to have a negative impact on the organization, though many do.

CA’s communications strategy includes protocols and practices to navigate such situations, optimizing the public relations and messaging environment from beginning to end.

While the nature of situations that require a response from CA are, by definition, unable to be planned in detail, the following principles are intended to guide our communications efforts:

### Perspective

Above all, our objective is to maintain CA’s long-term brand and reputation for the purpose of maintaining trust and viability as a foundational part of the Columbia community. With an audience and constituency that measures in the hundreds of thousands, we need to acknowledge that there will always be individuals and stakeholders that vocally disagree with elements of the organization’s position, operations and prioritization, and it cannot be our goal that every person in the community has a positive view of the organization.

Equally important is the fact that not every dramatic or negative sentiment will make a meaningful impact, measured by spread or longevity, and in many cases, a lack of response is the optimal path to avoid unintentionally elevating small issues beyond what would have otherwise occurred.

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For an organization that has existed for over half a century, taking a long-term view means responding to and addressing only those issues that risk impacting our ability to continue to provide valuable services and facilities to the community.

### Accuracy

In public relations and communications, trust is the cornerstone of reputation, and we must always take care to address issues with the facts on our side and a minimum of spin. It is just as important to ensure the spread of misinformation is contained to the best of our ability.

### Speed

While acknowledging the importance of taking an appropriate long-term view, news moves very quickly, particularly where there is drama and the perception of conflict or friction. In situations where a response campaign is warranted, our communications efforts need to move as quickly as possible to maintain relevance and impact.

### Objectivity

CA will continue to do our best to share information with everyone in the Columbia community. We recognize the diversity and complexity of the community as an inherent strength, and we will strive to ensure equal access to our communications and equal opportunity to get involved in engagement processes.

### Tact

When situations are emotionally-charged, it can tempt any person or organization to interact in a way that exacerbates those emotions. We remain cautious and calculated in our responses, understanding that combatting feelings with fact can be a fruitless battle. CA will be intentional and not impulsive when it comes to addressing anger, misconceptions, harsh criticisms and slanderous comments. We reserve our own emotional statements for times when they are merited on behalf of our community.

### Confidence

CA provides unparalleled value to the Columbia community, and criticisms or conflict that arise in the public space around it's operations and impact must be considered in light of the massive positive contribution that it has made to the health and wellness and general quality of life of so many.

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This impact is testament to the goodwill and support that CA has received from the many thousands of residential households, members, customers and visitors who have made use of the facilities and programs offered by the organization.

In engaging in responsive communications, this reality must be the starting point for the statements and positions that we take, along with the knowledge that CA will continue to provide this value for years and decades to come.

## Managing Responses

While applying the above principles in pursuing responsive communications activities, there remains a certain level of instinct, experience and judgment that must be applied, and no two situations are ever the same. While this reality prevents us from mapping out a simple playbook, we seek to calibrate our tactics and approach by applying a tiered approach that takes into account the severity, impact and context of any given situation:

**Level 1** - A situation is monitored, but no direct response is necessary

- Situations that may merit a level 1 response
  - Small groups of individuals talking negatively about CA on online forums
  - Local blog post about CA
- Tools to utilize in level 1 responses
  - N/A
- Other considerations
  - Our ability to monitor the conversations happening in the community regarding CA is an essential part of understanding what needs to be addressed in our communications strategy in the future and where opportunities exist to celebrate our successes in the public eye.

**Level 2** - Calculated response is beneficial

- Situations that may merit a level 2 response
  - Addressing misinformation and criticisms in persistent online conversations involving a significant number of people
  - Local blog post about CA
- Tools to utilize in level 2 responses
  - Social media
  - Community conversations
  - Reaching out to media contacts for positive coverage
  - Blog posts
  - Digital signage
- Other considerations

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- These are the situations that are not inherently damaging to CA when it comes to public perception, but there may be opportunities to engage people and invite critics to get involved in CA processes.

### **Level 3** - Rapid, significant response is needed

- Situations that may merit a level 3 response
  - Clear and present danger to the public at our facilities or on our Open Space
  - Severe damage to CA's core brand, values and reputation
  - Correction of misinformation in a major news outlet
- Tools to utilize in level 3 responses
  - Press releases and media events
  - Blog posts
  - Social media
  - SMS systems
  - Email
- Other considerations
  - These priority initial reactions may grow into Special Campaigns (see next section) if the communications team identifies an ongoing, enduring and coordinated need to respond.

### Special Campaigns

In cases where a situation is particularly significant or sensitive, we need to shift from a purely responsive approach to one in which we create and implement a more defined strategy. Such efforts will be labeled "Special Campaigns".

These campaigns require us to formulate unique communications strategies and calendars. In 2021, we have identified:

- COVID-19
- FY2022 budget process
- Symphony of Lights
- New President/CEO search

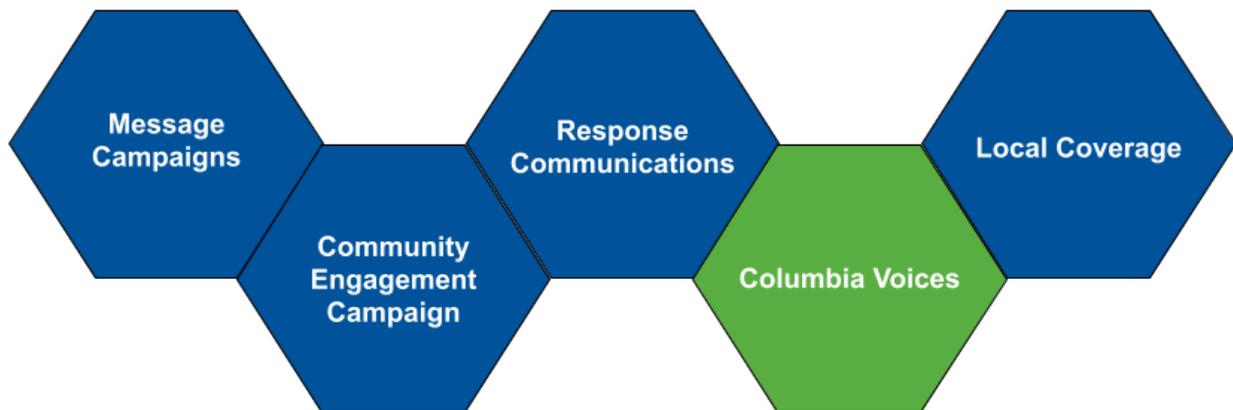
Each Special Campaign is necessarily unique with respect to timelines, triggers, tone and the tools used to engage in the public discussion. However, any issue that is significant enough to warrant the formation of a Special Campaign will require the articulation of objectives and a broad campaign description, talking points made available to Board members (updated as required by the situation), and at least one cornerstone blog article that may be referred to in all content and communications.

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Some of these Campaigns can be mapped out while others have planned reactions/responses that go into motion at certain points in the process. For instance, we have a good understanding of the schedule for the FY2022 budget, while much of the Symphony of Lights strategy is triggered by legal decisions that we cannot predict or control. The same goes for COVID-19, changes in guidelines and spikes in cases.

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## D. Columbia Voices



The purpose of CA’s Columbia Voices initiative is to maintain a continuous channel of two-way communication between the organization and stakeholders, particularly focused on listening and gathering customer and resident feedback.

This engagement is grounded in two basic concepts.

First, engaging the community on multiple levels is the most logical way to **build a sense of community between CA and its audience**. That requires interaction on various platforms, a two-way conversation that addresses questions associated with customer service, conveys an awareness of what’s going on in the community and a desire to be involved in people’s lives.

Second, being reliable with our day-to-day responses helps us **foster an environment of trust and accountability** for our organization.

The set of actions and mechanisms that make up Columbia Voices is distinct from the twice-yearly Community Engagement Campaign, which seeks to capture a repeated and comparable set of community data points focused on sentiment, awareness and priorities, with an engagement framework carefully defined by CA.

### CA-Selected Topics

While CA is ready and willing to engage with stakeholders on any issue of relevance to them at any time, we will provide a framework of topic areas in which CA will “seed” discussion with content designed to encourage community input.

The purpose of this is to generate community input in areas that may not be otherwise strongly considered by a wide audience, but which have broad relevance to the delivery of services, and are impactful to the community as a whole.

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It is intended that the CA communications team manage this on a monthly basis, planning themes in advance to be addressed in a given calendar month. Examples of topics which may be covered through this program include:

- Community resources (pathways and parks)
- Environmental stewardship
- Local development
- Diversity / Equity / Inclusion
- CA Programs & Facilities
- Community health and wellness
- Civic participation
- Schools and school programs
- Arts and culture
- Economic development
- Small business
- Ageing and retirement

A combination of content delivered through social media and email newsletters, partner channels, rich website content, handouts, brochures and flyers will be pushed out to the community with the express purpose of generating comments and input through various mechanisms such as online forms, email and surveys / questionnaires.

### Community-Selected Topics

Equally important is being responsive to the community in all the ways that they choose to reach out to us. Enhancements to the CA website are required to create a more user friendly “Contact Us” functionality, with clear descriptions of our processes for receiving and responding to input.

Standards that we are setting in place in the immediate term include:

- Social media messages - Direct messages to our CA social media pages (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) should get a response **within 48 hours**.
- Social media mentions - Mentions/tags on social media should be acknowledged **within 48 hours**. That could be a response, a like or other means of letting that user know we appreciate the interaction.
- Social media comments - Comments on our social media pages should be **monitored daily**, gaging for opportunities to positively interact with the public or respond to criticism with ways to get involved.
- Emails to CA Communications - We should be responding to emails **within 48 hours**.

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## Community Outreach

In addition, and subject to freedom to gather and meet the community based on COVID presence and protocols, we will undertake efforts to initiate in-person contact and conversation in places where people are. This may include some form of booth setup in village centers, shopping centers, CA facilities and similar locations. The purpose of these setups will be to invite and welcome spontaneous and in-depth conversations, distribute collateral materials and answer questions or direct inquiries to an appropriate CA team member.

We believe that this initiative is a valuable opportunity for CA staff at all levels and in all roles to engage directly with the public and better understand their perspectives on topics of importance to them. We will draw on the deep experience of the Customer and Member Service Center Team as we prepare for the early outreach efforts (most likely in Q2 2021).

At the conclusion of each month's activity, CA will collect and summarize all feedback collected and synthesize the results into a brief report to be provided to Senior Leadership, the CA Board and the community.

## Resident Speakout

The currently available Resident Speakout mechanism is an underutilized process for directly providing input to the Board. A campaign will be developed to encourage use of this channel with the addition of options for submitting content.

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## E. Local Coverage



While there are significant proactive and reactive components to the CA Communications Strategy as described in the preceding sections, there remains the need for CA to engage in the more informal, daily chatter that relates to the random and low-key issues and events around the community.

This speaks to our ability to share and react to information that's of general interest to our community that doesn't necessarily fall into categories that align CA with the identified factors ("reasons") that make the Columbia community a great place to be. It provides the flexibility to demonstrate to stakeholders that we are in touch with what's happening in the Columbia community outside of CA.

This may include things like:

- Sharing news stories that are connected to CA's values
- Cross promotion of events happening in Howard County that are of general interest
- Passing along announcements from Columbia and Howard County leaders
- Highlighting efforts by our community partners
- Celebrating the people of Columbia

Examples of such content that we have recently published includes:

- Highlights of an educational initiative provided by the Howard County Library System
- A celebration of National Ugly Sweater Day (to encourage the community to share user generated content)
- A donation made by the Rotary Club of Columbia Town Center to senior care facilities
- Celebration of a publishing achievement by a Clarksville Middle School student

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Implementation of this strategy requires sustained work by the Communications team to maintain awareness of things that are happening around the community by tracking social media, newsletters and working with partners. We will maintain a regular cadence of posts (1 to 2 per day) in social media against a set of standard categories and styles.

### Parameters

The selection of items, organizations, events and issues to cover is at the discretion of the CA Communications team, and we will seek to highlight content that aligns with the values of the community and which contributes positively to the public discourse.

Our efforts in this area will not be advertised or promoted, nor do we claim to offer access to our communications channels by right.