

Communications is a Two-Way Street

At recent Town Hall meetings hosted by South Haven City Council, “improved communications between the city and the community members” was voiced as an item of concern. What does the City do to communicate with its citizens? Where can the citizens find information concerning city activities? How can the City and the citizens mutually assist in exchanging information?

The City of South Haven staff and officials continue to make communications with the citizens a top priority. Numerous changes and additions to communications efforts have been made over the past few years. Staff and officials continue to try to create new ways to reach the public. They realize they have an obligation of making information available in a consistent, reliable manner. Staff and officials also realize they cannot possibly anticipate each citizen’s questions nor send out all information in a practical manner. This is where the citizen must be proactive and claim responsibility. The citizen must seek out the information of which he/she is inquiring. By all means, stay informed.

So, in what ways is the City of South Haven taking responsibility and offering information to the public? Let’s begin with actions required by state law. The Michigan Open Meetings Act requires that City Council, Planning Commission and the Zoning Board of Appeals must publicly post a list stating the dates, times and places of all its regular meetings within 10 days of the first meeting of a public body in each calendar or fiscal year. Special meetings require posting a notice 18 hours before the meetings. Also per State regulation, public hearing notices pertaining to zoning and planning meetings must adhere to specific publishing requirements. State law requires that certain meeting notices are to be published in the local newspaper. Per City Charter, each ordinance is published within ten days after its enactment.

Beyond state and city requirements, city staff initiates methods to make information available to the public. The following paragraphs explain these methods.

Meeting agendas are the most requested item of information. Agendas can be found in the enclosed bulletin boards at the front and back doors of City Hall. Also in City Hall, meeting agendas may be obtained from city department staff. The city web site calendar posts dates, times and agendas of city meetings.

In what other ways does staff make information available? Another way in which the public is informed is via the local government access channel 21. City Council regular meetings and workshops as well as Planning Commission and Zoning Board of Appeals meetings are broadcast live. City Council regular meetings are also replayed on Wednesdays and Fridays at noon and 7:00 p.m. These meeting dates are posted on the channel each month. The channel also

gives notices of city reminders such as leaf and snow removal; City Hall contact info; and Council approved non-profit organization events.

The city website (www.south-haven.com) offers another avenue to glean information. It has primarily been focused on being a resource for city records, such as agendas and minutes, and announcements of meetings. A link can be found to view legal notices. Numerous documents can be found in the “Document Center” and the current City Council agenda and minutes are easily accessible from the home page.

The City newsletter, *City Waves*, is published monthly and sent with the utility bills. The newsletter includes a calendar of upcoming meetings and city newsworthy items.

The brochure rack and bulletin board in City Hall offers information about city activities, meetings, and community activities in a non-solicitation form.

Of course as a citizen of the city, you may contact the mayor, your city council representative or city hall staff by calling, writing, or emailing. All contact information of City Council representatives and City employees are available on the city web site, city hall service counter, or you may call the main office (637-0700) to get the contact information you need. In fact, the Mayor holds regular office hours each Thursday between 8 a.m. – 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. – 5 p.m. at City Hall. Citizens may drop in to speak one-on-one with the Mayor.

Another way a citizen may keep informed is to attend meetings of the City Council or boards/commissions/authorities. These meetings are open to the public. Meeting dates and times are posted at City Hall and on the web site. If a citizen cannot attend a meeting, minutes are posted on the web site or can be obtained from city staff.

The definition of “communications” as it pertains to this article is “an exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, signals, writing, or behavior”. Given all of the above methods that the City of South Haven is implementing to make information available to the public, it seems that the definition of the word is being utilized. But, please note the word “exchange” in the definition. Wouldn’t “exchange” imply that someone on the receiving end take action in order to create an exchange?

This is a call to all citizens to be proactive in gaining information about your city government. The City of South Haven will continue to make the information available to you using all of the following methods:

- City Council meetings
- Boards/commissions/authorities meetings
- *City Waves* newsletter

- City TV channel 21
- City Hall bulletin boards
- City web site (www.south-haven.com)
- City of South Haven officials & staff
- Local media (newspaper & radio)

We will consider any suggestions you may have of other means of communicating. Will you reach out and seek information to fulfill the communications exchange with your city government?