

# MAYOR & COUNCIL AGENDA COVER SHEET

**MEETING DATE:**

June 2, 2008

**CALL TO PODIUM:**

**Britta Monaco, Public Information Director**

**RESPONSIBLE STAFF:**

**Britta Monaco**

**AGENDA ITEM:**

(please check one)

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Presentation
	Proclamation/Certificate
	Appointment
	Public Hearing
	Historic District
	Consent Item
	Ordinance
	Resolution
	Policy Discussion
	Work Session Discussion Item
	Other:

**PUBLIC HEARING HISTORY:**

(Please complete this section if agenda item is a public hearing)

Introduced	
Advertised	
Hearing Date	
Record Held Open	
Policy Discussion	

**TITLE:**

Presentation of Draft Media Policy for City Employees

**SUPPORTING BACKGROUND:**

The Public Information Director's Workplan for FY 2008, which was developed in the Spring of 2007 in conjunction with the former City Manager, included the organization of media training for key City staff. The training was designed to help staff understand the needs of the various types of news outlets (print, radio and broadcast) and provide them with tools and techniques to help them feel more comfortable when interacting with the media. It was held in December, 2007.

Feedback from staff following the training pointed to the need for clearer direction for all staff on media interaction. The Public Information Office was asked by the Acting City Manager to create a media policy that would address areas such as media relations, guidelines for interacting with the press, responding to media inquiries, requests for public records, media relations in emergency situations, guidelines for employees communicating with the media as private citizens, news media and commercial photographer access to facilities, correction of misinformation, dissemination of news, and media training opportunities.

After drawing on media policies from other municipalities around the country and receiving input from the Communications Committee, the Public Information Director presented a draft City of Gaithersburg media policy to the Senior Leadership Team and City Attorney in March of 2008. Staff comments were incorporated and a revised draft was provided to the Mayor and Council on May 20.

The media policy is an administrative document, not a City Ordinance. While it does not require formal adoption by the Mayor and City Council, sections of the policy may provide guidance to them, so their comments have been requested. Once all comments have been reviewed it will be distributed to City employees with their paychecks, at which time it will be considered in effect.

**DESIRED OUTCOME:**

**Hear presentation**

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## City of Gaithersburg Media Policy

### **I. Purpose**

To provide procedures and guidelines for coordinating and disseminating information to the public.

### **II. Policy Goals**

Promote an open relationship with the media, based on professional respect for their needs and recognition of their role as one of the most effective means of communicating with citizens.

Facilitate timely media access to accurate public information.

Provide an effective internal process that maximizes message consistency, factual accuracy and advocacy of the City's message.

### **III. Scope**

This policy applies to all City of Gaithersburg staff, Mayor and City Council, and appointed members of City Boards, Commissions and Committees.

Nothing in this policy shall be construed to contradict federal, state or municipal law. Activities which are deemed protected under such law are not prohibited.

### **IV. Media Relations**

#### **A. Primary City Contact**

The City of Gaithersburg's Public Information Officer (PIO) acts as a central resource for the media, facilitating access to the appropriate person for the information requested. This process enables the PIO to coordinate with reporters and staff to ensure deadlines are honored and to manage follow-up questions, controversial issues and photography requests. The Police Department PIO serves in the same capacity for police-related issues.

Assistant City Managers, Department or Division Directors or their designees serve as media contacts in the absence of the PIO.

#### **B. Spokesperson**

Generally there will be one spokesperson designated for response to each inquiry. For citywide issues, the spokesperson will most often be the City Manager or PIO. For department-related issues, the spokesperson will most often be the Department or Division Director or his or her designee. The spokesperson will work directly with the PIO to ensure that information for specific media issues is communicated appropriately. The City Manager and PIO should be consulted before conducting interviews regarding controversial or high public interest matters. The Police Chief and/or Police PIO should also notify the City Manager and PIO prior to conducting significant media interviews unless emergency circumstances preclude such advance notification.

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## **C. Elected Official and Volunteer Responsibilities and Guidelines**

Council, Commission and Committee members respond to media inquiries at their own discretion and should realize that the media is contacting them as a community representative. Members should declare if their response is on behalf of the entire Council, Commission or Committee, or if they are speaking as an individual. Whenever possible, Council members and Commissioners are strongly encouraged to notify the City Manager or PIO when they have been approached by the media. The PIO is available to assist with responding to media inquiries.

Traditionally, the Mayor and Council have made a practice of being accessible to the media and have provided their contact numbers directly to the media. Every attempt will be made to encourage the press to contact them directly on Council policies and issues. Council Members' work and home phone numbers cannot be given to the media unless directed by the Council Member. The PIO is available to facilitate communication between the Council and the media if needed.

## **D. City Employee Responsibilities and Guidelines**

City employees should immediately notify their supervisor or Department or Division Director of significant or controversial events or issues that occur and may be of interest to the general public.

Employees may respond directly to a media inquiry regarding routine, factual information relating specifically to his/her function. However, follow-up questions from the reporter should be referred to the Department or Division Director or PIO.

If the inquiry involves policy issues, the staff member should only respond after direction to do so from his/her Department or Division Director and with the Director's knowledge of the response.

All requests for information about criminal incidents or investigations should be referred to the Police Department PIO.

### ***1. Routine Media Requests***

Routine requests may be responded to by any employee if the response is of a factual or incidental nature.

Routine media requests include information such as hours of operation, schedule for a special event, City population, etc.

### ***2. Non-routine Media Requests***

All non-routine media requests should be forwarded to the Department or Division Director and PIO prior to response. These requests may include responses that require the interpretation of policy, employee information and emergency situations.

## **E. Department and Division Directors' Responsibilities and Guidelines**

Department and Division Directors should, in a timely manner, notify the City Manager and PIO of significant events that occur within their departments that may be of major interest to the general public. The City Manager will determine the appropriateness of contacting the Mayor and City Council. Examples include but are not limited to:

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- Positive activities such as programs and employees receiving awards.
- Major malfunctions of City equipment or facility infrastructure that could impact the general welfare of the public, environment or ability to provide service.
- Injury, serious illness or death of an employee or patron at a facility.
- An unexpected work stoppage or inability to provide a critical City service.
- Personnel matters, including termination or arrest of an employee.

Upon receiving a media inquiry that requires additional information which the PIO is unable to provide, the inquiry will be forwarded to the appropriate Department or Division Director. The Department or Division Director may choose to forward the inquiry to a staff member. The PIO is available to work with the Department or Division Director or his or her designee to help develop a response.

## **F. Responding to Media Inquiries**

If an employee who is not designated as a spokesperson is contacted by the media, he or she should refer the call to either the Department or Division Director or PIO. A proper response to this type of inquiry is:

- “Thank you for calling. I want to be sure you have the most accurate information, so let me put you through to (Department or Division Director or PIO).”
- Ask which media outlet (newspaper, TV station, radio station, etc.) the caller is with, the story’s focus, the reporter’s deadline and the story publication date so you can provide this information to the Department or Division Director or PIO.

Media inquiries should be responded to within a reasonable time frame. If a considerable amount of research time will be necessary, a courtesy call should be placed to let the inquiring media know when a response might be anticipated.

Employees should only respond to inquiries within their purview. They should not respond to matters that do not directly relate to their professional responsibility for the City.

If time is needed to compose a response, it is appropriate for the employee to tell the reporter he or she will call them back. Employees should then do so in a timely manner.

Other general guidelines include:

- Media inquiries regarding sensitive and controversial issues pertaining to internal operations of the City organization should be forwarded to the City Manager, who will communicate with the PIO, Department or Division Directors and/or City officials to develop appropriate response strategies for each issue and determine an appropriate spokesperson.
- Employees should not make judgmental comments, particularly about individual Council Members, Council actions or official City policy. Any inquiry regarding “why” an individual Council Member/Commissioner voted in a particular manner on a specific issue should be forwarded to the Council Member/Commissioner in question.

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- Staff should refrain from anticipating an action or position that has not yet been formally taken by the Mayor and Council or Planning Commission.
- Employees should not offer legal opinions on City policies or activities.
- Staff members should not respond to media inquiries regarding issues currently under litigation or relating to threatened litigation. Such inquiries should be referred to the City Attorney.
- Matters dealing with employee/personnel actions are confidential and should not be discussed with the media.
- Employees should provide media interviews only after approval by the Department or Division Director and PIO. Procedures for employees of the Gaithersburg Police Department are detailed in General Order 1201.1 – Media Relations and Public Information.
- Employees may not release to the media documents, memos, letters, e-mails or other communications that are not part of the public record.

## **V. Public Records Requests**

Requests for public documents from the media or general public must be made in writing in accordance with the Maryland Public Information Act. Any request, with the exception of requests for routine documents, must be immediately forwarded to the City Attorney and copied to the PIO. Requests will be responded to or fulfilled as soon as practical and at least within the 30-day time frame required by the Maryland Public Information Act. Please note that the City can charge a reasonable copying fee and for staff time in excess of two hours should that be necessary to research, compile and copy the documents. Please see the City Attorney for the fee schedule.

## **VI. Emergency Media Relations and Critical Incidents**

In the event of a disaster or emergency, the City Manager, Chief of Police, PIO and/or Police Department PIO will coordinate primary media relations efforts on behalf of the City of Gaithersburg. If other non-City agencies are involved (Montgomery County Police, Montgomery County Fire & Rescue, etc.), the lead agency is responsible for providing or coordinating the release of public information.

Please refer to the Gaithersburg Police Department Public Information Office policy for appropriate procedures.

## **VII. Guidelines for Employees Acting as Private Citizens**

The following guidelines are offered to employees who may choose to contact the media as a private citizen. These guidelines do not prohibit such contact but support other City policies deemed necessary by state and federal law regarding improper use of City equipment and property.

- Letters to the Editor may not be prepared on City time, printed on City letterhead stationery, or mailed at City expense.
- Telephone contact may not be made on City time using City telephones.

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- Use of City e-mail is prohibited.
- Use of City facilities or supplies is prohibited.
- Responses or letters cannot include the employee's official title or imply that the response is on behalf of the City of Gaithersburg.
- Statements made to the media cannot be made on City time.

## **VIII. Media and Commercial Photography**

If an employee is contacted by a representative of the public or the media requesting access to a public facility to videotape or take photographs for information or editorial purposes, employees should inquire as to the nature of the story, what they want to shoot, what the timing will be, and when the piece will air or be used in print. Contact the PIO with this information. Provided access does not unreasonably interfere with operations, access will not reasonably be denied. Model releases are not necessary unless the subjects are under 18, in which case parental permission is required.

Photography or videography for commercial purposes by non-news personnel (i.e., photographs that will be used in a retail sales brochure or magazine ad, video for a TV commercial or documentary, etc.) require written permission and waivers of liability. Model and location releases must be obtained before shooting is allowed. Employees should refer these requests to the PIO.

## **IX. Correcting Misinformation**

The City of Gaithersburg has the right to clarify any information released by the media that contains factual inaccuracies or quotes taken out of context relating to a City issue.

### **A. Factual Discrepancies**

The PIO may contact the media when a story has been published or aired containing factual error that significantly impacts the public's perception of the issue being addressed. Department and Division Directors are encouraged to notify the PIO when they believe incorrect information is being communicated by the press regarding a City of Gaithersburg issue or program.

### **B. Editorial Discrepancies**

Department and Division Directors should contact the PIO when there is evidence that a specific editorial comment or news story does not appropriately represent a balanced perspective of the issue being discussed. The City Manager, in consultation with the PIO, will determine if an official rebuttal or response is appropriate.

## **X. Dissemination of News**

### **A. News Releases**

News releases will be prepared and issued electronically or by fax by the City PIO or designee. The Police Department PIO may also issue press releases, copying the City PIO when releases are sent. The City PIO and Police Department PIO are responsible for maintaining their respective media contact lists.

City news releases will be distributed to the Mayor and City Council immediately if the issue is time sensitive, or in their next reading packet if the matter is not urgent. Releases will be posted on the City's official website and will be provided for inclusion on the Cable TV bulletin board if appropriate.

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## **B. News Briefings**

News briefings may be conducted to educate the media about potentially controversial issues and provide reporters an opportunity to ask in-depth questions. In most briefings the City provides extensive background materials, fact sheets and explanatory materials. The PIO will be responsible for scheduling any such briefings.

## **C. News Conferences**

A news conference will be held at the direction of the City Manager or Mayor or designee to announce or respond to an issue of significance or controversy with a united voice pertaining to facts, information, rules, and emergency or crisis situations. It will be planned and coordinated by the PIO. A spokesperson for the news conference will be selected by the City Manager, or, if appropriate by circumstances, the Mayor. Additional personnel who can provide background information and details may be required to attend. The Chief of Police may also conduct press conferences for issues relating to the Police Department. The Chief of Police should notify the City Manager, Mayor and PIO prior to holding such an event unless emergency circumstances preclude such advance notification.

## **XI. Media Relations Training**

The Public Information Office will coordinate media training for management and supervisory staff, elected officials and select volunteers on an as-needed basis.

*Draft 5/29/08*