June 22, 2018

CRCOG - Communications Plan
//Suggestions for Brand, Owned Media and Earned Media

It has been our pleasure to collect and analyze your brand sentiments. Through your focus groups, interviews and surveys, we have learned the thoughts, feelings and suggestions surrounding CRCOG's brand, outreach efforts and prospects. From the myriad insights, two themes have emerged that will guide this communications plan:

1. CRCOG is uniquely able to position itself as a key *efficiency, impact* and *economic* leader in the capital region, and such positioning would give CRCOG both added security and efficacy as a government agency.
2. CRCOG can scale its impact across all constituents by acting more like a public-facing organization in several key ways.

This document will focus on the action plan derived from the two thematic initiatives above. In the Branding section, we will address the pros and cons of CRCOG's branding and provide recommendations from your constituents. Then, we will discuss the variety and structure of recommended messaging and distribution through owned media. Finally, we will offer key suggestions for earned media in order to provide action items for further development.

The team at GEM is proud to serve as your strategic partner throughout these and other communications initiatives you undertake. We are committed to seeing CRCOG galvanize its role as a leader in governmental services in the capital region and beyond.

I.   Branding

A.   Naming and Logo

The elephant in the room for this initiative was CRCOG's identity itself. The question, "what do you think of CRCOG's branding?" elicited varying degrees of response from apathy (*there's nothing we can do about it*) to admonition (*we better do something about it*).

However, before we can even discuss brand, the key question throughout our discussions was, "to whom is CRCOG speaking?"

Throughout the groups, interviews and surveys, it became clear that CRCOG is a somewhat clandestine organization that doesn't have much of an identity even among its stated most valuable audiences: town officials and legislators. In fact, one legislator remarked that if he asked his own peers what a council of governments is – never mind what CRCOG is – he would likely get a wide variety of responses, few of which would be accurate.

Interestingly, some of the larger focus groups turned up noncommittal or varying answers about whether CRCOG should embrace or change its name and identity; meanwhile, smaller focus groups and private interviews emphatically suggested a wholesale rebranding, for the reasons stated above.

With that feedback, two questions arose:
1. How do we effectively reach town officials, legislators and other constituents, and
2. To what extent does CRCOG need to remain loyal to a brand for which there is no evidence of key-market penetration or even name association?

The pros of a rebrand include the opportunity to clarify CRCOG's purpose; communicate that a positive change is coming; reach out to town officials and legislators with a renewed communications strategy; and position itself as a public-facing entity. Throughout the feedback, it became clear that a public outreach program would be the most effective means to stay top-of-mind to town officials and legislators who are subject to turnover and inundated with constant communications. With a public-facing brand and strategy, CRCOG could leverage a broader communications and media effort to influence town officials and legislators—not only indirectly through resident activism, but directly by treating those audiences as members of the population rather than as a standalone market.

You can imagine, for instance, a combined effort that includes direct town official and legislator outreach, the likes of which we'll discuss later, coupled with the repetition of public-facing headlines about CRCOG's good work. Altogether, this will make for an effective means to control CRCOG's message – and its destiny as a public provider in the State of Connecticut.

As one economic development director in a focus group put it, "CRCOG should position itself to the public as 'we are your advocate.'" In fact, it was even suggested that CRCOG's projects *need* the public's engagement in order to be most effective.

That strategy would satisfy our first question about how to reach CRCOG's key markets, and practically satisfies the second question as well. If CRCOG's best communications efforts are public-facing, it follows that CRCOG would benefit from a rebranding *of sorts*. The big caveat we express here is that change is difficult, CRCOG is an historic institution, and there are many cons that will come up with regards to a rebrand.

Namely, the cons of a rebrand are in retraining those who *are* in the know that CRCOG is no longer CRCOG; dealing with any statute issues of rebranding or having a DBA; overcoming internal resistance to change; and, perhaps most importantly, convincing your decision-makers that a public-facing strategy is indeed your best hope for monetary and reputational gains over the next several decades, the negation of which would also cancel the need to rebrand in the first place.

That is why we recommend only an intermediary rebranding in which the "Capitol Region Council of Governments" stays in spirit as a tagline or byline, but that there is a new acronym or nickname that comes to symbolize CRCOG in the public and even governmental spheres. While a full rebrand is outside the scope of this document, such an undertaking would go a long way towards refreshing CRCOG, and the vast majority of respondents expressed interest in CRCOG changing its acronym and/or name to better symbolize its mission and purpose.

As for the rest of the branding – including a tagline, logo and color scheme – we heard almost unilaterally that it's time for a refresh. As noted, if "Capitol Region Council of Governments" becomes the byline, there shouldn't be the need for a tagline, particularly because the new name should say what CRCOG does in a more effective way. However, a new logo and color scheme should absolutely be created as part of this rebranding process, which will have positive trickle-down effects in subsequent suggestions.

While these types of rebrands can be laborious and have budgetary consequences – like signage and business cards – we know that the benefits of such a change far outweigh the costs. Particularly as you embark on this renewed communications effort, a rebrand is the perfect excuse to revisit your market with fresh excitement, a renewed commitment and a social signal that positive change is coming. For CRCOG especially, the rebrand will be an excuse to reach out to legislators, town officials and media partners and publicly double-down on your efforts to help save money for Connecticut's residents, both within the capital region

and outside of it. In short, rebranding will create this first wave of positive messaging and give CRCOG a valuable initial lift that it can use as a door-opener for things to come.

II.   Owned Media

Owned Media is a broad category that we used to define a variety of CRCOG communications initiatives that can provide extraordinary value to your constituents. We have divided our recommendations into two categories: Internal Communications and External Communications, and further into subdivisions according to their scope.

A. Internal Communications

Your internal focus group reflected a group of talented, respectful individuals who deeply care about CRCOG's mission and future. The group's recommendations covered a wide spectrum, from cultural improvements to tactical decisions about technology. Here are the highlights we deemed relevant and actionable for the purposes of this plan.

i.   Interdepartmental Communications

The group expressed a general feeling that departments act as siloes, to CRCOG's detriment. Even in the focus group itself, team members were discovering aspects of CRCOG, its work and its departments for the first time, making it clear that interdepartmental communication wasn't flowing as effectively as it could be.

At best, this shows up in CRCOG's communications as a fractured brand image and mismatching templates. At worst, it shows up in conflicting emails, too many disparate messages, and ultimately in market confusion – a sentiment we heard frequently in our other discussions.

The first step here is to first recognize that siloes exist and that CRCOG's team indeed wants to collaborate more efficiently and effectively for the benefit of all. Following are a few tactical ways to begin the process of bringing the CRCOG staff together into a single unit for better communications.

ii.   Meetings – Cadence and Agendas

One of the easiest tactics to implement with regards to internal communications is a structured meeting cadence involving monthly staff-wide meetings, weekly departmental meetings and daily "huddles." While developing such a system is beyond the scope of this document, we recommend the books *Traction* by Gino Wickman and *Meetings Suck* by Cameron Herold to begin to break down departmental barriers and get your team rowing in the same direction. This is by far one of the most cost-effective changes with maximum

impact in this plan, and we highly suggest that your meeting system be given extensive thought and immediate attention.

iii. Templates

As an obvious but not-to-be-missed strategy, we recommend creating templates and systems for every part of your communications efforts – be they digital, traditional, press releases or postcards alike. Wherever you can provide paint-by-numbers templates for staff members, you will get efficient work, economies of scale in your team's time and uniformity across all communications efforts. Though you will need many templates at the outset, undertaking this effort once will pay great dividends down the road, and it can be done in stages so as to not overwhelm CRCOG's budget or time commitment.

To begin this process, we recommend pulling relevant department heads together to understand what types of communications pieces they put together on a regular basis. With that list, we can prioritize based on frequency of use, ease of creation and other criteria to discover which templates should be given priority. As you'll see throughout this document, there are certain pieces – like a new newsletter template – that should absolutely be given priority. However, the creation of those pieces will heavily depend on a rebrand, which is why you'll see that initiative at the top of our to-do list at the back of this document.

iv. Culture and Technology

One piece of feedback we thought pertinent to include is that CRCOG could benefit from more communicative technologies, like an interoffice live chat feature. In fact, this was part of a broader ask we heard to bring the CRCOG team closer together as *people* as well as coworkers – and to that end, team members reported feeling more distant from each other in recent years as office functions and member outings have diminished. Typically, feedback like this wouldn't necessarily be included in a communications plan; however, we believe CRCOG has a very unique ability to act as a role model for its town members, showing them how a governmental entity can form a thriving culture for the benefit of providing even better products and services for all. Given that unique positioning, we believe there could be interesting dividends to making deliberate steps to improve not only CRCOG's external outreach, but its internal culture and communications as well.

Several staff members remarked that in many ways, CRCOG already had the technology it needed to create better synergies; however, varying levels of tech-savviness seemed to create inefficiencies. One staff member recommended having dedicated trainings, that could be staff-led, in order to get everyone onto a required standard for which pieces of technology were to be used in what circumstances. In fact, uniformity in general seemed to be lacking

when it came to internal technology and even procedural processes, with several staff members detailing inefficiencies in meetings, departmental siloes, being out of sync with scheduling, booking conference rooms and more. These gaps could easily be repaired with lunch-n-learn style educational meetings where staff members teach other staff members about technology, educate others on what's going on in each department, and otherwise have dedicated time to share important cross-departmental news. However, setting out strong, administrative guidelines for tech and culture must come from the top, and we highly recommend that CRCOG's leadership rework its technology ground rules, cultural guidelines and communication expectations in order to get the staff rowing in the same direction, as the staff eagerly desires.

When it came to CRCOG's external constituents, several senior members of your committees recommended emboldening the entire CRCOG staff and nurturing their entrepreneurial tendencies, both as a means to extract new ideas and as a way to offload the risk and responsibility from the shoulders of the elected officials that govern CRCOG. It was even stated that "the policy board isn't bold enough" as a reason why CRCOG has been prevented from creating necessary changes to date. One policy board member remarked that CRCOG should take the stance, "if I were going to design a government from scratch, here is what we would do," and that CRCOG should seek to create a streamlined change management process in which it brings model plans to the Executive Committee to get fast approval and fast implementation in more of a "lean startup" model.

This was an interesting idea that could satisfy two competing objectives; namely, the need to move CRCOG boldly forward into a leadership position while removing political risk from CRCOG members and governors. Throughout the focus groups, CRCOG's staff indeed had innumerable ideas to advance CRCOG into the organization it could be, which have seemed to be stifled by understandable political headwinds. Consciously removing these obstacles could provide the fuel CRCOG needs to institute change from the bottom up instead of burdening those at the top who understandably can't make drastic changes in their current positions.

v. Internal Resources

Finally, we heard a resounding sense of needing a dedicated marketing/PR/communications person to handle day-to-day communications tasks and be the central conductor for the rest of the team members. While the practical consideration of budgetary constraints is very real, we know that a highly competent person in such a role would be able to create massive value for the organization as a whole. In fact, a person highly trained in media relations alone could propel CRCOG to a level of awareness that would make

it indispensable to the State – a position which would secure CRCOG's funding in a substantial way.

The key here is to find the *right* person to lead this effort; a person who has the skills, experience *and* Connecticut contacts to both orchestrate CRCOG's communications deliverables and ensure that its efforts are noticed. While it is entirely possible and appropriate to begin CRCOG's communications efforts with a dedicated team member with moderate experience, we highly recommend hiring a key talent for this critical position within the next 12 months if possible.

In the meantime, there is much groundwork to be done that can absolutely be handled by current CRCOG staff and a competent agency. At the end of this document is a checklist of recommended items to consider and complete in the next 6 to 12 months, none of which require a new hire in order to complete. It should be noted that the priority of those tasks are entirely predicated on CRCOG's decision to embrace and/or prioritize certain parts of this plan, and we look forward to guiding you through those decisions in the next phase of this plan's implementation.

B. External Communications

This section will address the nuts and bolts of CRCOG's communications efforts – including how to reach its audiences and how to use the technologies and platforms available today to most efficiently and effectively communicate its message.

i. Core Messages

One of the most important strategic decisions CRCOG must make is what CRCOG will declare about itself and its core positioning. Throughout the focus groups, it was clear that CRCOG could benefit from being more well-known, giving CRCOG the opportunity to emerge in a refreshed identity of its own choosing. However, those options must address the delicate balance CRCOG has between being a strong regional player and being a behind-the-scenes provider to its complex arrangement of constituents.

There are certainly pros and cons to CRCOG positioning itself as a governmental leader in Connecticut. The primary benefit is to secure CRCOG's place as a primary governmental provider, thereby increasing its funding abilities. The primary downside is the alienation of some of CRCOG's constituents, including both the public and – by extension – elected officials who resist any hint of regionalism or even the use of the word. As one legislator bluntly put it, "elected officials are stuck between doing what they do best (protecting their fiefdoms) and needing to do things regionally."

Therefore, our recommendation for CRCOG's core positioning and messaging is:

- *Sharing and cooperating for the benefit of all.* CRCOG knows that when CT's residents, businesses, elected officials and legislators share resources and cooperate with one another, everyone will be better off. CRCOG can and should become the standard-bearer for this message of cooperation, and use their case studies and quantitative metrics to make this case repeatedly. Part of this cooperative message should tie into economic growth and the nurturing of the business community – because when the region cooperates and improves itself, businesses will start, arrive and thrive, yielding more jobs and prosperity in the region.

- *Focused on how to provide value to each individual town, while elevating the entire community.* In order to support its cooperative message, CRCOG must take care to tell individualized, town success stories. In other words, CRCOG should create town-specific case studies and both qualitative and quantitative evaluations that both make the case for CRCOG participation *and* support CRCOG's thesis that cooperation leads to individual town success. Formally, these reports should have a dedicated place on the website and be talked about in social media, highlighted in newsletters and email outreach, and emphatically shared in meetings as proof positive of CRCOG's individualized work. In this way, CRCOG will be building a pyramid of success that shows how CRCOG's cooperative efforts result in both individual town successes *and* regional success, without using the dreaded "R" word. Tying together the combination of town and regional benefit will be critical to support CRCOG's core message of shared services and cooperation. Furthermore, in this case, we see "regional success" as meaning both in CRCOG's dedicated capital region and through the State of Connecticut where various CRCOG services provide laudable impact.

- *Dedicated to creating efficiencies and saving money, including tax dollars for all CT residents, and particularly those inside of CRCOG's territory.* The bottom line for CRCOG is, in this case, truly about the bottom line. CT residents at large, legislators and town officials should come to understand that CRCOG stands for both better governmental efficiency and tax savings. Any evidence that CRCOG's efforts directly contribute to monetary savings and efficiency should be talked about ad nauseum – in reports, social media, website, press, and other venues contained in this plan.

Altogether, this three-part messaging plan will create a line of reasoning that CRCOG can use to carve out its identity and communicate what it stands for: *Alongside our partner councils of government, CRCOG helps Connecticut towns efficiently cooperate to improve their residents' lives and save money, making Connecticut a better place to live and work.* While some may think "Connecticut" might be a stretch, we recommend that CRCOG think beyond its metropolitan territory and consider the myriad ways in which it impacts towns outside of its immediate area. Out of respect for the other councils of government and their territories, you'll notice that we included other COGs in that positioning statement, while subtly placing CRCOG at the head of this cooperative movement.

This entire strategy is predicated on CRCOG's willingness to become a recognized leader for making government more efficient and effective, which seems to admittedly be a departure from its normal modus operandi. However, we see only upside potential in CRCOG taking a leading stance, provided that it respectfully includes its partners and effectively reassures its members that CRCOG stands for individualized attention and results as much as it stands for cooperation and regional success.

To help CRCOG claim its role as a leader for cooperative efforts, one interviewee recommended that CRCOG set regional and statewide goals that it publicly works toward with the help of its partners in Connecticut, which is yet another tremendous way for CRCOG to build its identity as an organization that accomplishes great things for Connecticut. In a similar vein, yet another focus group member stated that CRCOG has an opportunity to become the best governmental support agency in the region for elected officials, legislators, town managers, other COGs and more. In short, if CRCOG can more openly claim that identity as the go-to resource for efficiency and cost savings in Connecticut, it can appropriately balance its role as a leader among other COGs and agencies.

ii.   Audiences, Engagement and Ambassadors

While labor-intensive and somewhat traditional, CRCOG – especially in the first stages of implementing a new communications plan – will need to get live time with its most valuable constituents, including both legislators and town officials. What we frequently heard was that many elected officials at all levels vaguely know that CRCOG even exists, never mind what CRCOG does. However, if CRCOG can get in front of its audiences with a pointed message, it can shift that paradigm in its favor. One of the focus group attendees smartly pointed out yet another reason for CRCOG to be public-facing, which is that when towns have turnover, there won't be as much of a learning curve for new officials if CRCOG were well known to the town's residents in the first place.

One recommendation we heard from legislators was to form an ambassador committee to recruit ambassadors – both legislators and elected town officials – to invite their counterparts to events. If the invite comes from their peers, invitees are more apt to see the event as a legitimate use of their time as opposed to CRCOG sending its own invite.

Furthermore, one legislator recommended leveraging the public in order to get in front of key legislators. For instance, CRCOG can set up several pre-written email templates and encourage the public to "ask your legislator about shared services." With the right public outreach, the hopeful effect would be that citizens would use CRCOG's templates to send emails into their legislators. While we can't speak to the efficacy of such a strategy, the key insight is that CRCOG can maximize its budget if it can find grassroots ways like this to gain access to their target audiences.

Another focus group agreed that rotating the location of CRCOG's meetings would be a good way to get out into the community and meet constituents where they live and work. While this may be untenable for certain standing meetings, there might be other creative ways in which CRCOG can get physical time in its member communities and/or literally get onto the town agendas in a standing "Update From CRCOG" fashion. This is an inexpensive but effective way for CRCOG to guarantee that its presence and agenda be known, and this is a strategic way to make sure that CRCOG gets noticed by key prospects or members who perhaps haven't fully engaged with CRCOG's services. As one staff member suggested, even being put onto the agendas of towns in Connecticut is a great first step to get CRCOG in front of its constituents in a meaningful way.

Finally, one of the focus groups recommended a formal orientation program for new elected officials. If CRCOG does not already have this in place, we highly recommend that CRCOG put together an orientation program. Such a program can be small and simple – for instance, booking lunch with every new elected official so Lyle or another CRCOG leader can walk the new official through CRCOG and its offerings, with a nicely-organized piece of collateral that the new official can use as a reference guide later. Getting to these officials early and often is pivotal to CRCOG's success and ensuring that CRCOG stays top-of-mind as an indispensable resource. Furthermore, it allows CRCOG to spread its message of sharing and cooperating for the benefit of all *before* the official is overwhelmed by Connecticut's sense of protectionism. Focus group members actively volunteered to be part of such a welcome committee to get the process started, and this is yet another cost-effective way to reach out with maximum impact.

Getting face time with key constituents will be critical to CRCOG elevating its image and growing its base; there is simply no more effective way to communicate to an extremely busy cohort. That said, no communications effort in the 21ˢᵗ century can exist without an integrated effort, which is why we have rounded out our communications strategy with your owned media properties below.

iii. Owned Media Properties and Social Media

Today's best communications are clean, clear and follow a systematic schedule that readers and viewers can grow to count on. The good news is that, by and large, the internet has standardized the way content is displayed and trained audiences on how to consume it. To that end, here are our recommendations for your owned media properties.

1. Website

Ordinarily, with a website like CRCOG's, we would recommend a complete redesign to make it more functional for the users you want to recruit. However, we will in this case stop short of that recommendation for two reasons.

First, we recognize the constraints you're faced with as a governmental agency. But second and more importantly, you might be able to accomplish your objectives without undertaking a website project in the near future, *as long as your constituents can access what they need to within your current system*. That's not to say that there isn't an opportunity cost associated with your website, especially if you take action on the rest of our recommendations.

For instance, if you do become more public-facing, CRCOG's home page should do a better job of highlighting its core projects – with big, indicative images, clear descriptions and well-written case studies. We repeatedly heard that the public "should absolutely know that CRCOG exists and what it does," and that showing "victories and forward progress" across all divisions of CRCOG will be essential to it solidifying itself as a leader in creating cooperation and cost savings. However, if CRCOG should decide to showcase its work, it will have to do so with a template that is easy to understand from a lay person's perspective, helping all constituents get an at-a-glance understanding of CRCOG's important work.

Therefore, at a minimum, we recommend developing webpage templates – particularly with case studies – that can translate quickly and easily to an online format, which will at least serve to quickly educate all audiences about what CRCOG does. The importance of these newly-designed pages should not be underestimated, as those revised links could serve e-newsletter emails, social media posts, intra-departmental sharing and other needs that make

some fresh design a sound strategic investment, especially if those same designs are leveraged into templates for new print work and other media types.

Finally, we heard consistent complaints about the navigation on CRCOG's website, with both visitors and internal staff being unable to find necessary resources. It became clear that the current navigation incurs an internal opportunity cost associated with lost time and frustration; plus, as one town official put it, "if we can't find what we need from CRCOG quickly and easily, we're looking elsewhere to get our contracts filled." Between all those wasted staff hours and frustrated members, and with the knowledge that websites should typically be redone every 3 years, we recommend at least investing in a new navigation, assuming that an entire website rework is untenable. Fortunately, your Google Analytics data will be able to assist in restructuring the navigation to put frequented pages within easy reach. Finally, any website work should coincide with the potential rebrand and template creation in order to ensure continuity with all of CRCOG's outreach efforts, as is a priority with this plan.

2. Social Media

Ordinarily, we might be tempted to ask, *do CRCOG's constituents use social media?* On the other hand, we encourage you to ask a slightly different question: *How does social media tie into the opportunity to elevate CRCOG as the leader in creating efficient cooperation and cost savings in Connecticut?*

In this case, we again encourage CRCOG to think like a statewide leader in outreach by using social media as a strategic distribution system, and building its own agency channels to serve as the mechanisms for all CRCOG content (i.e., we do not recommend creating multiple social media channels for different departments or initiatives unless they are truly separate brands with wholly different missions). In fact, social media is the one owned property that can help you weave CRCOG into the governmental and economic fabric of the State, without having to conform to any press standards.

To that end, we recommend thinking about CRCOG's social channels as their own broadcast stations, with the sole mission of *helping Connecticut towns efficiently cooperate to improve their residents' lives and save money, making Connecticut a better place to live and work.* That mission is, in and of itself, a content strategy, and CRCOG's content should always show cooperative success stories, news updates of cooperative success stories, original editorial and shared content about both cooperating and saving taxpayer dollars, and broad content that seeks to make Connecticut a better place to live and work. While some of those directions may seem broad, social media is, as its nomenclature suggests, *social*; therefore, in order to take advantage of social media's conversational tone, CRCOG will have to adopt a widespread

approach to sharing and resharing positive content about the State, its towns, and its cooperative efforts.

In fact, sharing the content of other media outlets, governmental agencies, nonprofits and legislators will be a key way to insert CRCOG into the conversation and increase the chances of CRCOG original content being shared in turn, and that content should follow in the footsteps of the aforementioned positive case studies, project news and success stories from around the State. One of the best values that social media will provide is the research and data mining that can assist CRCOG with its internal strategies. For instance, social media analytics will show you who is sharing your content, what kind of content is getting the most traction and more, which informs not only future social posts, but also gives you insight into potential partners, impactful messaging and more.

It's important to not underestimate the combined power of a strong social media presence. For those who are watching – particularly the other news outlets in the State – your channels will get noticed for their up-to-date and relevant news as well as its thought leadership and editorial (not only the "what," but also the "why" of CRCOG's projects, from the authoritative voice of CRCOG). This particular brand of market penetration is vital to the Earned Media efforts you'll see in that section; and furthermore, your efforts will cement CRCOG's place as a leader for other agencies and municipalities to follow suit, supporting your core positioning overall.

As referenced above, social media – and the rest of CRCOG's outreach – should be centralized into one "voice" so CRCOG's messages don't appear to be disparate. One way to accomplish this is to have a dedicated person in charge of all copywriting that at least proofreads and edits submissions for emails, collateral, social media and all other forms of communication. That kind of consistency ensures that all of CRCOG's departmental experts are using the same vernacular when referring to departments, programs and initiatives, so CRCOG's communications efforts are unified.

Finally, one recommendation that came out of your focus groups was to have a private shared Facebook group or groups that could give CRCOG yet another way to consistently reach its members. Having private Facebook groups – perhaps divided into CRCOG's respective departments as you see fit – will not only give CRCOG another outreach mechanism, but it will also give CRCOG's members the ability to interact with each other, share resources, and otherwise foster community, which is exactly inline with CRCOG's stated mission in the first place.

3. Email and Organizational Content Strategy

A common misperception in today's marketing is that everyone is too busy to read or consume any content. Except, that's not exactly true; in fact, if you reflect on your own behavior, you'll find that you carve out the time to consume the content that's a) relevant to you and b) easily digestible, in the format you prefer.

For CRCOG in particular, the importance of the content is not what's at stake, since everyone in your purview agrees that CRCOG is the organization with answers. The question is, what format(s) should CRCOG use to get its important information across to the people who matter?

Again, CRCOG has an opportunity to become the leader in how it communicates, and the biggest recommendation we have is not to add, but to *remove* communication mechanisms and focus on two types of outreach:

- Continual Updates: These are ongoing updates from CRCOG that are not time-sensitive.
- Trending or Urgent News: These are urgent updates that CRCOG's audiences might want to know about, like a current successful initiative, special announcement, or other time-sensitive piece of information.

Thinking about your content in these two buckets will help CRCOG design a distribution strategy that makes sense for its audiences. For instance, we recommend that your continual updates go into either a weekly or biweekly email newsletter that replaces the current monthly report and that is published at a certain day and time like clockwork. By contrast, your trending or urgent news should be prepared and sent the day of an event so that CRCOG claims its spot as the go-to agency for trending updates within its scope of work. Having such a system will allow all of CRCOG's constituents, partners and media outlets to get onto a systematic schedule with CRCOG so they know what to expect and when.

You'll notice that we've only addressed email so far, and that is deliberate; we feel that mastering email distribution first will have a trickle-down effect to other platforms. For instance, a nicely organized email will inform monthly meetings, social media posts, press releases and other distribution mechanisms. Furthermore, email was by far the number one choice among your constituents when asked how they would like to receive information.

Therefore, putting together a master email template will be a critical step for arranging CRCOG's monthly content. One imperative here will be reorganizing CRCOG into "pillars" of content, arranged by WHO would want WHAT kind of information, and WHY. These may fall into CRCOG's current departments; but then again, these pillars might be slightly different

where there is overlap or the need to divide a department into two natural news paths. With a simple whiteboard session, CRCOG's staff can develop these pillars in order to make sure that content is arranged and coded for the end-user to consume, which is not necessarily how CRCOG is currently arranged internally. This is yet another cost-effective way to begin the communications improvement process, and will help lend clarity on a variety of other initiatives throughout this document.

As it stands now, emails are sent by departments with departmental information to segregated lists according to interest. Most email marketers would suggest that you continue to keep your audiences separate; however, we would actually recommend a different approach for the near future, adding all of your constituents to one distribution.

The reason for this admittedly unorthodox recommendation is that CRCOG's core problem is that few know what it is or what it does. As paraphrased by one member, "I'm sure the information gets to *someone*...but it doesn't trickle down to all of us, even if we need it." In fact, the purchasing council in particular noted that CRCOG's reaching town managers and elected officials was useless to the purchasing managers, because their leaders rarely if ever forwarded or communicated the information that the purchasing managers needed. Therefore, by using a regular mass distribution, you can seek to educate all your audiences on all the facets and projects of CRCOG.

Furthermore, it was clear from the survey that there isn't a strong priority for certain pieces of information, and that the need to get updates across the board were fairly uniform. However, that is not to say that list-specific distributions should stop, or that certain pieces of information should be given priority within a certain communication; on the contrary, there are department-specific messages that will need to keep occurring, and priorities should be given to what's most important to capture your audience's time sensitivity. However, when it comes to a weekly or biweekly distribution, we recommend creating a master email sent to all lists for the immediate future.

With a master email sent to a mass audience, the size, length and design of the email is critical. One of the first projects we recommend CRCOG undertake is a standard master email template that uses rich colors, big images, bold headlines and bullet-point explanations, all with appropriate subheadings broken down by pillars, departments and projects so it's easy for each reader to understand which content is most relevant to him or her. Each story should have a "read more" link that directs readers to your website, to keep the master email short and easy to consume. This should be a high priority among the recommendations in this document.

As we stated earlier, organizing your content in this way will inform the rest of your content and distribution strategy; for instance, we can color-code certain departments for creating templated print reports, and assign certain templated and branded images for social media by department or project. It's also worth noting that CRCOG's content should be as much human-interest as it is factual; in other words, CRCOG's case study-style news should highlight WHO is affected as much as WHAT is going on, in order to humanize CRCOG's projects and endear them to all constituents. Altogether, this effort will go a long way to organizing CRCOG's communications outreach in a way that all audiences will grow to understand and appreciate.

iv.　Technology Platforms

In this section we will recount feedback we received and provide recommendations for digital tools and technology platforms we recommend.

1.　Digital Tools

Given our recommendation for email, the email distribution system and database are of utmost importance. We heard multiple asks for an upgraded email database system that would allow CRCOG to effectively reach its audiences, and we agree that such a tool is essential. While budgetary constraints may seek to prevent such an investment, we feel strongly that there is no more important technology than a system that can appropriately track and organize the people whom you serve at all levels of the organization.

With a proper email system tied into a CRM, CRCOG staff will be able to track open rates, who opened which emails, who clicked on what links and more. These insights will be able to inform future communications efforts; but, more importantly, the insights can help CRCOG better understand what's important to its members in order to provide better, more targeted value.

In addition, as stated throughout this document, we know CRCOG has an opportunity to lead other agencies and municipalities in a wide variety of ways – communications being one of them. To that end, we also recommend creating a digital tools section of CRCOG's website to offer recommendations to your member towns that span the breadth of what's in this plan and more. For instance, CRCOG could offer social media tips and guidelines, earned media and email newsletters, and provide a list of pre-vetted vendors to help members with their communications. This recommendation came out of a focus group with elected officials and we immediately saw it as an opportunity to add value to member towns that could perhaps justify an improved pricing structure for CRCOG's membership. Although such an undertaking may be years away, it is worth CRCOG setting a goal to truly lead its constituents.

III.   Earned Media

    A. Earned Media Partnerships

One of the most important initiatives that CRCOG should undertake is establishing connections with all parts of the local media here in the Hartford-New Haven DMA. We heard directly from media representatives that CRCOG should pause and publicly celebrate its wins so that everyone hears about the great work CRCOG does. In addition, members of the media remarked that media outlets would actively welcome CRCOG's presence and news, if only that news were pushed to the outlets in the first place. One of the best aspects of earned media today is that, through software services like Cision, earned media outreach is trackable and measurable. Your eventual person in charge of press will be able to pull reports with reach, pickups and ad equivalency rates that you can use to show measurable lift and meaningful ROI as you develop the earned media portion of these recommendations.

The first thing CRCOG should seek to design is a press packet. It should contain relevant bios (i.e., who are the "faces" of CRCOG?), areas of expertise, current projects that CRCOG touches, contact information and a basic list of goings-on in the State, on which CRCOG can and should be asked to provide commentary. Such a packet should be sent to a dedicated press list and handed out in-person when available, as CRCOG's eventual person in charge of press seeks to develop relationships with press throughout the State.

To that end, here are specific recommendations for how CRCOG should interact with each of the three traditional media outlets.

        i. Television and Radio

CRCOG can and should position itself as having its "finger on the pulse" of what's happening in Connecticut. To this recommendation there will surely be voices that insist that other organizations can and should be the provider of news instead of CRCOG; however, we implore you to think differently about that posture, should objections arise.

Throughout our collecting feedback, it became abundantly clear that CRCOG has done and continues to do extraordinary work for the residents of Connecticut; and that in return, CRCOG receives little to no appreciation for its dedicated efforts. While there has clearly been organizational resistance to claiming the limelight, we know that just staking the claim in the first place will ensure that CRCOG takes its share of the credit.

Ordinarily, this would be problematic, since CRCOG is generally only one player of many in any given project. However, that's perfectly acceptable; in fact, CRCOG's key media strategy should be taking credit wherever possible *so that it can share the credit* with all parties involved. In that way, CRCOG will become the humble band leader who appropriately insists on passing

off credit wherever possible, while simultaneously earning the reputation for being at the very center of news in Connecticut.

You can begin to create this win-win-win by simply reaching out and establishing relationships with local television and appropriate news-radio networks. The pitch is simple: CRCOG is involved in some of the hottest-button issues in Connecticut (crumbling foundations and new railways come to mind). CRCOG has the latest updates on where its projects are at, and it's happy to share those updates with news networks as often as they need.

As part of this effort, CRCOG will need to choose a spokesperson who is camera-ready and media-trained to begin to give CRCOG a voice on the local airwaves. Here, reliability counts – since, over time, networks will begin to rely on CRCOG's accessibility and openness. Once CRCOG establishes itself as one of the go-to providers of news, stations tend to stick with sources they know and trust, which will make initial efforts more worthwhile over time.

ii. Print

For better or worse, print media has lost its editorial abilities over the past decade. For CRCOG, this evolution provides a wonderful opportunity to publish daily, weekly or monthly columns in both statewide and local town publications throughout the State.

In fact, we recommend reaching out to every major and minor print outlet in the State of Connecticut and asking if CRCOG can provide content, except of course where CRCOG feels it would be stepping on the toes of other councils of government.

That notwithstanding, we would still recommend establishing a column in every print outlet in the State and then offering that column as a joint effort with other COGs. Such a move, if made respectfully as a value-added effort, could help CRCOG deepen its position as the leader of Connecticut COGs and be framed as an effort to assist all Connecticut COGs to be more impactful in their communication efforts.

Given that print publications are always looking for relevant content, and given that CRCOG has both the clout and knowledge to provide worthwhile news, it should be quite simple for CRCOG to gain a healthy print distribution both within and outside of its core territory.

B. Partner Programs

Where possible, CRCOG should also seek to establish symbiotic relationships with affinity groups that can give CRCOG immediate distribution; for instance, the MetroHartford Alliance, CBIA, member town chambers of commerce and other groups that represent public interests while running tangentially to Hartford's legislative and commercial groups. These potential partner groups have newsletters, events and other opportunities for CRCOG to spread its name and mission, which will be particularly important in the beginning stages of CRCOG's

potential rebrand and communications plan implementation. One interview particularly highlighted co-hosted events as a perfect way to make sure CRCOG stays in and even leads the conversation about regional initiatives, while brilliantly piggybacking on a pre-existing audience.

Finally, with television, radio, print and partners, CRCOG's message should stay focused on true news developments and success stories that prove its mission for efficient cooperation and cost savings, making Connecticut a better place to live and work. If CRCOG can execute on an earned media strategy that leverages that message into a variety of news outlets, it will quickly develop a groundswell of awareness and support with all of its constituents.

IV.   Conclusion

The word that came out of CRCOG's feedback was, "opportunity." CRCOG has an enormous opportunity to revamp the way it communicates and take a strong message of cooperation to Connecticut's residents and government officials. We look forward to answering any questions you have about this comprehensive plan.

V.   Suggested Action List and Timeline

The following action items are in order of appearance in the plan. Top recommended items, which provide the most budget-friendly impact, are highlighted in yellow. Top recommended items that would require an external budget are highlighted in green. This list contains several of the broader initiatives; however, there are several recommendations sprinkled throughout this plan that nest under these broad action items, which we can help you prioritize as you select which initiatives are important for you.

A. 2018
   i. Branding
      1. Decide on a rebrand and templates
      2. Finish rebranding and templates by end of 2018
   ii. Owned Media
      1. Internal
         a. Initiate new meetings protocol
         b. Standardize technology usage and administrative standards
         c. Decide on cultural initiatives – group outings, etc.

    2. External

        a. Decide on core messaging and public-facing agency "mission"

        b. Design the ambassador program

    3. Owned Media Properties and Social Media

        a. Decide on the new website plan

        b. Decide on a social media action plan

    4. Email and Content

        a. Divide messages into pillars and headings for the email template

        b. Assign CRCOG staff to providing content

        c. Assign key person to assemble content and be the "voice" editor

        d. Create email template

    5. Technology Platforms

        a. Decide on the new email distribution system

  iii. Earned Media

    1. Earned Media Partnerships

        a. Build a media list – both cold and personal relationships

        b. Design the press packet

        c. Begin to develop the media list with personal outreach

    2. Partner Programs

        a. Build a partner list and begin to have conversations around cross-promotion of content

B. 2019

  i. Branding

    1. Finish any leftover branding initiatives, template designs, etc.

  ii. Owned Media

    1. Internal

        a. Hire a dedicated PR/social media/marketing person

    2. External

        a. Implement the ambassador program

        b. Design the new orientation program for elected officials

    3. Properties and Social Media

        a. Implement the new website plan

        b. Implement the social media plan

4. Email and Content
    a. Implement the new email distribution
5. Technology Platforms
    a. Implement the new email distribution system
    b. Decide on creating a "digital tools" member section

iii. Earned Media
1. Earned Media Partnerships
    a. Design and develop press packet
2. Television and Radio
    a. Begin outreach efforts
3. Print
    a. Begin content distribution efforts
4. Partner Programs
    a. Begin cross-promotion of content