

Department Source: Public Works

To: City Council

From: City Manager & Staff

Council Meeting Date: January 20, 2026

Re: Summary of Communication Strategies for Public Works, Community Development, and City Utilities

Impacted Ward: Citywide

Executive Summary

At the September 2025 City Council meeting, Council requested a report detailing the City's current practices for notification related to certain maintenance and improvement projects. Staff has prepared for Council information a summary of how the City communicates to the public about a variety of activities involving Public Works, Utilities, and Community Development. It looks at three main areas: public projects, maintenance projects, and emergencies. The processes are similar across departments, focusing on keeping people informed through meetings, letters, social media, and press releases.

Discussion

The City employs transparent methods to inform the public regarding activities in Public Works, Community Development, and City Utilities. These methods facilitate awareness of ongoing events, enable inquiries, and promote safety. We categorize this information into three sections: Public Projects, Maintenance Projects, and Emergencies. The regulations are largely consistent for both Public Works and City Utilities, while Community Development adheres to comparable procedures for its initiatives.

Public Projects

These projects aim to enhance infrastructure such as roads, sidewalks, sewers, water lines, power lines, stormwater drainage systems, etc. They adhere to a Public Improvement Process that engages the community from the outset and complies with the City Code of Ordinances as described in Chapter 22 Article III Division 3. Public Works and City Utilities generally follow comparable procedures, while Community Development employs similar methods for new developments. The objective is to hear from local residents, integrate their feedback when necessary, and secure the necessary approvals from the City Council.

Key Steps in Public Projects:

- Preliminary Design: Survey land, draw plans, estimate costs, and check with maintenance teams or other utilities to avoid problems.
- Interested Parties (IP) Meeting: A meeting where neighbors learn about the project. Plan it with a public information officer, make a contact list of people nearby, send letters ahead of time, set up a BeHeard CoMo webpage for comments, and post on social media. At the meeting, show plans, answer questions, and take notes.
- Public Hearing at City Council: Send memo to Council with a project summary, maps, and plans. Mail letters to people, update the contact log, call affected

owners, and post online. Council hears comments, asks questions, and votes to go ahead, change, or stop the project.

- Easement Acquisition and Bidding: Get permission to use impacted property by appraising it, mailing offers, and talking to owners. Then, bid out the job to contractors. Plans might change slightly based on owner conversations.
- During Construction: Hold a pre-construction meeting to communicate with the contractor, utility companies, and other stakeholders, send press releases about start dates and traffic changes, put up signs, and notify owners if driveways are blocked.

Private Development (Community Development):

The attached document details the public notice practices that the Community Development follows for private development projects, such as rezoning, planned development, and subdivision actions. Many of public notice steps are included in City ordinance, and staff is required to complete these steps in certain scenarios, such as prior to a required public hearing. Other notices are considered a courtesy and have been developed over time as public notice needs and goals have evolved. In addition to direct public notice, there are also opportunities for the public to view information regarding development occurring within the City via the City's website.

Maintenance Projects

Maintenance projects include routine repairs and planned activities such as road repairs, sidewalk closures, milling and overlaying streets, pipe replacement, and similar work. While these projects do not require City Council approval, the City prioritizes public notification to minimize disruptions and unexpected events. Communication methods include emails, social media posts, press releases, maps, photographs, and direct outreach to affected stakeholders such as schools, businesses, or homeowners' associations (HOAs).

Road and Sidewalk Closures (Private Development):

- The right-of-way technician sends an email titled "Street Restriction/Closure Notification" to notify relevant departments, including the Columbia Police Department (CPD), Columbia Fire Department (CFD), and Public Works.
- The staff examines the details, addresses any missing information through follow-up or research, and translates the content into clear, public-facing language.
- Depending on the scale and impact, the staff decides whether to issue only social media posts (for instance, in cases of minor disruptions such as a single-lane closure in a residential area) or to also provide a full press release (for example, in cases of major disruptions like a complete road closure in a high-traffic area). Press releases are submitted to the City Manager's Office for approval and often result in coverage on local news websites and television broadcasts.
- Notifications typically include a map or image for visual context. The staff also handles media inquiries, conducts interviews, or collaborates with subject-matter experts as necessary.

Planned Road Work (e.g., Mill and Overlay):

- Notification often comes via phone from a street supervisor.
- Staff gathers details on the project's scope, timeline, purpose, and potential impacts on residents, businesses, schools, or HOAs.
- A press release is drafted, incorporating maps or photographs where helpful, and submitted for approval through the City Manager's Office.
- Direct calls are made to major affected parties (e.g., schools or businesses) after identifying contacts through research.
- Staff handles resulting media interviews and provides updates on any delays.
- Proper planning and signage of the work zone

Winter Weather Response:

- Operational updates are provided by the Engineering and Operations Manager concerning anticipated conditions and response strategies. Typically, these updates occur at 7:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m.
- In the case of minor incidents, social media announcements and press releases are issued, detailing staffing levels, timelines, treatment methods, and public safety recommendations.
- For significant storms, the staff collaborates with the City Manager's Office to produce a coordinated citywide press release.
- Throughout the event, real-time updates are shared on social media, public inquiries are responded to online, images or videos are shared, and comments are monitored to communicate concerns to response teams.
- Follow-up press releases are released according to a predetermined schedule.

Utilities Maintenance Projects:

As necessary, all utility maintenance work includes traffic control and utility locates. These are always notifications of work. The level of additional direct outreach is typically dependent on the impact severity of the work.

Planned utility replacement or rehabilitation work that involves accessing side or back yards or digging in yards will include prior notification via door knocking, door hanger or phone call. If power or water outage is known in advance, then door knock, phone call, door hanger would occur. Additional coordination and communication for commercial customers will occur if there is a potential to impact their business with an outage or encroachment on customer parking areas. Larger projects may also include a press release. Any water outage would also include a Rave alert.

Planned utility replacement work in the street or immediately adjacent to the street in the ROW would have limited prior notification. For example, blocked driveways would likely receive a door knock. If power or water outage is anticipated then door knock, phone call, door hanger if known in advance would occur. Again, additional coordination may occur in commercial areas if there is a potential impact to the business with an outage or encroachment on customer parking areas.

There are many maintenance activities where prior notification is limited to door knocking. This includes sewer line cleaning, sewer line TV inspection, water meter replacement. For both a water service line replacement or accessing a locked gate or yard with a dog, the work is scheduled with the property owner. Projects such as flushing water mains may have a press release with an information map on the website.

Planned Vegetation Management for Overhead Electric Lines:

Electric staff plan and review each work order. If tree removal or equipment access is necessary, Electric staff meet individually with the property owner. Written agreements for removals of intentional tree or shrubs are obtained from the property owners prior to the work. Volunteer tree removal and tree trimming is not typically included in written agreements or prior contact with individual property owners. The written agreement includes Trade-A-Tree where applicable. A few weeks to months prior to the City's contractor performing tree trimming and tree and shrub removal, a post card is sent to property owners in the work corridor notifying them of the upcoming work.

Emergencies:

Emergencies involve unexpected incidents such as power outages, water main breaks, fallen trees, or road damage. While the first priority is addressing the emergency; the City responds promptly to inform the public using tools like social media, press releases, text alerts, or phone calls. Utilities follows specific protocols for outages, Public Works handles road-related issues, and Community Development addresses concerns like unsafe structures. The guiding principle is to deploy available communication tools rapidly, provide essential information, and collaborate with media outlets. While there is no rigid flowchart, actions are scaled based on the incident's type and impact.

Electrical Outages (Utilities):

- Notifications are received via email from an automated system or directly from the control room.
- Alerts are issued if 1,000 or more customers are affected, or if the outage persists for more than two hours (classified as prolonged).
- Posts are made on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and NextDoor during business hours (8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) or after-hours if needed, or anytime for significant events).
- Standardized templates are used: For a specific-area outage, the message states, "There is a power outage affecting [number of] customers. City of Columbia Utility crews are working to restore power as soon as possible. To report an outage, call 573.875.2555. Visit the outage map at [link]." For prolonged outages, the reason is included if available; for widespread weather-related outages, multiple incidents are noted. Updates provide details on the cause, number of affected customers, and restoration time.
- For hazards like downed poles, warnings advise the public to stay clear and report sightings.

Water Service Alerts and Boil Advisories (Utilities):

- Notifications are received through the Rave alert system.
- Alerts are issued if 50 or more customers are affected (excluding scheduled advisories where tenants received prior notice).
- The Rave notification is copied to Facebook and NextDoor with a hyperlink to the outage map. Due to character limits on X, a summarized version is used: "COMO Alert: Water Main Break has occurred at [location] for [number of] customers. A Precautionary Boil Advisory will follow. Look for hang tag. Visit the outage map at [link]. For more on boil advisories, visit [link]."

Road Emergencies (Public Works):

- Staff visits the site to take photographs and issues social media posts quickly (e.g., most of the time within hours of the incident).
- If the road remains open but presents a hazard, warnings are posted; for significant incidents, a press release with detour information is added.
- Reporters are met on-site for interviews, and updates are provided once resolved.

In conclusion, this summary highlights the City's communication strategies across Public Works, Community Development, and Utilities, ensuring transparency and community engagement. By utilizing tools like social media, press releases, meetings, and direct outreach, staff aims to minimize disruptions and build trust with residents. These processes, refined over time, support efficient operations. For additional details, please refer to the accompanied documents: Public Works CIP Public Engagement Process, Utilities Outage Notification Guidelines, Community Development Process & Procedures, and CIP Process Manual.

Fiscal Impact

Short-Term Impact: None

Long-Term Impact: None

Strategic & Comprehensive Plan Impact**Strategic Plan Impacts:**

Primary Impact: Organizational Excellence, Secondary Impact: Secondary, Tertiary Impact: Tertiary

Comprehensive Plan Impacts:

Primary Impact: Inter-Governmental Cooperation, Secondary Impact: Secondary, Tertiary Impact: Tertiary



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Legislative History

Date	Action
N/A	N/A

Suggested Council Action

Council report for informational purposes.