
The Small-City Communications Readiness Checklist

A practical self-assessment for cities without
full-time communications staff.

A readiness tool for real staff capacity.

Built for smaller and fast-growing municipalities

Roles. Channels. Crisis readiness. Resident engagement. Practical next steps.

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Public communication is no longer a nice-to-have for local government. Residents expect timely updates, clear explanations, accessible information, and a sense that their city is listening. For small cities, the challenge is that this work often falls to a city manager, clerk, department head, executive assistant, or rotating staff member who already has a full workload.

This checklist is designed to help small cities understand where their communications are strong, where they are vulnerable, and what to improve first. It is not about creating a large communications department. It is about building a workable system: clear roles, reliable channels, prepared messages, and consistent habits that help residents trust the information they receive.

Use it as a quick internal review, a leadership discussion tool, or the starting point for a more complete communications plan.

How to Use This Checklist

For each item, mark one response:

- **Ready:** This is in place and used consistently.
- **Needs Work:** This exists in some form, but it is incomplete, informal, outdated, or inconsistently used.
- **Not Yet:** This is not currently in place.

At the end, use the scoring guide to identify your city's readiness level and choose a practical next step.

1. Communication Roles and Responsibilities

Small cities do not need a large communications team, but they do need clarity about who handles what.

Checklist Item	Ready	Needs Work	Not Yet
We know who is responsible for routine citywide communication.			
We know who approves public-facing messages before they are shared.			
Department heads understand when to notify leadership about issues that may require public communication.			
Staff know who can post to official city channels.			
We have a process for coordinating messages across departments.			
Elected officials and staff understand the difference between official city communication and individual commentary.			

Quick reflection: If a resident concern, infrastructure issue, or service disruption became visible today, who would draft the message, approve it, and publish it?

2. Core Messages and Public Information

Clear communication starts before there is an urgent issue. Cities should have basic public information and recurring messages ready before they are needed.

Checklist Item	Ready	Needs Work	Not Yet
We can explain the city's priorities in plain language.			
We have current descriptions of major projects, services, and initiatives.			
We have standard language for common topics such as road work, utility service, public meetings, events, permits, and public safety updates.			
Our public-facing materials avoid jargon where possible.			
We explain not only what is happening, but why it matters to residents.			
We have a consistent tone: professional, factual, accessible, and calm.			

Quick reflection: Are residents receiving context, or are they only receiving announcements?

3. Communication Channels

Residents do not all get information in the same place. A ready city knows which channels it uses, what each one is for, and how to keep them current.

Checklist Item	Ready	Needs Work	Not Yet
Our website has current contact information, meeting information, service details, and project updates.			
Our social media channels are active, monitored, and clearly official.			
We have an email newsletter or other direct resident update tool.			
We know which channels are best for urgent updates, routine updates, public engagement, and formal notices.			
We have a process for removing outdated information.			
We make important information available outside social media.			
We consider residents who may have limited internet access, limited English proficiency, or accessibility needs.			

Quick reflection: If social media disappeared tomorrow, how would residents still receive important city updates?

4. Website Readiness

For many residents, the website is the front desk of city government. It should help people quickly answer basic questions and understand what the city is doing.

Checklist Item	Ready	Needs Work	Not Yet
The homepage makes it easy to find high-demand information.			
Residents can quickly find how to contact departments.			
Meeting agendas, minutes, and public notices are easy to locate.			
Major projects have current pages or updates.			
Forms, permits, and service requests are easy to find.			
Emergency or urgent information can be posted quickly.			

Checklist Item	Ready	Needs Work	Not Yet
Staff have a clear process for updating website content.			

Quick reflection: What are the five most common resident questions, and can someone answer them from the website in under two minutes?

5. Social Media Readiness

Social media can help cities reach residents quickly, but it should be managed with clear expectations and boundaries.

Checklist Item	Ready	Needs Work	Not Yet
Our official accounts are easy to identify as city-managed channels.			
We have guidelines for what gets posted and what does not.			
We have a comment moderation policy or public participation guidelines.			
Staff know how to respond to misinformation, complaints, and inappropriate comments.			
We avoid relying on social media as the only place for important information.			
We have access credentials documented in a secure way.			
More than one authorized person can access accounts if needed.			

Quick reflection: Is social media helping the city communicate, or is it becoming the city's entire communications system?

6. Crisis and Urgent Communications

During urgent situations, cities need speed, accuracy, and calm coordination. The work is easier when roles and message templates are prepared in advance.

Checklist Item	Ready	Needs Work	Not Yet
We know who leads communication during urgent situations.			
We have current contact lists for leadership, department heads, public safety partners, schools, utilities, and regional agencies.			
We have message templates for service disruptions, severe weather, road closures, boil water notices, public safety incidents, and facility closures.			
We know which channels to use for urgent updates.			
We have a process for confirming facts before sharing information.			
We can update residents after hours if necessary.			
We review communication response after major incidents and make improvements.			

Quick reflection: In an urgent situation, what information must be confirmed before the first public update goes out?

7. Resident Engagement

Good communication is not only outbound. Cities also need dependable ways to listen, explain decisions, and close the loop with residents.

Checklist Item	Ready	Needs Work	Not Yet
We have regular ways for residents to ask questions or provide feedback.			
We explain how public input will be used before asking for it.			
We report back on what we heard from residents.			
We use more than one engagement format, such as surveys, open houses, listening sessions, pop-up events, or stakeholder conversations.			
We reach beyond the residents who already attend meetings.			
We prepare staff and elected officials with key messages before public engagement events.			
We document recurring resident concerns and questions.			

Quick reflection: When residents give input, do they hear back about what changed, what did not change, and why?

8. Internal Communication

Residents can feel when staff are not working from the same information. Internal communication helps create consistent public communication.

Checklist Item	Ready	Needs Work	Not Yet
Staff receive timely updates about major projects, policy changes, service changes, and public issues.			
Front-line staff know what to say when residents call or visit with common questions.			
Departments share communication needs before an issue becomes urgent.			
Leadership has a predictable way to brief staff on important developments.			
Staff know where to find approved talking points or public information.			
We have a process for correcting outdated or inconsistent information internally.			

Quick reflection: Are front-line staff hearing important city news before residents ask them about it?

9. Planning and Content Habits

Consistency comes from simple habits. A small city can make major improvements with a basic planning rhythm.

Checklist Item	Ready	Needs Work	Not Yet
We maintain a simple communications calendar.			
We plan ahead for seasonal topics, budget milestones, elections, construction season, events, and service changes.			
We identify communications needs when new projects or policies begin, not only when they are ready for approval.			

Checklist Item	Ready	Needs Work	Not Yet
We have a regular rhythm for website, newsletter, and social media updates.			
We reuse approved messages across channels instead of recreating everything from scratch.			
We track questions and concerns that should become future communication topics.			

Quick reflection: *What city topics would benefit from being explained before residents become frustrated or confused?*

10. Measurement and Improvement

Communications work should be practical and measurable. Small cities do not need complex dashboards, but they should know what is working.

Checklist Item	Ready	Needs Work	Not Yet
We track basic website, email, or social media performance.			
We pay attention to recurring resident questions and complaints.			
We review which updates get the most engagement or confusion.			
We identify communication gaps after major projects, events, or issues.			
We make small improvements based on what residents ask, miss, or misunderstand.			
We periodically review whether our communication channels still match resident needs.			

Quick reflection: *What would tell you that city communication is becoming clearer and more trusted?*

Readiness Score

Use this simple scoring method:

- **Ready** = 2 points
- **Needs Work** = 1 point
- **Not Yet** = 0 points

Add your score for each section, then total your score.

Section	Score
1. Roles and Responsibilities	
2. Core Messages and Public Information	
3. Communication Channels	
4. Website Readiness	
5. Social Media Readiness	
6. Crisis and Urgent Communications	

Section	Score
7. Resident Engagement	
8. Internal Communication	
9. Planning and Content Habits	
10. Measurement and Improvement	
Total Score	

What Your Score Means

0-42: Vulnerable

Your city may be relying on individual effort more than a communication system. Start with roles, urgent communication protocols, and the website. These are the areas most likely to affect resident trust when pressure increases.

43-84: Developing

Your city has some useful communication practices, but they may be inconsistent or too dependent on a few people. Focus on documenting repeatable processes, preparing message templates, and building a basic planning rhythm.

85-114: Functional

Your city has a solid foundation. The next opportunity is to make communication more proactive, coordinated, and measurable. Resident engagement, internal communication, and message planning may offer the biggest gains.

115-130: Ready and Improving

Your city is in a strong position. Continue refining your system, testing urgent communication protocols, and using resident feedback to improve clarity and trust over time.

Priority Action Planner

Choose three improvements to make in the next 90 days. Keep them realistic enough to complete with current staff capacity.

Priority 1

What needs to improve?

Why does it matter now?

Who owns it?

First step:

Target date:

Priority 2

What needs to improve?

Why does it matter now?

Who owns it?

First step:

Target date:

Priority 3

What needs to improve?

Why does it matter now?

Who owns it?

First step:

Target date:

A Practical 30-60-90 Day Starting Point

If your city is not sure where to begin, use this sequence.

First 30 Days: Get Organized

- Identify who owns routine, urgent, and department-level communication.
- Confirm who can approve and publish public messages.
- Review the website for outdated or hard-to-find information.
- Gather login access, contact lists, and current communication tools.
- Create a short list of the most common resident questions.

Days 31-60: Build the Basics

- Draft message templates for common and urgent situations.
- Create a simple monthly communications calendar.
- Clarify which channels are used for which types of updates.
- Prepare plain-language descriptions of major projects and priorities.
- Establish a basic internal briefing habit for staff.

Days 61-90: Strengthen Trust

- Add or improve one direct resident update channel, such as an email newsletter.
- Create a process for reporting back after public engagement.
- Review social media guidelines and moderation practices.
- Track common resident questions and turn them into proactive updates.
- Schedule a quarterly communications review with leadership.

Common Warning Signs

Your city may need a more structured communications plan if:

- Residents often say they "had no idea" about city projects, meetings, or decisions.
- Staff are surprised by questions from residents because they did not receive internal updates.
- Social media is the main place where residents learn about important city information.
- Public messages are rewritten from scratch each time, even for recurring issues.
- Only one person knows how to update key communication channels.
- Major projects do not have clear, plain-language explanations.
- Engagement efforts collect feedback but do not report back to residents.
- Urgent communication depends on whoever happens to be available.

Sample Message Framework

For most city updates, use this structure:

1. What is happening?

State the update clearly in the first sentence.

2. Who is affected?

Name the residents, neighborhoods, customers, road users, businesses, or service users who need to know.

3. Why is it happening?

Give enough context to reduce confusion or speculation.

4. What should people do?

Include dates, times, locations, links, contact information, or next steps.

5. When will the city share more information?

Let residents know when to expect the next update, especially if details are still developing.

Final Thought

Small-city communication does not have to be complicated to be effective. The goal is not constant posting or polished language for its own sake. The goal is a city that can explain decisions clearly, share information reliably, listen with intention, and respond with confidence when the moment calls for it.

When communication becomes a system instead of a scramble, staff are better supported and residents are better served.

About Public Point Communications

Public Point Communications helps local governments strengthen communication, engage residents, and navigate growth with confidence. The work is built for smaller and fast-growing municipalities, especially cities without a full communications team.

Services include strategic communications planning, municipal communications audits, community engagement programs, citizen academies, youth advisory commissions, executive communications, and crisis or change communication support.

For support turning this checklist into a practical communications plan, visit publicpointcommunications.com.

Build communication systems your city can sustain.

Strategic communications planning, municipal audits, engagement design, and practical advisory support for local government.

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