



Main Street News

Main Street Communications Ltd. Maple Ridge • Victoria Winter 2002 Issue 4

Notes

Main Street Communications Ltd. offers:

Communications strategies
Advertising and promotions

Workshops in creative and business writing

Public participation processes for community planning

Event management
Strategic documents and reports

Main Street is offering a complete package of annual report production services to local governments. See page 3



by Ian McLeod

In the right setting, public-private partnerships are a great way to provide public services at reduced cost to taxpayers. I like the one at Furry Creek, on the Sea to Sky, where a developer paid the full shot for a highway interchange and the province made money on the financing. Very few P3s, however, are that clear-cut; more often they present an elaborate blend of leases, loans, swaps and profit-sharing.

B.C. cabinet ministers predict that the province will rely increasingly on the partnership model in future years. On the local government side, the upcoming Community Charter will make it easier for municipalities to enter P3s. Judging from Main Street's experience, the projects that succeed will be those where the public sector makes a generous allowance for planning, research and consultation in the initial stages.

The P3 concept is still fairly new to many B.C. residents. When a

P3s: a closer look

proposal pops up close to home, citizens may worry about numerous issues including whether the project or the associated land transactions offer good value, standards of service will be upheld or the public will be protected in the event of bankruptcy. Put more simply, citizens often do not understand why a partnership is required or how it is supposed to work.

This anxiety is justified if one considers - for example - the terrible record of public-private sports facilities in the U.S., where sports franchises frequently back away from promises to pay operating costs. In this province, various P3s have run into serious trouble because the public did not trust the process.

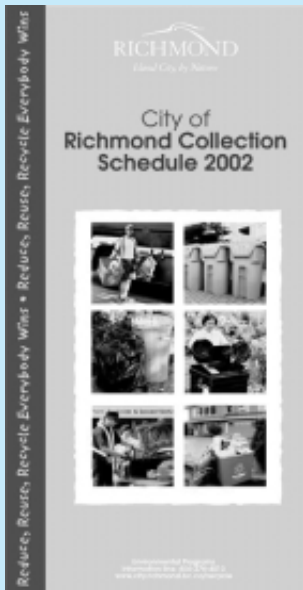
Surveys of decision-makers suggest there is a near consensus about how to increase a P3's chance for success. The first requirement is to recognize that partnership discussions are strategy-intensive at the front end. Governments may have to free up their best talent, including top managers, for as long as partnership negotiations continue. Throughout this period, it's critical that elected leaders send out clear signals of support

for the project. Adding to the burden, governments must expect a very high level of interest from the public during project development. Citizens may demand a share in setting the parameters for the project; once it is underway, they will want to see the project's capital and operating projections. Community business people may agree to help by serving as project advocates, but they need to be kept informed in detail. Main Street has also had success in hosting public meetings to inform citizens about how this project model can be designed to protect the public and generate benefits for all parties.

Ian McLeod is senior consultant at Main Street Communications Ltd.

“Communications is not about messaging, it's about building relationships.”

Jack Stuempel, Communications Manager, Vancouver Island Highway Project





On the Web

Making websites work for the user

by David Firman

As a usability consultant with a background in communications, I am fascinated with how public agencies in B.C. are taking advantage of the Internet to engage in internal and external communications. I have spent many hours surfing the websites of municipalities, provincial corporations and other public bodies, and find that many of them take a creative and effective approach to this new medium.

Public-sector websites offer an excellent model for exploring patterns of Internet use and for evaluating the experience of internal audiences (employees) and external audiences (everybody else). First, the information they present is complex and varied. Second, decision-makers understand that the Internet is becoming an essential and cost-effective part of civic business, and they are keen to find out what works. Third, the industry is offering governments and institutions a growing range of useful on-line tools that require testing. Until recently, websites have been mainly on-line repositories of

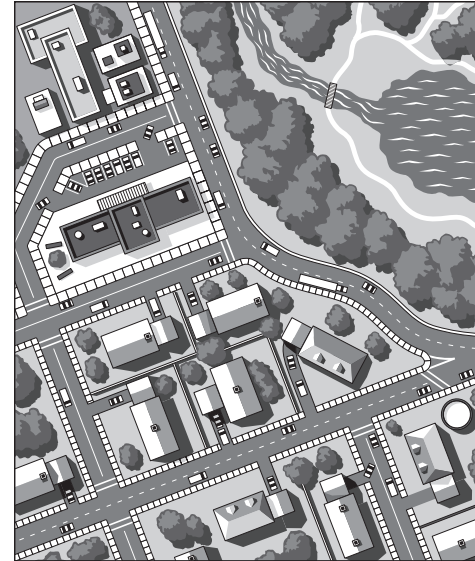
paper-based information. Companies like Pacific Alliance are leading a breakthrough that will allow the viewing of complex engineering data (including GIS maps) on a web browser, opening up a whole range of new possibilities for communicating with citizens, contractors, and outside agencies. Countless other potentially valuable interactive applications will follow in the near future. Website design issues can be broken down into two interdependent subcategories, content and navigation. With regard to content, city or agency departments already know what kinds of information requests they receive and where to go for the answers. However, I have found that when people from various departments are gathered in the same room, they often engage in vigorous exchanges about how much content to display on the web and how to frame it. Such meetings are useful, since they expose the very different expectations that thoughtful people may have about the role a website plays in the overall municipal communication strategy.

But content is only useful if it is seen and understood, and this leads to the issue of navigation. We have all experienced the frustration of struggling to find information on a website. This is one area where usability studies can help develop web design strategies. What is usability? Usability engineering originated in

software development and is based on the tenet that design immersed in the context of use has great potential for productively supporting the reality of use. Simply put, a usability study looks at actual users at work (or play) with a particular technology and employs a variety of techniques to get the user to explicitly report on their experience. A detailed look at how users actually work their way around a website is often quite revealing of navigation strengths and weaknesses.

Testing the experience of in-house users is fairly straightforward, and the recommendations that flow from testing can often be adopted almost immediately. The general public, however, is a bigger challenge. Every citizen has his or her own level of experience, software capability and information needs. One low-cost response to this reality is to ask in-house staff to navigate through areas of the website that they do not encounter as a part of their jobs. Even more useful are sessions conducted with focus groups made up from the general public.

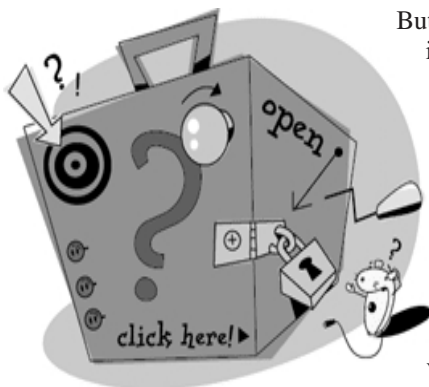
Some of the public-sector websites in B.C. are superb. The general level of website



effectiveness will improve as information providers take consistent, disciplined notice of the experience of the end-user. The user looks for clearly-presented content, a helpful and attractive format, and ease of navigation access. Testing usability is one very good way of assuring effective web-based information sharing.

David Firman is working with Main Street to design a set of workshops on web usability for public agencies. David is a consultant at Pacific Alliance Technologies in Vancouver. His work has contributed to the development of award-winning software now in use at utilities such as Telus, Verizon, and CPS (San Antonio, Texas).

He is currently working on developing flexible interfaces for web-based viewing of engineering data. David Firman can be contacted at df@pat.ca





Street Noise



Creating an effective annual report



Main Street Communications has joined with a team of associates to offer annual report production services for local governments in B.C.

Most annual reports are well-received by councils and the public, but our experience suggests there is often considerable anxiety in the preparation phase. Problems with software incompatibilities, missed deadlines and cost overruns frequently end up on the desk of senior staff. As a result, some reports are not as good as they could be in terms of clarity, coverage and visual appeal.

on a wide range of performance measures.

Main Street is offering to help manage the pressures. We have come up with a formula that will result in the preparation of a good-looking report with a minimum of stress. Our team will supervise the collection of information, design and edit the product and print the final report. We're also prepared to provide any single element or combination within this package. We also provide full writing and photographic services on request.

At the same time, the provincial government has signalled that, under its Community Charter bill, all local governments will be expected to publish annual reports including full disclosure

For sample costs, call Ian McLeod at (604) 467-4188.



Main Street Communications Ltd.

Offers seminars, workshops and strategic advice on:

- Public Consultation That Works
- Effective Media Relations
- Issues Management and Crisis Communications
- Writing News Releases That Make News
- Business Writing
- Public Speaking and Presentation Skills
- Building Teams, Committees and Partnerships

Writing for the Soul

with Vicki McLeod



Main Street is expanding our program of workshops designed to motivate writers to find their voices and make time to write. Three day- long workshops held in 2001 were sold out. In the coming year we plan to offer sessions in Maple Ridge, Victoria, Port Coquitlam and elsewhere in the Lower Mainland and on the Island. A weekend writers' retreat is set for April in the Fraser Valley. E-mail vbentzen@telus.net for updates.

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Work Begins at Arts Centre Site

Site preparation work has started on the new Arts Centre and Theatre in the Maple Ridge municipal complex. The Centre, scheduled for completion in late 2002, will feature a 500-seat main stage, a 150-seat performance studio, an art gallery and visual arts workshops.

The Centre's business plan calls for ongoing community input on how to make the space work for local artists, seniors, young people and festival committees. A local business advisory committee will assist with financial planning and with promoting the Centre as a conference venue.



The municipalities of Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows have agreed to provide an annual operating subsidy. Under a P3 arrangement, Maple Ridge will lease the complex from the developer. A community

fundraising committee is working to raise \$2 million for furnishings and equipment.

Main Street's Vicki McLeod is chair of publicity for the fundraising effort.

Province filling in gaps on Community Charter

The Community Charter process, intended to increase the power and responsibilities of local governments, has become one of the most complex of the Campbell government's initiatives. The process is now scheduled to extend to autumn 2002, when the legislature will be asked to adopt Charter legislation. Since last summer the government has issued a set of consultation papers and a discussion paper, both available at http://www.mcaaws.gov.bc.ca/charter/ch_index.html. A white paper is due in the spring, to be followed by public hearings.

The Charter idea had its roots in the Premier's own experience in municipal government. As an opposition MLA he submitted a draft Charter to the legislature as a private member's bill. For municipal decision-makers, key objectives in this exercise include a prohibition on downloading by the province, the limiting of the powers of provincial agencies when they operate on local turf, and more authority for municipalities to act without seeking provincial approval. The recent background papers also consider potential new revenue sources and borrowing powers

for local governments. The public interest is to be addressed through measures to increase openness and participation in local government, as well as through the elimination of red tape.

So far, the process has not attracted much media attention. However, in a November column, Vaughn Palmer of the Vancouver Sun predicted that the key points of public discussion will be the long term cost of the Charter and the scope of local powers to tax and regulate.



Main Street recently joined the City of North Vancouver and GMK Engineering of Victoria to inform residents about a proposed city-wide parking strategy. The City worked closely with an advisory committee of residents and business people in identifying issues and testing the parking plan.

P
a note from the task force

The City of North Vancouver Parking Task Force has released its report. The report includes recommendations for parking strategy, including: increasing parking supply, increasing parking enforcement, and increasing parking revenue.

learn more about the options

The City, the Parking Task Force and other interested parties are invited to attend a public hearing on the report. The hearing will be held on Monday, October 15, 2001, at 7:00 PM at the City of North Vancouver, 111 East 2nd Street, North Vancouver, BC V7P 2M1.

Members of the Task Force include: Mayor, Councillors, and representatives from various community groups.



Merger at Main Street

Communications Ltd.

Main Street partners Vicki Bentzen and Ian McLeod were married on October 13, 2001 at the fabulous Farmhouse Lifestyles conference and retreat centre in Pitt Meadows. So far, so good. Vicki has changed her last name to McLeod, but the Bentzen label will linger on for a time on our stationery and in our materials. Our e-mail address is imcleod@telus.net

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