

DRAFT

HRM Tax Reform Communication Strategy

Prepared by: Kim Borgal - Corporate Communications

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this communication strategy is to provide an overall framework for integrating, managing and coordinating the communications and public consultation initiatives that will guide the process of the Tax Reform project.

This plan is a working document, as the process of Tax Reform has already begun. The tactics and dates are interchangeable, and can be altered at any time.

UNDERSTANDING TAX REFORM

The purpose of Tax Reform is to ensure a competitive local government environment, and to decide, as a community, what we want the municipal tax system to do for us. Tax Reform strives to balance the reliance on market-based assessment while providing consistent and sustainable revenues to support municipal operations. The intention is to find a fair balance between providing services and collecting revenues.

In order to do this, staff will have to consult the public and stakeholders on the options to garner their support, understanding and input.

STAKEHOLDERS

There are a number of key stakeholders whose involvement is critical to the success of Tax Reform. Amongst them are:

- The general public
- Business groups
- Taxpayers
- Ratepayers and citizen groups
- Halifax Regional Municipality (staff, council, SMT, CAO and DCAO), and other municipalities in Nova Scotia
- Province of Nova Scotia
- The Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities
- Chamber of Commerce

The success of Tax Reform relies upon strong stakeholder support that is representative of all areas and facets of HRM.

SUMMARY OF COMMUNICATION TACTICS TO DATE

Corporate Communications and Finance have been working on the Tax Reform process since 2004. In this time the following tactics have begun, or been completed.

- Survey – Corporate Research Associates, November 2005 & November 2006
- Two focus groups on the Discussion paper (more details inside)
- Website has been launched (October 2006)
- Graphic design has been approved internally, and by focus groups
- Phone number and e-mail are in working order
- Advertising and recruitment for Tax Reform Committee

COMMUNICATION TACTICS

The process of the Tax Reform project is outlined below. The communications tactics will support the phases of the project. The communication vehicles are ongoing and will be catered towards the tactics outlined in the Tax Reform process below.

ONGOING COMMUNICATION VEHICLES

Details: To provide the public and stakeholders with educational tools that will inform about the need for Tax Reform, why we are doing it, and how to help. These tools will be constantly used, and updated, according to what phase we are in the Tax Reform process.

Discussion paper

The discussion paper is intended to be the main print communication tool for the Tax Reform strategy. It will provide the public and stakeholders with information about Tax Reform, why we are doing it, and how they can help. It will be mass distributed to all households in HRM via Canada Post or inserted with local newspapers. This brochure will also be available at public consultation events throughout the Tax Reform process, as well as in Customer Service Centres and Libraries.

The discussion paper has already been prepared and is in its final draft. Two focus groups have already been conducted (one with internal staff in August 2005, and one externally in February 2006). We gathered information about the discussion paper, its look and content. The feedback was used as a test to help determine and predict the attitudes and opinions of the general public and stakeholders.

Periodic newsletter

Once Phase 2 (see below) begins, a periodic update on the Tax Reform process will be circulated to all stakeholders and interest groups highlighting any milestones, decisions, public comment and next steps. The newsletter can be mailed out, e-mailed and posted on the website.

Website

The website is live (www.halifax.ca/taxreform) and acts as a public information tool for citizens to gain knowledge about tax reform and the options and events that will surround the strategy. So far the website is specific for information about the Tax Reform Committee. More information will be posted as the process is underway so the public can receive immediate updates, and follow the process. All advertising and communications efforts have suggested people visit the website for more information on the process of Tax Reform. The website's success can be partially measured by the amount of hits we get monthly, or during particular phases of the process.

Contact us about Tax Reform: e-mail and phone number

A Tax Reform phone number (490-4886) and e-mail (taxreform@halifax.ca) has been set up. The phone number directs callers to a real person, and the e-mail is accessible by several people. The phone number and e-mail will be included on all communications pieces.

Research

Ongoing research of public awareness and interest through scheduled questions in the Corporate Research Associates Urban Report.

STEPS IN THE TAX REFORM PROCESS:

Phase 1). CREATE STAKEHOLDER ADVISORY GROUP – TAX REFORM COMMITTEE (“TRC”)

Details: It is clear that cooperation and communication is key to the success of Tax Reform. Staff must work in cooperation with internal and external stakeholders to ensure buy in for any Tax Reform recommendations. The TRC will be present throughout the process to ensure that stakeholders can contribute their input. The TRC, comprised of Council members and HRM residents, will advise on appropriate steps throughout the Tax Reform process, review materials, and feedback from roundtables, tax conference, and community meetings (see tactics below) and provide guidance in the decision making process.

Communications support:

- Newspaper advertisements for recruitment, press release
- Posting TRC meeting minutes to the website

Phase 2). PUBLIC EDUCATION

Details: This phase will begin after the TRC has been formed, but will be an on-going process of informing the public of where we are in the process, information about decisions made and next steps. In addition, this phase will be about educating the public on the status quo of the current municipal tax system, and some options for rebuilding the tax system as a community. This phase is more “one-way” communication of advising the public. Phase 3 will include more opportunities for “two-way” communication and public feedback. A database of people who are interested in the Tax Reform process should be developed from herein, to send information about upcoming events, and news about the process.

Communications support:

With leadership from the TRC, public education will be focusing on the communications tools listed below (details above).

- Discussion paper
- Newsletters & e-mails
- PSAs, ads
- Website updates
- Corporate Research Associates – Urban Report

Phase 3). PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Details: HRM would like to hear the thoughts of residents and stakeholders on how we should shape our new tax system, and what methods should be explored. The consultation will occur in two steps; roundtable discussions, and a tax conference. The round tables will provide an environment for participants to express their opinions on the topic in an intimate setting.

Roundtables/ Cafes - Practice Session with Council

Details: Provide council with an early opportunity to take part in the Tax Reform process by attending a workshop session.

Objectives:

- Garner early support from Regional Council
- To inform Council about the options available for tax reform in HRM and the strategies that will follow, and gain their approval
- Provide Council with an early opportunity to ask questions and give input

Public Round Tables/ Cafes

Details: There will be a series of “cafes” or roundtables conducted throughout various areas in HRM. The purpose of the roundtables is to gather opinions from participants in different districts. Each individual district will have its concerns about tax reform due to its geographical standing (Rural, Urban, Suburban) on HRM’s map. We would like to gather the opinions of each individual group and then bring them together at the Tax Conference so individuals hear concerns from other districts, and to see if a conclusion can be reached.

Objectives:

- To inform and educate participants about the options surrounding tax reform, and gather suggestions.
- To garner support from participants.
- To encourage public input and stakeholder participation in the Tax Reform strategy’s development.

Communications support (Roundtables, or “cafes”)

- Letter to stakeholders & special interest groups
- Distribution of Discussion paper (again)
- Newsletter and e-mail
- Advertising campaign to encourage people to sign up for cafes
- PSAs and news releases
- Update website with information
- Live feed to website for those who cannot attend (Canada News Wire)

Tax Conference:

Details: To gather the members that took part in the separate roundtables together in one venue to have a discussion. The purpose of this is to bring together the opinions of stakeholders within different areas of HRM and come to a conclusion that pleases the majority.

Communications support (Tax Conference)

- Letter to citizens involved in round tables
- Newsletter, e-mail
- PSA and news release
- Updated website with information
- Corporate Research Associates – Urban Report

Phase 4). RECOMMENDATION TO COUNCIL

Details: To be determined based on recommendations from Roundtables and approval of Tax Reform Committee.

Communications support:

- News release
- Update website
- Newsletter, e-mail

Phase 5). PUBLIC HEARINGS

Details: To inform and educate citizens on the Tax Reform process, and what can happen to change the tax system as it exists today. More details TBD.

Communications support:

- News release/ PSA
- Update website with information
- Newsletter, e-mail
- Information piece – brochure, booklet (TBD)

Phase 6). IMPLEMENTATION

Details: To be determined based on recommendations from Roundtables and Tax Reform Committee.

Communications support

- News release
- Update website
- Newsletter, e-mail

Phase 7). EVALUATION

Details: Every good communications strategy/ campaign should be measured through evaluation. The Tax Reform process is a public process, and the evaluation tools for success are listed below.

- Media monitoring
- Corporate Research Associates – Urban Report
- Public Comment, feedback
- Public Participation
- Council review