

Town of Freeport Communications Assessment

By Peter Sachs

1. Introduction

Over the past few weeks I have worked with Councilor Pilch to assess Freeport's current communication channels, identify problems with our current infrastructure and policy, and develop recommendations on how to improve them. The goal of this assessment is to create a communication system able to effectively let Freeport residents know the action of and goings-on in their town. This has included a survey of our present capabilities as well as extensive research on the actions of other towns in Maine and across America. The full recommendations were presented before the Freeport Town Council on 08/03/2021, with a summary below.

2. Current Capabilities

Freeport has a wide variety of active communication channels:

- The Freeport Municipal Bulletin, with 670 subscribers on an email list, contains a variety of public events and notices. It is maintained by the General Assistance Administrator.
- The Freeport Facebook page, with 1,231 followers, contains public notices as well as recordings of Town Council meetings. It is maintained primarily by the Town Manager.
- The town has an opt-in emergency "reverse 911" outreach system that sends out texts, with subscribers in the low hundreds (no hard numbers available).
- The town's television station shows Town Council meetings and other public forums, and is available for streaming online at fctv3.freeportmaine.com.
- The town's website (freeportmaine.com) is managed by a variety of town staff, who maintain whatever sections are relevant to their office. It contains a blogpost-style "Municipal News" section.
- When legally required, the town takes out a newspaper ad for public notice.

3. Issues

The town is facing two main issues relating to its current communication strategy: one, we do not reach the vast majority of Freeporters, and two, the control of our current communication channels is highly fragmented.

The problem with the first issue, outreach, is self-evident. Only the most engaged fraction of Freeporters were able to find and subscribe to the newsletter and/or our Facebook page. Because of this, invested parties are likely not seeing the town's public notices and announcements, leading to unnecessary misinformation, anger, and conflict. The vestigial state of our current emergency messaging system, meanwhile, has the potential to be dangerous. It is used regularly to let Freeporters know where they can safely stay during heat waves and snowstorms if their residences lack AC or heating respectively; not to mention how necessary this would be during a more dramatic disaster. It is essential that we expand this system in order to save as many lives as possible.

The second issue comes from the decentralization of town communication. There are about a half-dozen to a dozen different town employees with some authority over the town's communication channels. This means that one piece of important info, posted to one channel, isn't necessarily posted to another. For example, the newsletter (and all information therein) is only sent out via an email list and the website--it isn't on the Facebook page. Each of these employees has these responsibilities as a small part of their job; this has often led to town communication to be neglected due to a lack of perceived importance (relative to the rest of their duties) as well as time. This is exacerbated by Freeport's lack of communication guidelines. Right now, these employees either follow cautious, self-imposed guidelines or refuse to post at all unless required by statute in order to avoid treading on anyone's toes. Other towns spend between 25-40 combined hours a week on communication. Freeport spends 3-5 hours a week.

4. Recommendations

Influencers for Emergencies:

Our short-term priority should be to build up Freeport's ability to send out emergency communication. The fastest way to do this is to reach out to local influencers

that already have significant distribution lists or followings on social media. Whenever an emergency occurs, they will be able to amplify whatever information we have much farther than we would be able to on our own. For example, Buck's Barbeque (a local restaurant) has over 10,000 followers on their Facebook page; roughly 8 times the reach of Freeport's. Much of that is tourists and residents of neighboring towns--however, it is not unreasonable to assume that a larger number of Freeporters get regular information from Buck's than the town itself.

Zero Effort Engagement:

Freeport's social media and newsletter are publicly available to all who search for it; however, one must already know what to look for. Previous attempts to build up circulation for specific communication channels used the other, more established town channels limiting their effectiveness; we have only expanded our reach among people we have already reached. Many people are not subscribed to our newsletter and social media simply because they do not know it exists. The town should try to advertise its communication channels in a way that requires no effort on behalf of residents. This can include traditional advertising, such as newspaper or radio, but more creative and direct methods are possible. The town of Falmouth, when they first started their newsletter, sent a physical copy to every address in town with information on how to sign up. They send additional copies out with their tax mailings. It is also a possibility to set up info boards in high resident traffic areas (such as grocery stores).

Set Communication Standards:

As previously stated, Freeport has no formal communication guidelines, leading to confusion and (for social media) a slower update schedule. By formalizing communication and aesthetic standards for social media and the newsletter, we can improve both the quality and quantity of Town of Freeport posts. Some towns advertise community events not affiliated with the town government; others stay focused on news. Both systems can and do work, as long as they are spelled out explicitly.

Hire a Communications Director:

The easiest way to fix the fragmented state of Freeport's current communication is to move all such responsibilities to a single department; given Freeport's current size and needs, it will likely only require one person. They will be able to prioritize the

newsletter, social media, and the website to a level that the current system does not truly allow. This professionalization will lead to higher quality content, increasing readership and engagement. They can also ensure information is consistent across all our channels. Furthermore, they can easily expand our capabilities to other platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, that Freeport does not currently utilize. A professional will be able to manage reaching out to influencers, setting new standards, and expanding our social media reach more effectively than our current system.