

VIRGINIA ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES  
COMMUNICATIONS AWARD SUBMISSION  
SUBMITTED BY: ROANOKE COUNTY, VA

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COMMUNICATING BUDGET INFORMATION WITH A  
TIMELY AND EASY TO UNDERSTAND PUBLIC CAMPAIGN

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Providing information that is easy for the public and employees to understand is no easy task when it comes to explaining the complicated and somewhat lengthy process involved in developing a locality's budget. Such has been the case for Roanoke County, which has a general government revenue budget of approximately \$165 million. However, over the past couple of years, Roanoke County has created and refined a multi-month campaign to provide timely and easy-to-understand budget updates that takes the public and employees from the earliest budget development meetings to final budget approval by the Board of Supervisors. This process has been especially important in recent years as Roanoke County has faced challenging decisions regarding department operating budgets and staffing levels.

Helping and encouraging the public and employees to understand and get involved in the budget development process became an even greater priority for Roanoke County's Administration and Board of Supervisors with the downturn in the national, state, and local economy. In late 2008/2009, Roanoke County was beginning to see local revenues decrease rather than grow by upwards of 7 percent annually, as had been the case for a number of years. Prior to 2009, the public and employees had rarely expressed interest in the budget process. But, for the first time in years, Roanoke County's departments were being asked to make cuts to their operating budgets, which had employees and some members of the public concerned.

It was apparent the economic issues facing the nation, state, and Roanoke County were not going to dissipate anytime soon. It was at this point that staff in the Roanoke County Public Information Office began to review the budget information that was available online and being shared internally with employees. It became apparent that while the data and important dates were available online, improvements could be made in the way budget information was shared with both employees and citizens, who may not be able to attend multiple public meetings, often held in the afternoon or evenings. Thus, staff in the Public Information Office began to explore ways to share information from the budget meetings as quickly, and as simply, as possible.

Since 2009, the amount of information, level of detail, and ease in finding budget-related documents has improved as a result of feedback. For example, employees asked that the information provided be written in a fashion that was simple and easy to understand because financial information, revenues, and charts can be complicated. As a result, Public Information Office staff uses short sentences and bullets to highlight the most relevant information, whenever possible. Other feedback related to how early in the process information was conveyed. Over time, it has become apparent that citizens and employees want to know and understand the budget picture long before a draft budget is developed and public hearing scheduled. Today, information regarding the budget is shared as soon as budget numbers are publicly discussed in detail with the Board of Supervisors. This allows the public to know, early on, how the budget picture is shaping up.

Roanoke County staff does an outstanding job preparing budget-related reports for the Board of Supervisors meetings; these are the reports that are contained in the Board of Supervisors agenda packet that is posted online. One challenge, however, is that the public has to know when and where to look on the Roanoke County website to find the information. With that in mind, the Public Information staff *first* created a dedicated web page under the County's Management and Budget site with an easy to remember web address ([www.RoanokeCountyVA.gov/budgetinfo](http://www.RoanokeCountyVA.gov/budgetinfo)) where all budget-related information could be posted.

The following is a list of when, how, and what information is posted to this dedicated webpage, as well as the other ways that Roanoke County encourages the public and employees to understand and get involved in the budget process:

- Staff begins posting information to the web page early in the budget process. For Roanoke County, this typically begins in January or early February when the Board of Supervisors is briefed by the County Administrator during a scheduled work session on information that is generally generated by the Governor's office in mid-to-late December.
- Directly following the work session, a short budget summary of the information discussed with the Board of Supervisors members is prepared by Public Information staff. The brief write-up references and links to the various reports that are provided to the Board members.
- All of the budget summaries and related documents are labeled according to the date in which they are presented, so that the reader is able to easily follow the progression of the budget process.

- To ensure that citizens know when the budget is discussed or new information is available, information directing the public to the budget web page is shared via the County's social media sites.
- To keep the County's nearly 1,000 employees informed, an email is sent following the Board of Supervisors meeting that summarizes the information discussed, with links to the County's budget webpage for more detailed information.
- An online citizen's input form was created in January 2012 and is available on the webpage for citizens to comment on the budget or provide general feedback. It is important that people share their views of the budget, but not everyone is able to take time away to attend a Board of Supervisors meeting or to speak at a public hearing.
- Other information available on the dedicated webpage includes a calendar of important dates related to the budget, such as budget work sessions, public hearings, first and second readings, and the date for final adoption of the budget.

When Roanoke County began its campaign to improve the sharing of budget information, Public Information staff personally informed the media of the dedicated webpage and social media updates. To further keep the public informed of the budget, a five minute interview is taped with the County Administrator or Management and Budget Director each month to air on the County's cable access station. In early 2012, staff began to share these video segments on YouTube and the dedicated budget webpage.

Feedback from the Board of Supervisors, administration, citizens, employees, and media regarding the budget communications initiative continues to be positive. And even though the improvements were made in an effort to keep citizens informed during a difficult economy, staff intends to continue their efforts into the future. Communication is important in local government where the citizens deserve to be informed and encouraged to voice their opinion, especially regarding issues that may have a direct impact on the services that they have come to rely and depend upon.