

Washington County

Board of Commissioners Resolve No. 2026-2

Board Policy/Directive on Communications

WHEREAS, the Board of Commissioners ("Commissioners") recognizes the importance of communications of and concerning County Government operations, both externally and internally; and

WHEREAS, in the Commissioners' judgment a written communication policy would benefit Washington County government operations for guidance and clarity.

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the attached document entitled "Washington County Communication Policy" dated October 8, 2026, is hereby adopted by the Commissioners; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the County Administrator, on behalf of the Commissioners, is hereby directed to distribute the attached Policy to all affected persons and entities; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the County Administrator, as County Clerk, shall cause this Resolve to be placed on file as a record of the Commissioners' action.

Dated this 8th day of October 2026 in Machias, Maine.

Washington County Board of Commissioners


David C. Burns, Chair, District 2


William Howard, District 1


Courtney Hammond, District 3

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Washington County Communication Policy

Policy Title: Communications, Public Information, and Intergovernmental Coordination Policy

Adopting Body: Washington County Board of Commissioners

Applies To: County Commissioners, County Administrator, Department Heads, and County Employees, Contractors, and Volunteers acting on the County's behalf

Effective Date: Upon adoption

1. Purpose and Authority

- 1.- This policy establishes coordinated, accurate, timely, and lawful communications by and on behalf of Washington County. It is intended to support transparent county government, responsible administration, continuity of operations, respectful workplace communications, and meaningful public access.
- 2.- The Board of Commissioners adopts this policy pursuant to its statutory duties to represent the County and manage its business. 30-A M.R.S. § 101.
- 3.- This policy supplements, and does not supersede, applicable federal or state law; collective-bargaining agreements; personnel policies; record-retention schedules; emergency plans; court orders; or the statutory duties and authority of elected county officers, constitutional officers, and independent boards or agencies.
- 4.- No provision of this policy authorizes the County Administrator, a Commissioner, or a department head to direct, restrict, or assume duties that law assigns to another county officer or independent official.

2. Guiding Principles

- 1.- County communications must be accurate, timely, professional, accessible, and respectful.
- 2.- Communications shall clearly distinguish: (a) an official County position; (b) an individual Commissioner's views; and (c) information provided by a department within that department's operational authority.
- 3.- County personnel shall not knowingly release confidential, privileged, security-sensitive, personnel-related, protected health, criminal-justice, juvenile, or other nonpublic information except as authorized by law and applicable policy.
- 4.- County business shall be conducted through County-approved accounts, systems, and channels whenever reasonably practicable so that records may be retained, searched, and produced as required by law.

3. Roles and Responsibilities

A. Board of Commissioners

- 1.- The Board establishes County policy through duly noticed public action and speaks for the County on matters reserved to the Board or on which the Board has adopted a position.
- 2.- The Chair, or another Commissioner expressly designated by the Board, is the Board's principal spokesperson on Board actions, County-wide policy, and matters pending before the Board. Nothing in this provision prevents another Commissioner from accurately describing a Board action or expressing that Commissioner's personal viewpoint as an individual elected official.
- 3.- Except as otherwise decided by the Board of Commissioners, Commissioners shall refer routine operational inquiries, requests for records, media inquiries concerning County administration, and constituent service requests to the County Administrator or the appropriate Department Head, while remaining available to constituents in their elected capacity.

B. County Administrator

- 1.- The County Administrator is the County's chief administrative official and is responsible for administration of departments and offices controlled by the Commissioners; the Administrator also acts as clerk of the County and attends Commissioners' meetings except as provided by law. 30-A M.R.S. § 82.
- 2.- Subject to Board of Commissioners' direction and this policy, the County Administrator shall:
 - a. Coordinate County-wide administrative communications and distribute information necessary for effective operations;
 - b. Serve as, or designate in writing, the operational contact for routine media and public-information inquiries that concern County administration;
 - c. Ensure that Commissioners receive material operational, financial, legal, public-safety, and reputational information in a timely manner;
 - d. Coordinate the preparation and posting of Commissioners' agendas, meeting materials, approved minutes or recordings, notices, and public-facing updates, in consultation with the Board Chair and County staff;
 - e. Establish a process for departments to route public-record requests immediately to the County's public access officer and record custodian; and
 - f. Consult County legal counsel when a communication presents material legal, litigation, confidentiality, employment, procurement, or public-safety concerns.

C. Department Heads

- 1.- Department heads are responsible for accurate, timely, and professional communications within their operational area. They shall keep the County Administrator informed of significant matters affecting service delivery, budget, staffing, safety, public confidence, legal exposure, or matters likely to require Board attention. The County Administrator shall keep the Board apprised of any of the aforescribed significant matters. To the extent such matters may directly involve the County Administrator, Department heads shall refer such matters to the Chair of the Board, or other designee, and/or as appropriate to the County's legal counsel.

2.- Department Heads may communicate factual information about routine programs, services, operations, and public notices within their lawful authority. They shall coordinate in advance with the County Administrator on County-wide announcements, significant policy matters, emerging controversies, multi-department issues, or communications reasonably likely to draw substantial media attention.

3.- Department Heads shall preserve the lawful authority of elected county officers and independent officials. Where an inquiry concerns an independently elected or statutorily independent office, staff shall refer the inquiry to that office unless the responsible official requests administrative assistance.

4.- Department Heads must promptly notify the County Administrator of a serious incident, significant service interruption, credible threat, data-security event, material complaint, anticipated claim or litigation, major records request, or media inquiry involving a significant County matter. Department Heads may also first notify the County's legal counsel of any of the aforescribed events, especially if communication's with the County's legal counsel may be necessary to preserve and protect the County's rights and duties.

D. All County Personnel

1.- Personnel shall treat colleagues, residents, vendors, and public officials with civility and shall not use County systems to harass, discriminate, retaliate, threaten, or disclose protected information.

2.- Personnel shall not purport to speak for the Board or the County unless authorized by this policy, the Board, the County Administrator within the Administrator's authority, or the responsible Department Head within that department's authority.

3.- Employees may communicate personally on matters of public concern, but must not represent personal views as County policy, disclose nonpublic information, misuse County resources, or interfere with their duties or the County's operations.

4. Communications with the Public and Media

1.- **Routine inquiries.** The receiving employee shall provide responsive, accurate public information within the employee's authority or direct the inquiry to the appropriate department.

2.- **Policy and County-wide matters.** Inquiries concerning Board action, pending Board business, County-wide policy, budget priorities, or issues involving more than one department shall be coordinated through the County Administrator and, when appropriate, the Board Chair or the Board at a public meeting.

3.- **Media inquiries.** Staff receiving a media inquiry shall promptly notify the County Administrator and the relevant department head. The County Administrator shall coordinate a timely response, identify the appropriate spokesperson, and provide the Board Chair notice when the matter concerns Board policy, litigation, a major incident, or significant public interest.

4.- **Urgent public-safety communications.** When immediate communication is necessary to protect life, safety, property, or continuity of essential County services, the responsible official may issue prompt factual information within that official's authority. The official shall notify the County Administrator and Board Chair as soon as practicable. This policy does not displace the

authority of law enforcement, emergency management, corrections, public-health, or other officials with independent statutory responsibilities.

5.- **Accuracy and corrections.** Public statements must be based on verified information. If a material error is identified, the responsible official shall promptly consult the County Administrator or County legal counsel and issue or arrange an appropriate correction through the same or a similarly effective communication channel.

5. Board Communications and Public Meetings

1.- The Commissioners shall deliberate and take official action only through public proceedings or other processes authorized by law. County boards and commissions are covered by Maine's definition of public proceedings, and public proceedings generally must be open to the public unless a statutory exception applies. 1 M.R.S. §§ 402(2)(C), 403.

2.- Commissioners and staff shall not use email, text messages, social-media messaging, telephone chains, intermediaries, or other serial communications to reach agreement, conduct deliberations, or take action outside a properly noticed public proceeding when doing so would circumvent Maine's open-meeting requirements.

3.- The County Administrator, as clerk, shall maintain a record of each public proceeding for which notice is required, including the date, time, place, attendance, motions, and votes as required by law. An electronic audio or video recording may satisfy the statutory record requirement. 1 M.R.S. § 403.

4.- Meeting notices, agendas, packets, approved minutes, and recordings shall be made publicly available in a manner consistent with law, County practice, and accessibility needs. Materials containing confidential information shall be reviewed before release.

5.- Executive-session topics, confidential legal advice, personnel information, security information, and other protected matters must be handled only as permitted by law. Participants shall not disclose nonpublic executive-session information except as authorized by law or County legal counsel.

6. Public Records and Retention

1.- County communications, including email, text messages, social-media content, attachments, and other electronic data, may be public records when prepared or received for use in County business or relating to County business. 1 M.R.S. § 402(3).

2.- The County Administrator is designated as the primary public access officer. The public access officer is the County contact for requests and is responsible for ensuring acknowledgment and a good-faith response estimate as prescribed by law; the County must respond even if a request is delivered elsewhere or the public access officer is unavailable. 1 M.R.S. § 413. The County Finance Director is the secondary public access officer, and shall perform duties of the public access officer in the absence of the County Administrator or as specific circumstances of a request(s) may dictate the County Finance Director is a more appropriate County contact. The County's legal counsel shall assist, as appropriate, on any public record request(s) and County processing and/or responses.

3.- Any employee receiving a request to inspect or copy County records shall promptly forward it to the public access officer and the office maintaining the requested record. No employee may disregard, delete, conceal, or independently deny a records request.

4.- The public access officer and record custodian shall administer requests in accordance with Maine law, including the requirement to acknowledge a request within five working days, provide a good-faith time and cost estimate, and provide written denials with the statutory basis. 1 M.R.S. § 408-A.

5.- Before release, the record custodian shall consult County counsel or an appropriate subject-matter official when a record may contain privileged, confidential, security-sensitive, personnel, health, corrections, criminal-justice, or otherwise protected information. The County shall redact protected information when required rather than withhold an entire record unless full withholding is authorized by law.

6.- Personnel shall retain County records in accordance with applicable State records-management requirements and County retention schedules. County business shall not be intentionally conducted through personal accounts or devices to evade retention or public-access requirements. If County business is conducted through a personal account or device, the responsible person shall preserve and produce the responsive record through the County's established process.

7. Digital and Social-Media Communications

1.- The County Administrator shall maintain, or designate personnel to maintain, official County websites and social-media accounts. Department-specific accounts require the Administrator's approval and must identify the responsible department.

2.- Official digital communications must be accurate, accessible, civil, and consistent with this policy. They shall not disclose nonpublic information, create an unauthorized commitment, endorse political candidates or campaigns using County resources, or state an unapproved County position.

3.- Department heads may post routine program, service, closure, safety, and event information within their lawful authority. Proposed posts concerning Board policy, litigation, personnel, significant incidents, or controversial County-wide issues must be coordinated with the County Administrator.

4.- Content on official accounts, including posts, comments, direct messages, edits, and deletions, shall be retained when required as a County record. Moderation of third-party comments must be viewpoint-neutral and consistent with a written account-use notice approved by County counsel.

8. Internal Communications and Escalation

1.- The County Administrator shall convene regular administrative coordination meetings with department heads and any other staff as appropriate. Department heads shall provide concise reports on material operational, financial, staffing, safety, project, and public-information issues. The County Administrator and each Department Head shall provide the Commissioners with a written weekly summary report (with each respective report consolidated into one single overall

document), or on such other time period established by the Commissioners, regarding County operations including any specific areas or priorities requested by the Commissioners.

2.- The County Administrator shall determine whether a matter requires Board notice, Board direction, placement on a public meeting agenda, consultation with County legal counsel, or referral to an elected officer or other responsible authority. Notwithstanding the foregoing, any individual Commissioner may request an agenda item for a Board meeting, which shall be placed on the agenda.

3.- A Department Head may communicate directly with Commissioners on matters within the department's authority. When the communication concerns a significant County-wide issue, proposed policy, material expenditure, legal risk, or a matter requiring coordinated response, the department head shall copy or promptly inform the County Administrator, except when doing so would be inappropriate because of a protected reporting obligation, personnel complaint, legal advice, or conflict of interest. A department head may communicate directly with County legal counsel to determine the most appropriate course of action.

4.- This policy does not prohibit protected reporting to law enforcement, regulatory agencies, County legal counsel, or other authorities, and it does not limit rights available under law or an applicable collective-bargaining agreement.

9. Confidentiality, Legal Matters, and Procurement

1.- Matters involving actual or threatened litigation, claims, subpoenas, investigations, insurance coverage, privileged communications, settlement discussions, or legal interpretation shall be referred promptly to County counsel through the County Administrator unless counsel directs otherwise.

2.- Personnel shall not make admissions of fault, liability, waiver, settlement authority, or legal conclusions on the County's behalf unless specifically authorized by the Board or County counsel.

3.- Communications related to pending solicitations, bids, proposals, negotiations, contracts, personnel matters, or investigations shall be handled in coordination with the County Administrator and County counsel as appropriate, with due regard for public-access obligations and legally protected information.

10. Training, Administration, and Review

1.- The County Administrator and County legal counsel shall provide orientation on this policy to department heads. This policy shall be made available to all covered personnel.

2.- The designated public access officer, both primary and secondary, shall complete the training required by Maine law and serve as an internal resource on public-access compliance.¹ M.R.S. § 413.

3.- Department heads shall ensure that employees who create, receive, retain, or release County communications receive practical instruction on records preservation, confidentiality, media referral, and the handling of public-record requests.

4.- The County Administrator shall review this policy at least every two years, and sooner when a material change in law, technology, County structure, or operational needs warrants revision. Proposed revisions shall be submitted to the Board for review/consideration.

5.- Violations of this policy may be addressed through training, corrective direction, or discipline consistent with law, applicable personnel policies, employment agreement(s), and collective-bargaining obligations. This policy does not alter statutory appointment, dismissal, or disciplinary authority. County employment and discipline remain governed by applicable law, including without limitation 30-A M.R.S. § 501.

11. Adoption

Adopted this 8th day of October 2026, by vote of the Washington County Board of Commissioners.

Washington County Board of Commissioners


David C. Burns, Chair, District 2


William Howard, District 1


Courtney Hammond, District 3

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