# Foundations of Municipal Communications

# About us

**Sean Dugan**

11 years of local government experience in Massachusetts

**Current:**

- Assistant Town Administrator - Town of Easton

**Previous:**

- Director of Communications & Special Projects - Town of Lexington

- Senior Communications Manager - Framingham Dept. of Public Works

- Public Information Officer - Town of Concord

Served a 3 year term on Uxbridge School Committee

MPA from University of Missouri, MS in Communications from Northeastern University

Founded Massachusetts Municipal Communicators via Mass. Municipal Association.

# About us

**Brianna Sunryd, MPP**

13+ years in local government communications and technology

**Current:** Public Services Manager, Collins Center for Public Management - UMass Boston

Public Innovation Design Studio, Communications Practice Area

**Previous:**

- Director of Communications & Civic Innovation, Community Participation Officer  - Town of Amherst, MA

- Assistant Manager Communications Center, Public Outreach Coordinator - City of Worcester, MA

ICMA Digital Strategies Committee

Massachusetts Digital Government Advisory Board

# Tell us about you!

**Introduce yourself**

Share in the chat what your current position/organization is.

Share up to 3 comms-related duties that you're responsible for (website, newsletter, social, print, etc.)

# Municipal Communications 101

**What we do**

Informed - Quality - Audience - Values

**Why they need us**

Having a person focused on comms means things won't fall through the cracks

**Benefits to our organizations**

Better information means fewer calls/emails/complaints, and less confusion

**Changing landscape & heightened importance**

How we communicate is ever-changing, and dedicated communicators keep you on the cutting edge of trends

# What do municipal communicators do?

**Informed**

Simply put, public sector communicators provide the timely, accurate and complete information needed for the general public to make informed decisions.

**Quality**

We promote important information that directly affects quality of life.

# What do municipal communicators do?

**Audience**

Work with our colleagues in government to get the right message, to the right audience, at the right time.

**Values**

We aim to find ways to engage the public, so that their government is reflective of their values.

# What is the Civic Experience?

Civic experiences can be described as the touch points or interactions between local governments and their community members. Such as:

- getting permits

- attending and participating in public meetings

- enrolling in recreational programs

- opening a business

- making payments

….to name just a few.

**Like most experiences, they vary on the scale from positive to negative, and everywhere in between.**

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# Effective Communication Positively Impacts the Civic Experience

- Educates and provides context to your community for increased involvement

- Builds trust and community well-being

- Harness and collect key feedback in a centralized way to make community-informed decisions

- Valuable data for decision-makers and elected officials

- Reduces misinformation and increases buy-in

- Multiple, accessible, simple ways to engage allows for greater reach and inclusion

**Note:** 91% of Americans who feel very attached to their community are at least somewhat interested in news about local laws and policies, compared with 68% of those who are not very or not at all attached. (Pew-Knight Initiative, 2024)

# Increasing Importance of Municipal Communications



**Heightened Importance**

The expectations of the public and how they receive information has changed remarkably over the past decade

With a flood of information people receive every day, public sector agencies need to stand out.

- Misinformation is a **real** problem for public sector agencies

- Civic engagement is important now more than ever

- The public demands accessibility and transparency in local government

# COVID Effect on Municipal Communications

Funding & participation surged during pandemic; Use it or Lose it!

**Attention**

People had time to pay attention & tune in! Expansion of virtual options and tools made it even easier.

**Traffic & Data**

Increased interest, awareness, web traffic & subscribers. Track and use this data over time.

**Funding**

Local communities received CARES Act & ARPA funding.

As that dries up, what now?

# Rebuilding the Trust

Trust in and positive public opinion of local government had grown during the pandemic, but has declined in the years following.
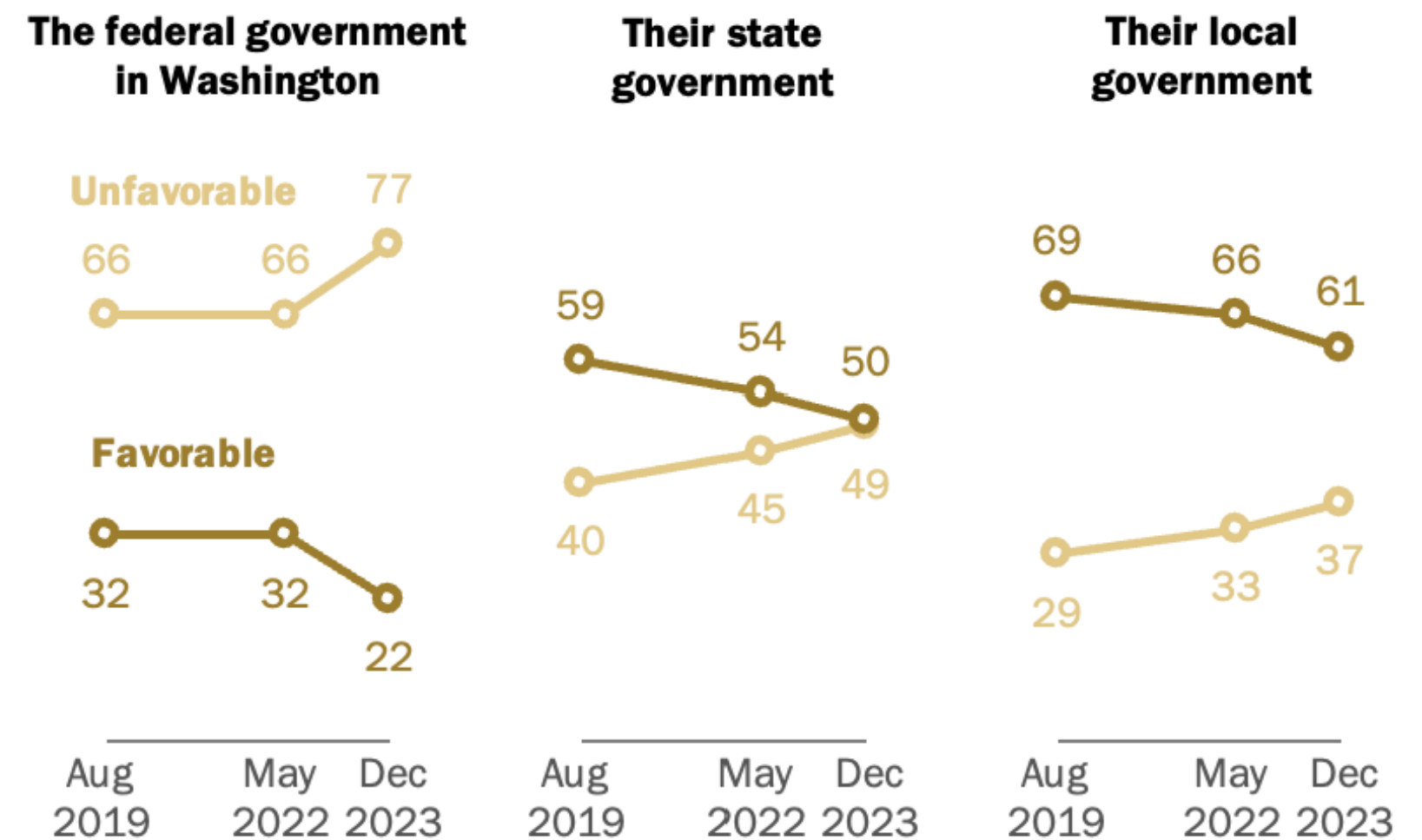
61% of adults rate their local government positively.

This is down from 66% in 2022 and 69% in 2019.

Americans differ little by party in opinion of their local government, with similar shares of Republicans (63%) and Democrats (64%) holding favorable views.



**Americans' opinions of federal, state and local government have grown more negative since 2019**

*% who have a(n) _____ opinion of ...*

**The federal government in Washington**

Unfavorable 66 → 66 → 77

Favorable 32 → 32 → 22

| Aug 2019 | May 2022 | Dec 2023 |

**Their state government**

59 → 54 → 50

40 → 45 → 49

| Aug 2019 | May 2022 | Dec 2023 |

**Their local government**

69 → 66 → 61

29 → 33 → 37

| Aug 2019 | May 2022 | Dec 2023 |

Note: No answer responses are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 3, 2023.

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

# What is
# Strategic Communications?

It's the practice of using effective communication skills and techniques by developing compelling messaging tailored to reach a target audience to achieve an organization's communications goals.
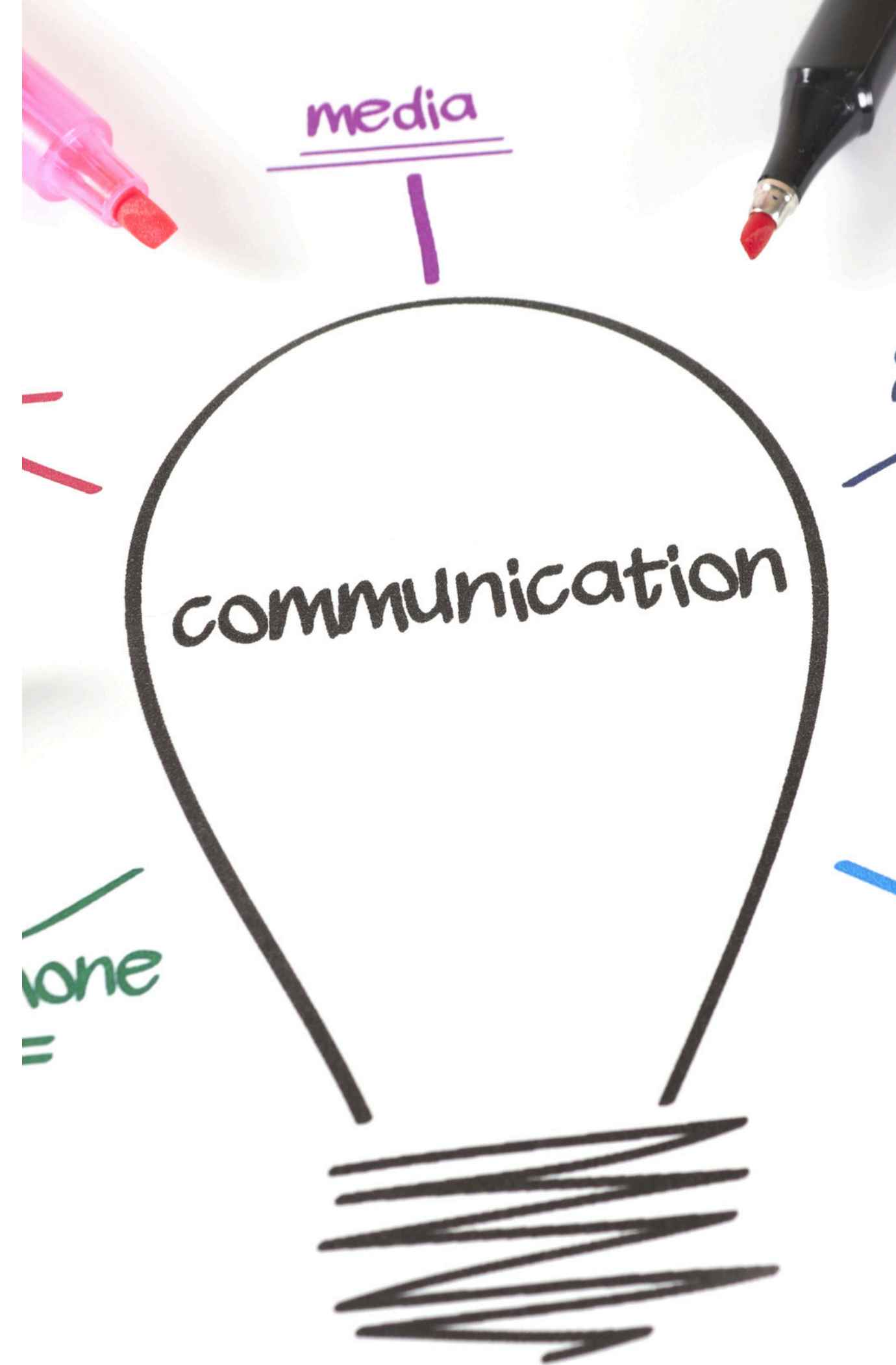
# Determine Your Goals

Figure out what is going to guide your strategy. These goals will likely come from your elected leaders and/or top leadership staff.

Ex. comprehensive plans, Council/Select Board goals, etc.

Your goals are what will guide the communications of your organization.

# Identify Your Audience

Look closely at who your organization is serving broadly, but also per message.

Unlike private sector, we have to reach a diverse audience.

Look at age, gender, race, educational attainment, etc.

Census data can help with this, also surveys.

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# Audience Definition

Ask yourself the following questions:

### Primary

Whose knowledge, attitudes and behavior must be changed in order to meet your goal? → These groups become your primary audiences

### Secondary

Who else is affected if you succeed in your goal? Say hello to you secondary audiences

### Partners

Are there others who can influence your primary and secondary audiences? Do not forget these important allies and partners, **try a community mapping process!**

# Community Mapping: A Powerful Tool for Municipal Communication

Community Mapping is a process which enables people to gather accurate information about how a community operates in order to mobilize its members and put them in a better position to represent themselves. **A concept borrowed from the social change movement but can help us in municipal communications as well.**

Helps reveal or highlight new allies/partners who can help share messages or provide access to tools/resources.
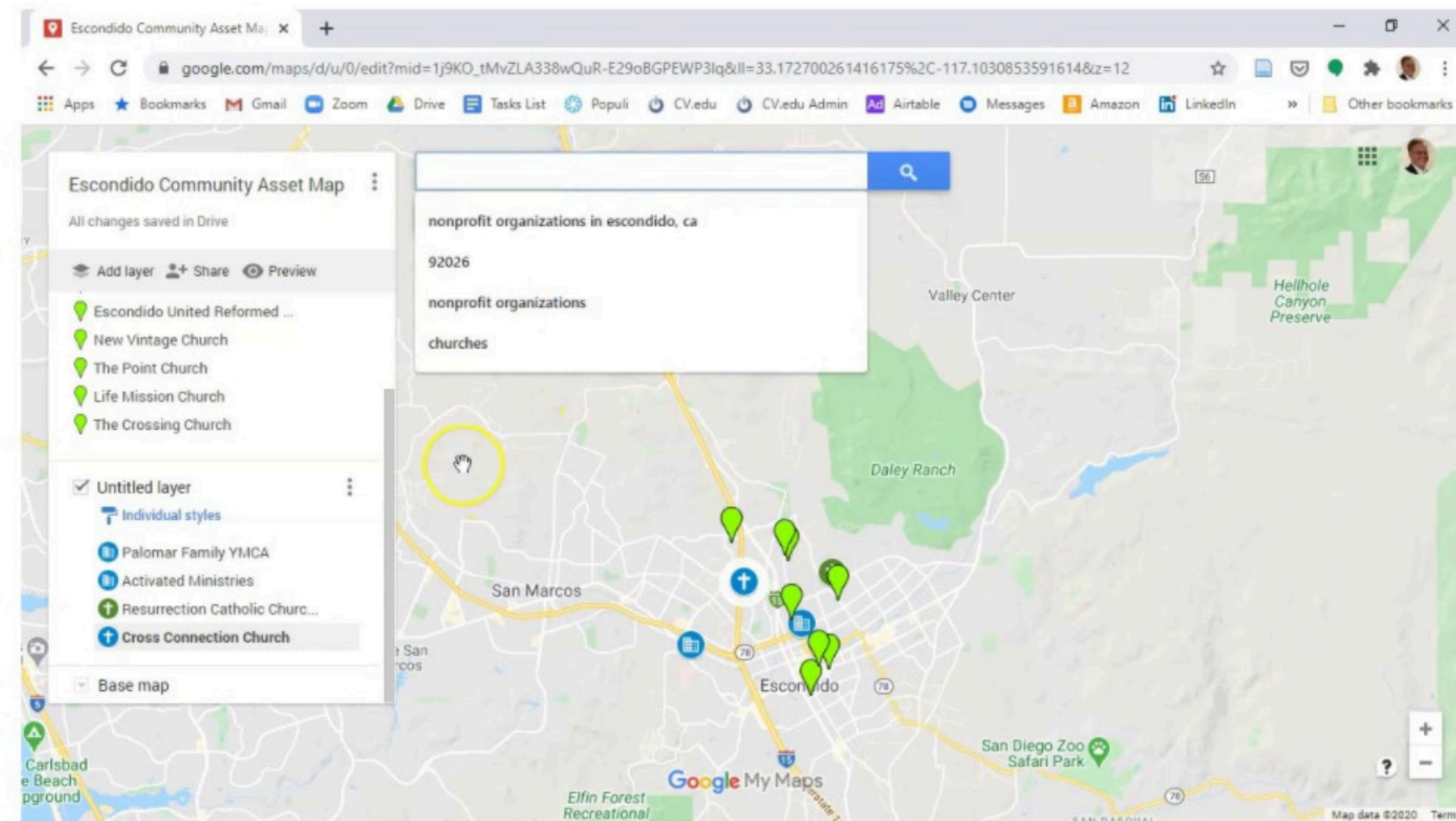
Approaching individuals/communities in this asset-based mentality empowers them to recognize their own strengths/capacities and feel more connected to their local governments.

As simple as hand drawn or harness the web!

<u>**Note:**</u> Great to do as part of any strategic planning process or for a particular project or campaign.
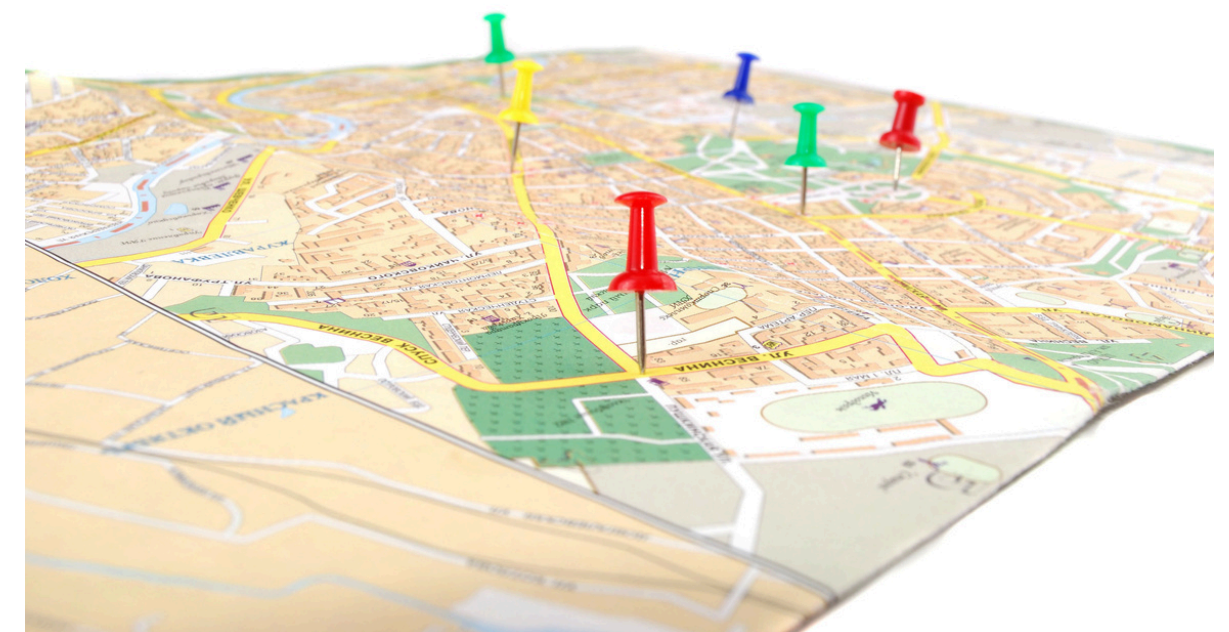
# Community Mapping Examples



Example of a community asset map (taken from " On assets -Paul Boon.ppt " , Nov 2008)

# In the Chat

**What do you think?**

What are some ways you have tried to connect
with the harder to reach segments of your
community?

# Determine Your Communications Channels



Discover which channels your audience is receptive to (surveys, web/social analytics, focus groups)

Decide which channels you will use to communicate the message to your target audience(s)

Be aware of general trends and preferences by demographic

Repurpose the tried and true, use existing tools in new ways → GIS, Issue Reporting Tools, Mass Notification Tools
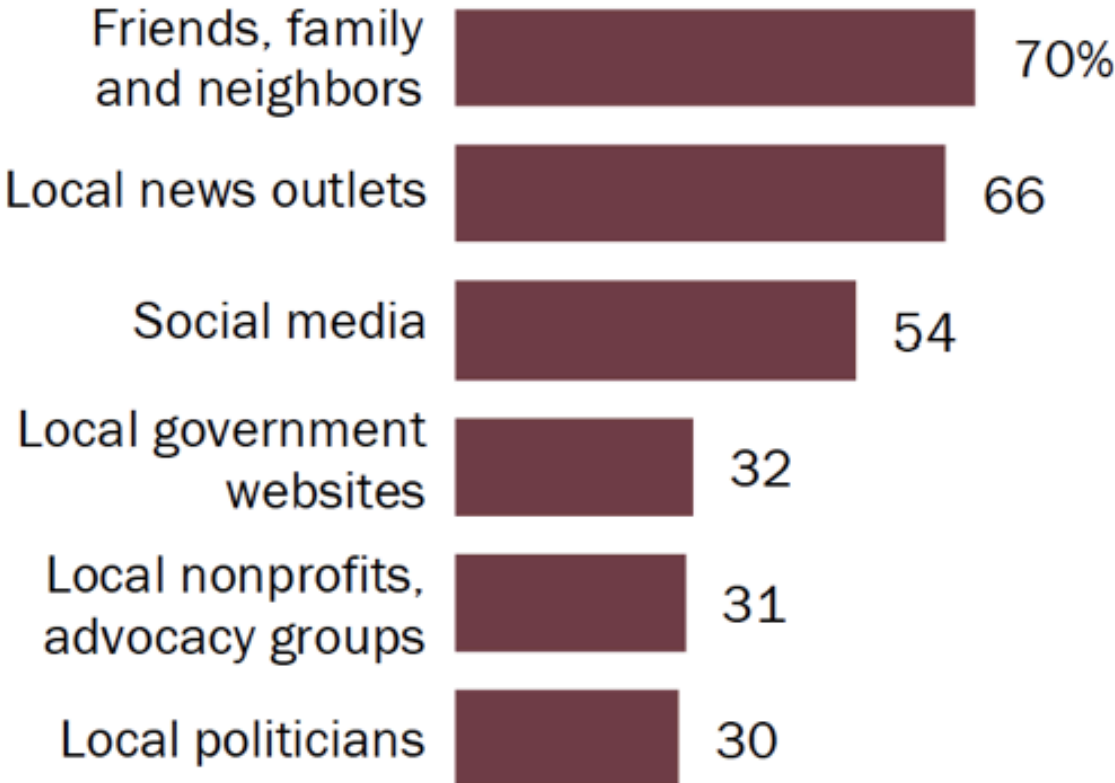
# National Trends on Local News Preferences

71% of U.S. adults ages 18 to 29 get news about local government and politics from social media often or sometimes, compared with 36% of those 65 and older.

Conversely, Americans 65 and older are more inclined than adults under 30 to get local political news from local news outlets (75% vs. 53%) and from local politicians (39% vs. 20%).

**Friends and family, local news outlets, and social media are Americans' top sources for news about local politics**

*% of U.S. adults who **often/sometimes** get local political news from ...*

| Source | % |
|---|---|
| Friends, family and neighbors | 70% |
| Local news outlets | 66 |
| Social media | 54 |
| Local government websites | 32 |
| Local nonprofits, advocacy groups | 31 |
| Local politicians | 30 |

Source: Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 22-28, 2024.
"How Americans Get Local Political News"

**PEW-KNIGHT INITIATIVE**

# Map Your Existing Assets

1. Look to groups in the community who may be able to help address your needs - shore up those allies & partners from your **community mapping** exercise

2. Take stock, identify or 'map' your **existing tools, talent, resources**, and workflows

3. Work with your **technology staff** to express the organization's further communication needs

4. Brainstorm how existing tools might be able to fit the bill, **think creatively - hack mindset!**

5. **Coming up short?** Explore purpose-built tools that are out there that could help you towards your goals. Free, open-source, or paid.

# Develop Key Messages



Key messages capture the essence of what you're trying to communicate to your target audience, with your organization's mission and goals in mind.

The key messages will speak to the **values of your organization**. They must be clear and universally applicable your community is and does as an organization

Examples from Grand Rapids, MI Strategic Comms Plan:

- Grand Rapids is a vibrant, collaborative and welcoming community.
- Our city's strength is rooted in the vision, collaboration and action of our residents.
- Together with the community, we have the confidence to lead, the courage to change and the vision to grow.

# Key Messages Should...

- Show the importance, urgency, or magnitude of the issue

- Show the relevance of the issue

- Put a "face" on the issue

- Be tied to specific audience values, beliefs, or interests of the audience

- Reflect an understanding of what would motivate the audience to think, feel, or act

- Be culturally relevant and sensitive

- Be inclusive and accessible

- Be Memorable

# Constructing Your Message

Information is designed to convey new facts, alter attitudes, change behavior, or encourage participation in decision-making.



Some of these purposes overlap; often they are progressive.

That is, for persuasion to work, the public must first receive information, then understand it, believe it, agree with it, and then act upon it.

**Regardless of the purpose, messages must be developed with consideration of the desired outcome.**

# Factors that contribute to public acceptance

- Clarity

- Consistency

- Main points

- Tone & appeal

- Credibility

- Public need

# Measure Your Success

To know the reach of your efforts, you'll want to develop benchmarks to determine how successful your comms are.

**What types of things can you use to measure success? It depends on your goals, consider:**

- Web traffic data, search queries, SEO, & keywords

- E-newsletter subscribers, open rate, etc.

- Social media engagement

- YouTube/Media plays

- Meeting attendance

- Survey results

- Subscriber counts over time

- CRM/Issue reporting & other system data

**Note:** If you haven't yet, set up your Google Search Console & Google Analytics today!

# Things You Can Start Now

1. Map your community to know your audience/allies

2. Create a checklist for staff to standardize outreach practices

3. Create templates for frequently used media (press release, grant announcements, hiring)

4. Create inventory of existing tools & services, think creatively

5. Determine your baseline & set up a plan for ongoing measurement

6. Consider governance policies & staff training

# Thank you!

# Questions?

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