ORANGE WATER AND SEWER AUTHORITY

A public, non-profit agency providing water, sewer and reclaimed water services to the Carrboro-Chapel Hill community.

MEMORANDUM

TO: **Community Engagement Committee**
Steve Dear (Chair)
Terri Buckner
John Young (*ex officio*)

FROM: Ed Kerwin

DATE: July 3, 2014

SUBJECT: **JULY 10, 2014 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT COMMITTEE MEETING AT 5:30 PM IN THE OWASA BOARDROOM**

Agenda

1. **Update on Affordability Pilot Project**

   Pat Davis will provide an update at the meeting.

2. **Discussion of Social Media Options**

   Staff report attached.

3. **Open Discussion and Schedule next meeting**

Ed Kerwin
Executive Director

Attachment – Staff Report on Social Media Options
c: Board of Directors

Social Media Report

In response to the Community Engagement Committee's request on May 29, 2014, this report provides information and recommendations about social media.

Background

We have used Twitter since November 2012. We have 161 followers and have posted 219 messages, or about 11 per month. We do not follow people or organizations on Twitter.

Social media options

- Facebook (allows posting of text, graphics and photos; Facebook page creators may allow others to post comments.)
- YouTube and Vimeo (for posting videos).
- Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat and Tumblr (allow posting of videos and/or photos).
- Blog (typically the blog sponsor poses questions and moderates public comments).

Social media can be used to distribute information such as news releases on various topics, photos and videos, notices of meetings and other events, etc.

Discussion

The advantage of social media is the speed of distributing electronic information via the Internet. In this way, they function like a website or e-mail.

Social media sites rarely require fees, but there is an opportunity cost in the use of staff time.

The staff time required for social media depends on the frequency of postings, whether videos or other content is produced, etc. In the case of Facebook, significant time may be required if citizens are allowed to post comments and if public comments are monitored for relevance, etc.

Social media are not traditional public forums under the First Amendment, and public agencies may post and implement policies to remove personal attacks, require that comments be related to specified topics, etc.

Based on our experience with Twitter and past feedback from residential customers, we think it is likely that using additional social media such as Facebook would have limited benefits.

The limited number of Twitter followers (161) suggests that interest in an OWASA Facebook page may also be limited.

In a 2010 survey of residential OWASA customers, Facebook and Twitter received the lowest ratings in a question on how customers prefer to receive information from OWASA (see excerpt on Page 3).

While customers' preferences have likely changed somewhat regarding social media, the limited number of Twitter followers since 2012 suggests that use of Facebook or YouTube may have limited effectiveness for informing and engaging customers. Further, we are not aware of requests by customers that OWASA have a Facebook page or post videos on YouTube.

We think the best way to seek feedback from and understand the perceptions of our customers is through periodic surveys mailed to a random sample of customers. While no single survey is a perfect measure of customers' perceptions, we think surveys can provide more valid information from a cross-section of the community.

Regarding the quality of interaction, we also believe that meeting face to face with interested members of community organizations or invited customers in targeted groups (such as customers with limited income) will continue to be the most effective way to engage our customers in dialogue and sharing of information and views.

To the extent that time is spent on social media, there would be less time to focus on reaching customers in a more personal way regarding key strategic objectives such as water conservation, affordability and proper use of the sewer system.

Experiences of other local agencies

Below is information from our contacts with the Town of Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill Police Department, Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, Town of Cary, the University and the University's Public Safety Department regarding their use of social media.

- All of the organizations have Facebook pages and use Twitter. Most use YouTube and follow some people and/or organizations on Twitter.

- All six organizations said getting information to citizens quickly is a benefit of social media.

- They spend several hours per week using Twitter and the same for Facebook.

- Five of the six organizations allow citizens to post comments on the organization's Facebook page.

The Towns of Chapel Hill and Cary and the University have more than 5,000 Twitter followers. (We note that they have a range of services to large numbers of people.)

Conclusion

Social media are an opportunity to reach more OWASA customers and other stakeholders and to engage with them.

However, the potential benefits and extent of public interest are uncertain. Based on experience to date with Twitter and data from past survey research, we do not recommend using additional social media at this time. We believe that our community engagement work over the next year should support our strategic initiatives.

Excerpt from results of 2010 survey of residential OWASA customers:

	strongly preferred	moderately preferred	least preferred	not sure/no opinion
Blue Thumb newsletter (mailed with OWASA bills)	22.2% (4)	**55.6% (10)**	22.2% (4)	0.0% (0)
Information printed on bills (bill message)	11.8% (2)	**58.8% (10)**	29.4% (5)	0.0% (0)
Paid notices in a newspaper	0.0% (0)	18.8% (3)	**81.3% (13)**	0.0% (0)
Paid notices on local radio	0.0% (0)	12.5% (2)	**87.5% (14)**	0.0% (0)
OWASA website	**43.8% (7)**	31.3% (5)	25.0% (4)	0.0% (0)
E-mail from OWASA	**73.7% (14)**	15.8% (3)	10.5% (2)	0.0% (0)
Televised OWASA Board meetings	0.0% (0)	18.8% (3)	**68.8% (11)**	12.5% (2)
Facebook	0.0% (0)	12.5% (2)	**87.5% (14)**	0.0% (0)
Twitter	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	**100.0% (16)**	0.0% (0)