

CITY OF SEBASTOPOL CITY COUNCIL
AGENDA ITEM REPORT FOR MEETING OF: March 4, 2025

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To: Honorable Mayor and City Councilmembers
From: Mayor Zollman
Subject: Processes and Procedures for Responding to Media Inquiries. Item would be to consider direction to staff related to media contact.

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RECOMMENDATION:

That the City Council Discuss Processes and Procedures for Responding to Media Inquiries. Item would be to consider direction to staff related to media contact.

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SUMMARY:

Currently the only formal adopted policy as it relates to media inquiries is within the policy on the role of the Mayor. Per the policy:

- It is the Mayor’s duty to serve as the City’s primary media spokesperson in coordination with City staff. Appropriate City staff should always be alerted to media contact.
- Nothing under the Mayor’s duties shall limit any individual Council Member’s ability to interact with members of the public or media.

The intent of the policy was to designate one single point of contact.

BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION:

Media coverage about the City of Sebastopol can provide a valuable opportunity to promote the work, strategies and goals of the City and community. However, contact between City officials, City staff and the media also heightens the need for a transparent and coordinated approach to media relations.

Positive and coordinated communication between City and the media is essential in order to maximize the benefits of media coverage in informing the public of civic matters. Although not official protocols, the Mayor, in consultation with City staff and legal counsel, have provided the following processes related to inquires from the media to ensure fair and equitable that any comments made to the media are consistent, factual, and accurate. The City strives to respond to reporters fairly regardless of the type of media outlet represented by a reporter.

Recently, the City has received emails from both the Press Democrat and Sebastopol Times indicating disappointment with the City’s response to the media. Listed below are questions received and responses.

Who on staff and council are we in the media allowed to speak with?

The Mayor is the spokesperson for the Council; each Councilmember may also speak for themselves. Thus, you can speak with any member of the Council. Generally, the Mayor will speak on policy issues and major initiatives. He may ask other Councilmembers to speak on areas of their expertise, such as members of Ad Hoc Committees on topics assigned to those Committees.

For staff, the primary and initial points of contact should be the City Manager and Assistant City Manager. They may designate Department Heads to speak as well. Generally, staff will speak on administrative and operational issues and budget topics. Staff may also speak to adopted policy issues particularly when there are questions about recommendations in staff reports or to provide background information.

What ways (email, text, phone call) are we in the media allowed to reach out to potential sources?

You may use any communications method to reach Councilmembers or staff. We prefer questions in writing (e-mail especially) as that will help us respond more effectively and promptly. Questions that are submitted in writing via email will result in quicker responses. We recognize that some things are more difficult to explain in writing.

What is the city's preferred timeline for responses to questions?

The more time we have to respond the more likely we will be able to respond. We would appreciate your providing 'real' deadlines. There have been instances when reporters provide a deadline that we cannot meet, and we do not pursue responses because we believe we have missed a deadline. Thus, if/when we learn about a new deadline we are unlikely to be able to respond because we have stopped (or never started) working on a response.

Questions received late in the day, on weekends (including Fridays, when City Hall is closed), and on holidays generally will not be answered until the next business day.

Please submit requests for interviews at least 24 hours in advance.

Can you confirm: we in the media should not expect responses to questions or topics that do "not align with the city's goals?"

We will attempt to respond to questions on all City-related topics. Our ability to respond will at times be constrained due to other priorities, availability of data, deadlines, etc. We will likely be more responsive to questions related to the City's priorities (as adopted by the Council) or of particularly high public interest. Questions not related to City goals may have delayed responses.

What am I missing?

Questions on major public safety incidents (crimes, fires, etc.) should be directed to the Police and Fire Chiefs or their designees. When sent by e-mail or text please cc: the Mayor, City Manager, and Assistant City Manager.

During emergencies we may designate another staff person as the Public Information Officer, per our Emergency Operations Plan. This may occur before declaration of an emergency, such as when there is a high risk from a wildfire or flood.

It is the goal of the City of Sebastopol to keep the public informed about achievements and efforts of the City and staff. By following the above, the Mayor believes the City can maintain a strong, transparent, and proactive relationship with the media, ensuring that all communication is timely, accurate, and aligned with the City's goals and values. By taking the time to receive the inquiry, and provide clean and accurate responses, the City can ensure that its communications are consistent, transparent and accurate.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH:

This item has been noticed in accordance with the Ralph M. Brown Act and was available for public viewing and review at least 72 hours prior to scheduled meeting date. The City has also used social media to promote and advertise the City Council Meeting Agenda Items.

FISCAL IMPACT: There is no fiscal impact associated with providing direction to staff. However, staff time will be required to research other cities and create a draft protocol for City Council consideration.

RESTATED RECOMMENDATION:

That the City Council Discuss Processes and Procedures for Responding to Media Inquiries. Item would be to consider direction to staff related to media contact.

OPTION:

1. The Council could deny the request to create a media protocol and maintain current protocol and processes as noted above.

ATTACHMENTS: City Council Policy Number 3

CITY COUNCIL POLICY NUMBER 3 ROLE OF MAYOR AND VICE MAYOR

The powers of the City Council to establish policy are quite broad. Essentially, the City Council may undertake any action related to city affairs other than those forbidden or preempted by state or federal law. Specifically, the City Council has the power, in the name of the city, to do and perform all acts and things appropriate to a municipal corporation and for the general welfare of its inhabitants which are not specifically forbidden by the Constitution and laws of the State of California. It is important to note that the City Council acts as a body. No member has any extraordinary powers beyond those of other members.

While the Mayor and Mayor Pro Tem have some additional ceremonial and administrative responsibilities as described below, in the establishment of policies, voting and in other significant areas, all councilmembers are equal. It is also important to note that policy is established by at least a majority vote of the City Council.

The intent of this policy is to ensure a fair and equitable policy for all Councilmembers regarding Selection of Mayor.

ROLES:

The Mayor is:

- The presiding officer of the City and of all meetings of the Council
- The official head of the City for performance of duties lawfully delegated to the Mayor
- Referred to as "chair" or "chairperson" when acting as presiding officer of legislative body meetings other than the Council; (such as the Successor Agency to the former Community Development Agency)
- Considered a member of the Council
- The Mayor or presiding officer has authority and discretion to preserve order at all Council meetings. This includes the authority to remove any person that presents a physical threat to any other person in the Council meeting, or for conduct that disrupts the meeting to prevent the orderly prosecution of the City's business. The presiding officer also has the authority and discretion to enforce these rules of the Council and to determine the order of business. The presiding officer shall have the authority to prevent the misuse of the legitimate form of motions, the abuse of privilege of renewing certain motions, or the obstruction of the business of the City Council. The presiding officer may preserve orderly business by ruling such motions out of order. In so ruling, the presiding officer shall be courteous and fair and shall presume that the moving party is making the motion in good faith.
- Entitled to make and second motions on matters before the Council and vote on actions, but shall possess no veto power over actions of the Council May establish reasonable time limits for the presentation of information to the public

- Due to subject matter, number of speakers, approximate length of an item, may determine, at the meeting, the re-ordering of agenda items.
- Recognized as spokesperson for the City Council
- To serve as the City's primary media spokesperson in coordination with City staff. Appropriate City staff should always be alerted to media contact.
- Nothing under the Mayor's duties shall limit any individual Council Member's ability to interact with members of the public or media.
- Participate in the preparation of the agendas of meetings in accordance with the Agenda Review Committee Policy
- Shall be elected annually from among the members of the Council, in accordance with the Selection of Mayor/Vice Mayor Protocols at the Council's first meeting in December of each year, or as soon thereafter as possible following the confirmation of the canvass of ballots by the County Clerk; or at the first regular meeting after the office of Mayor becomes vacant for any reason. The term of office of the Mayor is one year.
- In the absence of the Mayor from the City or a Council meeting, the Vice Mayor shall possess all powers of the office of the Mayor, and be subject to all prescribed duties for that office

In the absence of the Mayor and Vice Mayor from the City or a Council meeting, the Council shall appoint a member of the Council to act as Mayor Tern and shall possess all powers of the office of the Mayor