

BARNSTABLE COUNTY SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

1. INTRODUCTION

The County of Barnstable permits departments to utilize social media sites and social networking sites (collectively “social media sites”) to further enhance communications with its residents and others in support of the County’s goals and objectives. Designated County officials and County departments are allowed to publish articles, facilitate discussions and communicate information through such media to conduct official County business.

Social media sites facilitate further discussion of County government business, operations and services by providing members of the public the opportunity to participate in many ways using the Internet.

This policy sets forth general guidelines that must be adhered to with respect to utilization of social media sites for official County purposes. Questions regarding this policy should be directed to County Administration. These guidelines may be supplemented by more specific administrative procedures and rules as may be issued.

Furthermore, this policy may be amended from time to time, and is meant to be read in conjunction with all other applicable policies and procedures of the County of Barnstable.

2. DEFINITIONS

- (a) “Social media sites” and “social networking sites” refer to websites that facilitate user participation, networking, and collaboration through the submission of user generated content. Social media in general includes tools such as: blogs, wikis, microblogging sites such as Twitter; social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn; video sharing sites such as YouTube; and bookmarking sites such as Del.icio.us.
- (b) A “social media identity” is a specific user identity or account that has been registered on a third party social media site.
- (c) A “blog” (an abridgement of the term web log) is a website with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video.
- (d) A “moderator” is an authorized County official (appointed or elected) or employee, who reviews, authorizes and allows content submitted by County officials, employees and public commentators to be posted to a County social media site or sites.

3. POLICY

- (a) All County social media sites shall be:
 - i. approved by County Administration; and
 - ii. published using social media platforms and tools approved by the Information Technology Department (“IT”).
- (b) The official posting for the County will be done by the County Administrator or their

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designee.

- (c) Departments have the option of allowing employees to participate in existing social media sites or creating new sites as part of their job responsibilities.
- (d) All County social media sites shall adhere to applicable state, federal and local laws, regulations and policies including the Public Records Law, Public Records retention schedules, Open Meeting Law, Copyright Law and other applicable County policies.
- (e) Public Records Law and e-discovery laws and policies apply to social media content. Accordingly, such content must be able to be managed, stored and retrieved to comply with these laws. Furthermore, once such content is posted on a social media site, it should stay posted, unless it is removed for one of the reasons set forth below in paragraph (l), x and xi, of this policy, or it is changed to fix spelling or grammar errors.
- (f) All social media sites and entries shall clearly indicate that any content posted or submitted is subject to public disclosure.
- (g) Each County social media site shall include an introductory statement which clearly specifies the purpose and topical scope of the blog and social media/network site. Where possible, social media sites should link back to the official County internet site for forms, documents and other information.
- (h) Each County social media site shall indicate to users that the site is subject to a third party's website Terms of Service. Furthermore, each County social media site shall indicate that: the social media site provider could collect personal information through user's use of the social media site; and that this personal information may be disseminated by the third party; and that such dissemination may not be governed or limited by any state, federal or local law or policy applicable to the County.
- (i) All social media sites shall clearly indicate they are maintained by the County and shall have the County's contact information prominently displayed.
- (j) Sites and contents shall be, and remain in perpetuity, the property of Barnstable County
- (k) The County reserves the right to restrict or remove any content that is deemed in violation of this policy or any applicable law.
- (l) County social media content and comments containing any of the following forms of content shall not be allowed for posting:
 - i. Comments or content not topically related to the particular site or blog article being commented upon;
 - ii. Profane, obscene, or vulgar language or content;
 - iii. Comments or content that promotes, fosters or perpetuates discrimination on the basis

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- of race, color, gender, gender identity, national origin, religion, ancestry, age, sexual orientation, disability, maternity leave, genetic information, or active military status;
- iv. Comments or content that is threatening or harassing;
 - v. Sexual comments, content, or links to sexual content;
 - vi. Conduct or encouragement of illegal activity;
 - vii. Information that may tend to compromise the safety or security of the public or public systems;
 - viii. Content that violates a legal ownership interest of any other party;
 - ix. Protected health information;
 - x. Personnel information; or
 - xi. Other information that is not public record or is otherwise privileged from public disclosure.
- (m) All County employees with designated responsibilities related to the County's official use of social media shall be held to the terms of this policy, including their responsibilities to review content submitted for posting to ensure compliance with the policy.
- (n) Where appropriate, County IT security and/or computer use policies shall apply to all social media sites and articles.
- (o) Officials (elected or appointed) and employees representing the County via social media sites must conduct themselves at all times as a representative of the County and in accordance with all applicable rules, regulations, and policies (including personnel policies) of the County.
- (p) No County or department social media site can endorse or otherwise cite (either with approval or disapproval) vendors, suppliers, clients, citizens, co-workers or other stakeholders.
- (q) Employees found in violation of this policy may be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment.

4. GUIDELINES FOR EMPLOYEES DESIGNATED TO MANAGE COUNTY SOCIAL MEDIA SITES

- (a) *Consider Your Content.* As informal as social media sites are meant to be, if they are on a government domain or a government identity, they are official government communications. Social media sites will be sought out by mainstream media – so a great deal of thought needs to go into how you will use the social media in a way that benefits both the County and the public.
- (b) *Handling Negative Comments.* Always consult County Administration before handling negative comments from the public, or attempting to navigate difficult situations in public view on social media sites when acting as a County employee.
- (c) *Copyright Law.* Employees must abide by laws governing copyright and fair use of

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copyrighted material owned by others. Never reprint whole articles or publications without first receiving written permission from the publication owner. Never quote an excerpt of someone else's work without acknowledging the source, and, if possible, provide a link to the original.

- (d) *Use the Social Media Site or Identity Only to Contribute to your Department's Mission.* When you contribute to your department's social media site or identity, provide worthwhile information and perspective that contribute to your department's mission of serving the public. What you publish will reflect on the County. Social media sites and identities should be used in a way that contributes to the County's mission by:
- i. Helping you and your co-workers perform their jobs better;
 - ii. Informing citizens about government services and how to access them;
 - iii. Making the operations of your department transparent and accessible to the public;
 - iv. Creating a forum for the receipt of candid comments from residents about how government can be improved; and
 - v. Encouraging civic engagement.
- (e) *First Amendment Protected Speech.* Although the County can moderate the social media sites that accept comments from the public (such as blogs and wikis) to restrict speech that is obscene, threatening, discriminatory, harassing, or off topic, employees cannot use the moderation function to restrict speech with which the County merely disagrees (i.e. subject matter restrictions). Users have some First Amendment rights in posting content to public social media sites hosted by municipalities. Moderators must respect those rights by posting all comments other than those excluded for specific legitimate reasons, as referenced above.
- (f) *Mistakes.* The County policy is that once something is posted, it should stay posted. Only spelling errors or grammar fixes should be made without making the change evident to users. If you choose to modify an earlier post, make it clear that you have done so—do not remove or delete the incorrect content; provide the correct information and apologize for the error. Ways to accomplish this include:
- i. Strike through the error and correct; or
 - ii. Create a new post with the correct information, and link to it from the post you need to correct or clarify.

Either method is acceptable. In order for the social media identity or site to achieve transparency, the County cannot change content that has already been published without making the changes clearly evident to users.

- (g) *Media Inquiries.* County or department social media identities or sites may lead to increased inquiries from the media. If you are contacted directly by a reporter, you should refer media questions to the County Administrator or his designee.
- (h) *Records Retention.* Social media sites will contain communications sent to or received by County officials and employees, and are therefore Public Records. Ensure that the County

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or department retains a copy of the social media content in accordance with Public Records Retention Schedules. Review the third party social media service provider's terms of service for its record retention practices. Note that while third party social media providers will most likely save your content for some period of time, they generally will not save it indefinitely. To the extent their policies are inconsistent with Public Records Retention Schedules, the County or department should retain copies of social media posts such as by printing or otherwise storing periodic "snapshots" of the social media sites.

- (i) *Open Meeting Law.* Be aware of the Open Meeting Law and possible violations for improper deliberations outside of a posted meeting. A series of individual postings on a social media site cumulatively may convey the position of a quorum of a governmental body regarding a subject within its jurisdiction, and may constitute improper deliberation among the members of a board or committee.

5. EMPLOYEE GUIDELINES FOR USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA SITES

- (a) *Related Policies.* All employees are responsible for understanding and following any applicable related policies, such as those governing the general usage of information technology systems and services, in addition to this Policy.
- (b) *Conflict of Interest.* Employees are prohibited from using social media to engage in any activity that constitutes a conflict of interest for the County or any of its employees, as defined by G.L. c. 268A.
- (c) *Protect Confidential Information.* Never post legally protected personal information that you have obtained from the County (e.g., information that is not public record under the Public Records Law, G.L. c.66, §10 and G.L. c. 4, §7(26), or whose dissemination is restricted under applicable Federal or State privacy laws or regulations). Ask permission to publish or report on conversations that occur within the County. Never post information about policies or plans that have not been finalized by the County, unless you have received explicit permission from your supervisor to post draft policies or plans on the department's social media sites for public comment.
- (d) *Respect Your Audience and Your Coworkers.* Do not use ethnic slurs, personal insults, obscenity, or engage in any conduct that would not be acceptable in your department's workplace. Do not be afraid to be yourself, but do so respectfully. This includes not only the obvious (no ethnic slurs, personal insults, obscenity, threats of violence, etc.) but also proper consideration of privacy and of topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory— such as party politics and religion. Do not use your department's social media presence to communicate among fellow County employees. Do not air your differences with your fellow County employees on your department's social media's sites.
- (e) *Personal Comments.* Make it clear when you are speaking for yourself as a resident or stakeholder, and not on behalf of the County of. If you publish content on any website of the County and it has something to do with the work you do or subjects associated with the County, use a disclaimer such as this: "The postings on this site are my own and don't

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necessarily represent the County’s positions or opinions.” Employees shall not comment about rumors, political disputes, or personnel issues, in an official capacity.

- (f) *Employee or Official Profile.* If you identify yourself as a County employee or official, ensure your profile and related content is consistent with how you wish to present yourself to colleagues, residents and other stakeholders.

- (g) *Defamation.* Be aware that employees acting in their individual capacity (not on behalf of the County) are not immune from defamation claims. Under Massachusetts law, defamation is established by showing that the defendant published a false, non-privileged statement about the plaintiff to a third party that either caused the plaintiff economic loss or was of the type that is actionable without proof of economic loss. Some statements, like imputation of a crime, are defamatory per se. Avoid statements that may be interpreted as defamatory.

Approved by Board of Regional County Commissioners on December 13, 2017:

Leo Cakounes
Chair

Mary Pat Flynn
Vice Chair

Ron Beaty
County Commissioner

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I, _____ (print name), as an employee of the County of Barnstable, hereby acknowledge that I have received, read, understand, and agree to abide by the Barnstable County *Social Media Policy*.

Employee Signature: _____

Date: _____