

# A GUIDE TO USING WEBSITES FOR PROACTIVE DISCLOSURE



The Federation of Prince Edward Island Municipalities has prepared a toolkit to help municipalities implement practices that reflect the principles of open government – accountability, engagement and transparency. This guide has been prepared to provide advice about using technology, such as a municipal website, to proactively disclose municipal records, notices, bylaws and data.

Proactive disclosure is the act of releasing information before it is requested. Routinely releasing information on your municipal website increases transparency by giving citizens convenient access to decisions, notices, data, and records that may affect them. Open access to information facilitates public engagement in municipal government and promotes greater transparency and accountability.

**Your municipal website is the best means of proactively disclosing information.**

## The Role of Your Website

Disseminating information through electronic means is no longer optional. The Municipal Government Act specifies that electronic means is mandatory for some disclosures. For example, Section 110 (3) of the Municipal Government Act specifies that “council shall establish and publish, by electronic means and one other means of public notification, an annual schedule of meetings for the conduct of its business ...” Section 2 of the *Procedural Bylaw Regulations*, made under this Act, specifies that provision of notice by electronic means must be a notice posted on a website that is operated and maintained by or on behalf of a municipality.

For most municipalities, publishing on their website is the normal outlet for posting information. Unlike e-newsletters and social media, a well-designed website acts as a means for municipalities to publish notices and make information available. A municipal website also serves as a repository for historical information.

## What Are Municipal Website Best Practices?

Creating a municipal website that meets the needs of Council and the community requires research and careful consideration. A website is a major investment and is a municipality’s public face. It must be easy to use, visually attractive and contain relevant information. This information may include public notices, municipal records, information about tourism or recreation facilities and programs, or promote local businesses.

**In order to proactively disclose information, a website must be easy to update.**

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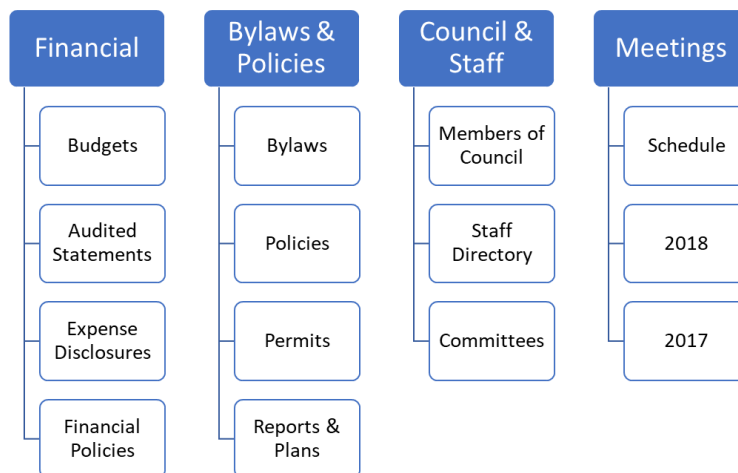
## Create a distinct Town Hall or Municipal Council section

Citizens should be able to easily locate records relating to municipal operations.

## Create a sub-menu

Sub-menus help citizens focus on the information they are looking for without having to sift through too much information. The exact sub-menu items for your municipality will depend on the information being published. As a minimum, topics should include Financial, Bylaws & Policies, Council & Staff and Meetings. Additional topics could include Committees, Open Data or other items important for each municipality.

Within a sub-menu, records can be listed by date (agendas and minutes) or alphabetically (bylaws or policies) or by year (financial plans, statements and auditors reports).



## Organize information

Once a municipal website starts getting used as a repository for information, the volume of documents can quickly grow. Give some thought in advance as to how the information will be organized so that users will not be lost.

Categorize information in a way that makes sense to your visitor. If you have the technical capability, include information under more than one section. For example, the municipality's Travel Expenses Policy may be made available under both the *Financial* section and the *Bylaws & Policies* section.

Cross references also help visitors navigate to the desired information. For example, the *Policy* section may include the municipality's Code of Conduct policy, which includes links to the Code of Conduct Declarations for all Councilors, which are located under the *Council & Staff* section. The website for the City of Charlottetown, for example, has links to their Bylaws under Resident Services, under Mayor and Council, as well as under Business and Development Services.

## Make sure information is current

Your website is only as effective as the information it contains. Information should be proactively disclosed so that it is available for public review without it being requested. Information should be routinely updated so that it is current and relevant. Stale information, such as notices, should be removed on a regular basis.

Historical information, such as Council meeting minutes, audited financial statements, approved budgets should be retained. Organizing these records under the appropriate sub-menu topics will help citizens find them if required.

## Open data

Consider including a section on Open Data so raw datasets can be added. Allow external users to access this information without restriction.

When making open datasets available, it is very important not to inadvertently release private information.

## What Should Be Considered When Investing In A Website?

### How easy is it to upload documents?

Proactive disclosure is based on using technology to disseminate information. Websites should be updated regularly and, to do so, an easy-to-use content management system is required. The most popular system is WordPress, but there are many others available. There are also subscription services that specialize in providing municipal websites. For a basic website, such a service may be more expensive in the long run, however, these subscriptions provide online services that are desirable for larger municipalities.



### Will the information be well organized?

When planning a website, it is important to envision not only today's information but what will be on the website years from now. The website structure and information should be able to accommodate information that will be added in future.

## **What else will the website have to contain?**

Many municipalities use their website for various purposes beyond open government, such as attracting tourists, outlining municipal services for new residents, providing basic information such as history and population and delivering e-services to residents. This variety of purposes can easily lead to a cluttered and hard to use website.

Information related to Council and municipal operations should be highlighted and easy to locate.

## **What are the ongoing costs?**

There are two basic costs relating to owning a website – domain registration and hosting. Domain registration is the right to the use of your domain name (such as sourispei.com). This is not the website itself – just the right to exclusive use of the domain name (often referred to as the website URL). Hosting is the cost of renting actual space on a server where your website will live. Hosting costs are often an annual expense.

While domain registration and hosting are sometimes bundled together, they are two separate components of a website. Investigating these costs upfront will assist in budgeting for start-up and on-going operating costs.

Most smaller municipalities do not have on-site technical staff, so the costs of website maintenance should be considered. Depending on the skills of staff, support from an off-site provider may be required. This support may be only for technical aspects and significant website changes, or it can include making all website updates.

Creating a new website for a municipality is often a significant undertaking, and there is a wide range of potential solutions and costs. There is no “best solution” that applies to everyone, as circumstances and requirements are different for all municipalities. Investigating these costs before the website is developed will help Council budget for capital as well as operating costs.

## **Are there any options?**

Investing in a municipal website requires commitment of both human and financial resources. Working with other municipalities, or an organization like FPEIM, could be an option. However, there must be a clear understanding of responsibilities so to meet the province’s Procedure Bylaw Regulation that identifies “electronic means” as a website operated and maintained by or on behalf of a municipality.

## **What about using social media?**

Although social media can be used to distribute notices, agendas and minutes this is not a replacement for posting on your municipal website. With social media, there is no guarantee that information will be made available to residents, even if they have indicated that they want to receive this information. Channels such as social media and e-newsletters make a great complimentary means to reach out to residents but are not a good principal means of publishing.