

Joint Local Government School Division Budget Communications Strategy

Introduction

Our community is served by two elected Boards: a School Board, whose constitutional responsibility is to ensure an appropriate public education is available to all our community's children, and the Board of Supervisors, who provides oversight and fiscal responsibility for the operations of the entire county government. We recognize that because School Board members are elected as advocates for our schools, the two Boards will always face the challenge of balancing competing priorities. As School Board members work to improve Albemarle's public education system, the Board of Supervisors must balance school division needs with competing needs of other county departments and agencies while maintaining an appropriate tax rate that fosters economic development, provides for a strong infrastructure, and ensures satisfied citizens and continued quality of life. We recognize and respect the different charges for each board, and affirm respective Board members' abilities to carry out the duties they have sworn to do. We also recognize philosophical differences among and between individual elected officials, and recognize the value of those differing perspectives in producing reasonable and positive outcomes for our community. We trust the democratic process of civil discourse, engaged and informed officials and citizens, and reasoned decision-making to produce the optimum results for our community given the resources and priorities established through this process.

In the summer and fall of 2010, following a particularly challenging budget season during which both Boards were facing significantly declining revenues and painful programmatic and personnel reductions across all departments and agencies, these two Boards met with Dr. William Boshier of Virginia Commonwealth University to begin a new process of collaborative work to best serve the citizens of Albemarle County. As a result of these meetings, a consensus emerged regarding an emphasis on joint communications and an impartial clearinghouse of agreed-upon facts. This document serves to outline that commitment, provide a summary of work to date, identify strategies for the 2011-12 budget process, and propose next steps for continued collaboration to best serve our community.

Objectives

- Better understanding by elected officials, staff, and community members of the operations of and challenges faced by both the School Division and the County as a whole
- Collaborative spirit among Board of Supervisors, School Board and staff as all work to serve constituent needs
- Strengthen the public's trust and faith in elected officials' ability to govern and staff ability to execute
- Streamlined and aligned communications to provide more transparency and ease of use to elected officials and community at large
- Accurate information for use by elected officials and community
- A dynamic, accountable process for providing requested information in a timely, accurate, unbiased manner

Guiding Principles based on Joint Strategic Retreat discussions:

- all participants agree to honor the process as described and will express any concerns in the agreed upon manner
- all discussions, both public and private, between individuals and groups will reflect a spirit of civility and mutual respect
- all parties will maintain an assumption of good faith on the part of all participants towards achieving our highest common goal of serving the community
- we will focus any debate on policies and not on agreed-upon facts

Efforts to Date

- Increased School Board and staff involvement in the County's Five Year Financial Planning Process
- County and school staff have shared budget presentation information with each other prior to public presentations and have collaborated to make sure material is consistent and accurate
- A joint communications steering committee has been established and held meetings
- School Board members, Supervisors, and county and school division staff took part in the United Way Day of Caring Project in September 2010 at Woodbrook Elementary School
- Joint Board of Supervisors and School Board magisterial district Town Hall meetings in some districts
- Based on constituent feedback, the School Division redesigned Section A of its comprehensive budget book to create a narrative Executive Summary which provides information about successes, operational analysis and key initiatives, with the cost and rationale, in a single location
- In response to requests from Supervisors and community, School Division streamlined and clarified fund descriptions in its budget
- County is including School Division data and highlights in its Annual Report published in the Daily Progress
- Significant shared services and programs

Strategies for 2011 Budget Process – Actions that staff considers achievable and meaningful given available resources and time constraints

- develop and maintain a joint Frequently Asked Questions publication accessible on both websites that is dynamic in nature to continuously add emerging inquiries
- local government and schools will both funnel requested information through a single point of contact in their respective Communications Offices
- both websites will feature appropriate budget information from each entity with cross-linking to provide easy access between budget materials
- regularly scheduled discussions between local government and school division communication and budget staff
- both websites and other budget materials will include a blended budget calendar

- will take advantage of opportunities to cross-share information between school and local government leadership teams
- will invite Parent Council president to attend stakeholders' budget briefing later this month
- communications staff will make each other aware of media inquiries and responses

Possible Next Steps

- Pursue additional joint communications opportunities through regular county and school division events, publications and presentations
- Consider a single budget website rather than a duplicated and crosslinked site on both County and School Division sites
- Continued education and information sharing among Supervisors, School Board members, county and school division staff, parents and community members
- Training sessions on School Division operations for Supervisors and community leaders, and training on County budgeting for School Division staff and stakeholders
- Sharing of Performance Management indicators among county and school division.
- Streamlined budget materials for School Division and County
- Continued Joint Retreats