



## WEST HANTS REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY REPORT

|                                                 |                                         |                                           |                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Information <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Recommendation <input type="checkbox"/> | Decision Request <input type="checkbox"/> | Councillor Activity <input type="checkbox"/> |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|

**To:** Committee of the Whole

**Submitted by:**

Shelleena Thornton, Municipal Operations Supervisor

**Date:** September 10, 2024

**Subject:** Communications Changes (Social Media Comments & Meeting Livestreams)  
– Information Report

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**LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY** – N/A

**RECOMMENDATION or DECISION REQUEST** – N/A as this is an information report.

### BACKGROUND

|                                   |                                                       |                                      |                                            |                                   |                                                 |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Property <input type="checkbox"/> | Public<br>Opinion <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Environment <input type="checkbox"/> | Social <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Economic <input type="checkbox"/> | Councillor<br>Activity <input type="checkbox"/> |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|

The West Hants Regional Municipality has had its Municipal Facebook account since 2014 (as it was that of the former Municipality of the District of West Hants, prior to consolidation with the former Town of Windsor).

Originally, it was a method in which to communicate recreation events, committee meeting notifications, and general municipal information of interest to residents, businesses, and visitors.

Over time, the Municipality's social media communication pages and methods have evolved to ensure folks can "like" and "follow" what is important to them, without this information getting lost (as information is displayed chronologically on one's page).

The West Hants Regional Municipality has the following Facebook pages and YouTube Channel:

- West Hants Regional Municipality (typically governance or service-related information)
- West Hants EMO (emergency management information)
- Inspire West Hants (a place to share general 'community' information)

- West Hants Parks and Rec (Community Development and Recreation information)
- West Hants Welcome Centre, located in Windsor, NS (promoting WHRM tourist information)
- Windsor Garlic Festival in downtown Windsor, NS (promoting event information)
- YouTube Channel – West Hants Regional Municipality

As indicated above, the West Hants Regional Municipality shares a lot of information to the most-appropriate Facebook page, while videos are shared to the YouTube Channel. The Municipality’s communications have substantially increased, not only in the tools used, but the content shared, and is managed by a Communications Team of six staff as well as other staff for smaller content items.

The variety of communication methods used include:

| How WHRM gets info out                     | How folks can communicate with WHRM  |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Municipal website                          | Telephone                            |
| QR Codes                                   | Email                                |
| Quarterly “Inspired” Newsletter            | Municipal Offices & Facilities       |
| Inserts with mail-outs                     | General Feedback button on website   |
| Recreation Program Brochure                | Variety of community outreach events |
| Bi-Annual EMO Newsletter (starting Oct’24) |                                      |
| Living Local Magazine                      |                                      |
| Newspaper Ads                              |                                      |
| Notices on property                        |                                      |
| Electronic signs                           |                                      |
| Radio as required                          |                                      |
| Social media (Facebook, X, YouTube)        |                                      |
|                                            |                                      |
|                                            |                                      |

## DISCUSSION

### Social Media Comments

Social media was a platform for safe and open two-way communication, however, over time the platforms began shifting from being a predominantly a safe place for information sharing to a place of negativity and trolling and negativity. Posts and comments have increasingly become negative, abusive, hateful, non-evidence based, misleading, threatening, and in many cases, heightened community division. This culture is not in keeping with the environment and outward presentation the WHRM should be promoting to its citizens or the outside community. Further, the social media accounts do not promote nor provide a safe psychological space for staff to provide information as part of their working responsibilities.

WHRM's Facebook pages have set parameters to help mitigate negative comments. For example, we have:

- Maxed out the number (1,000) of words, lists, phrases or emojis on our page that automatically hides a comment when they are used. These include foul, hateful, threatening, sexist, racist, profanity, etc. words/phrases.
- Blocked users who have navigated their way around any of the words/phrases and still able to publish a comment.
- The “About You” section of our Municipal Facebook page, states our social media standards,  
*Comments and feedback are encouraged and welcomed on this page, but there are some instances where comments will be edited, deleted, or closed, and/or users banned. Those are as follows:*
  1. *Comments deemed to be spam or questionable spam will be deleted. Including a link to relevant content is permitted, but comments should be relevant to the post topic.*
  2. *Comments including profanity will be deleted.*
  3. *Racist, sexist, foul, accusatory, or hate speech will be deleted and/or the user banned. Comments containing language or concepts that could be deemed offensive, will also be deleted.*
  4. *Comments that attack a person individually will be deleted.*
  5. *Fraudulent accounts will be banned.*

The West Hants Regional Municipality has experienced a rise in these negative comments and the Communications Team does not believe that continuing to house the negativity is *Inspiring* for anyone. It is overwhelming for staff to monitor and mentally draining, especially in an era when people are encouraged to reduce their screentime due to the mental health issues and challenges that it is scientifically proven to foster.

While many comments are neutral or positive, the trolling or foul comments occur regularly and are not beneficial, welcoming, nor inclusive for residents, visitors, businesses, nor staff. WHRM wants to *Inspire*. And that is why we offer a variety of other positive and supportive ways of information sharing and two-way communication.

With all that said, Staff are no longer able to effectively monitor comments, mentions, and/or tags to prevent harm to residents, businesses, staff, and Council. Therefore, to ensure a

constructive and safe environment, the Communications Team unanimously opted to disable comments and inbox messaging on all the West Hants Regional Municipality social media platforms effective November 1, 2024, and will encourage people to connect with the appropriate individual if required. A win-win!

How will we do this?

Leading up to the November 1<sup>st</sup> change (and after), staff will:

- share via social media, website, newsletters, and inserts that this change will be taking place,
- staff will share all WHRM's communication methods so that people are informed and educated on the variety of communication tools used (as indicated in the above table),
- continue to ensure all advertisements and postings provide as much detailed information as possible while also including an email address and/or phone number of an appropriate contact should people require more information. This will encourage those with a legitimate question, concern or suggestion related to the post, to contact the appropriate person on the specific matter at hand and restrict those trolling and/or violating the Municipality's social media standards. Another win-win!

### **Meeting Livestreaming – Switching from Facebook Live to YouTube**

The Communications Team, as well as Municipal Clerk support the transition of livestreaming Council and Committees of Council meetings from Facebook to the Municipal YouTube Channel effective November 1, 2024.

There are many benefits to this transition, including:

- Efficiencies for both the public and staff,
- More suitable video platform with more appropriate technical requirements,
- More video flexibility (can embed it on Municipal social media pages and website; whereas, you cannot do that with Facebook videos),
- Accessible with a more seamless user experience,
- Has become the general best practice of all levels of government.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

None.

### **NEXT STEPS**

November 1, 2024 – Turn comments off on all Municipal social media platforms.

## CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER REVIEW

I support the comments made within the report and emphasize the requirement for the municipality to provide safe psychological spaces for staff and the community to work within. Further, the municipality has made a strong commitment to becoming more welcoming and inclusive through the appointment of a Diversity and Inclusive Committee. They have recently recommended, and Council has supported, the creation of an Equity and Anti-Racism Plan to align with the Nova Scotia Dismantling Racism and Hate Act.

Aside from the inability for staff to effectively monitor and maintain the social media standards due to the volume and nature of the comments, this is an example of leadership towards creating or modifying our spaces toward a more positive outcome.

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