

MUNICIPAL—UTILITY COMMUNICATIONS¹

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Abstract. Communications between municipal and utility organizations must be established, maintained and improved on all levels of management and field personnel. Communications methods and structure depend on the size and existing working relationships of the two components. The success of each component will depend on the dedication of both to maintain open and responsive communication.

The relationship between the Fairmount Park System in Philadelphia, PA. and the Philadelphia Electric Company (PECO) is similar to most Municipal—Utility relationships. The Fairmount Park Commission has the jurisdictional responsibility for an estimated 250,000 street trees. Approximately 100,000 of these trees are within the responsibility of PECO. About one-third or the total population is London plane with the remaining in Norway, red, and sugar maple, oak, gum and ornamentals including cherry and pear. PECO retains professional arboricultural contractors to maintain their trees while Fairmount Park performs their work utilizing park employees.

Communication starts at the top. Senior Management personnel from both sides meet regularly. The purpose of the meetings is to discuss recent developments, problems, complaints and planning. Annually a permit is issued by the municipality to give PECO the privilege to work on street trees. The permit states that all work must be performed to the satisfaction of the Fairmount Park Commission. The permit can be terminated at any time if work is unsatisfactory. The permit is issued to the contractor with copies to PECO.

The Fairmount Park Commission (FPC) has purposely taken the position of establishing formal communication with PECO with an informal review of work performance with the contractor. The contractor works for PECO. To further improve communications, field personnel and inspectors for both PECO and FPC meet to discuss the work performance of the contractor on a monthly basis. Often informal unscheduled meetings arise out of these discussions.

The direction, policy and leadership is provided by senior management and is communicated to the field personnel in the form of meetings and correspondence. Trust between the two components is essential to a productive arrangement. Combined meetings between the two components have proven fruitful. Examples of "good" pruning and "bad" pruning are discussed using slides or photographs. Some tree site visits are used to explain details or justification for work.

In a public relations move PECO senior management addressed the FPC advisory council to explain their policies. The communication process includes monthly letters to PECO from FPC requesting prunings and removals for their consideration. PECO on a monthly basis provides FPC with a list of completed work.

Emergencies or specials are red flagged and given priorities. Requests for service for the general public are not forwarded directly to PECO, but are inspected by FPC and forwarded to PECO in the monthly request. When a complaint is received from the public, concerning pruning by the contractor, the FPC responds with PECO representatives. FPC is computerized and can recall requests for follow-ups to PECO when a response has not been received.

Conclusion

Good communication is hard work, but paramount to successful working relations. It is both structured, unstructured, formal, and informal. It must start at the top where compliance must be demanded by all responsible employees. Informing the general public, political leaders, and city managers of the policy and coordination between the municipality and the utility is instrumental to a successful program.

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