

CONNECTING BETHLEHEM

City of Bethlehem Communications Survey

Executive Summary

A. INTRODUCTION

The 2019 Connecting Bethlehem Communications Survey was designed to gather information on the current utilization and effectiveness of City of Bethlehem communications, including digital and non-digital communication channels. Utilizing City of Bethlehem communication channels and partners from the community, the survey was open for 55 days and nearly 1,400 people completed at least part of the survey.

The survey was made available on the City’s website and links distributed through various social media channels. Both English and Spanish language versions of the survey were produced. The survey was also completed prior to the debut of the updated city website.

This summary and detailed survey results will be available on the City of Bethlehem website.

B. KEY FINDINGS OF CONNECTING BETHLEHEM SURVEY

The following major findings and themes emerged from the survey results.

1. Key Finding: Citizens who currently utilize City of Bethlehem communications are largely positive about their effectiveness and value.

On the survey question *Q5 (#2)*, “City, Print, and Email Newsletters, Updates, and Alerts – If you did access this method in the past 12 months, how satisfied are you with this method?”, citizens answered with the following percentages of Very Satisfied or Satisfied -

| | |
|--|-----|
| Bethlehem Live Work Learn Play Newsletter | 94% |
| Bethlehem Recreation Newsletter | 91% |
| Bethlehem Newsletter | 95% |
| Community and Economic Development Email Updates | 89% |
| City of Bethlehem Email Alerts | 93% |

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2. Key Finding: Citizens have different and varied preferences in how they like to receive their City of Bethlehem communications.

As the data below shows, Bethlehem residents have varied preferences as to the manner in which they receive City of Bethlehem communications. On the survey *Question 5 (#1)*, “City Print and Email Newsletters, Updates, and Alerts – Have you accessed this method in the last 12 months?” Respondents answered with a wide variety of answers below –

| | <u>Yes</u> | <u>No</u> |
|--|------------|-----------|
| Bethlehem Live Work Learn Play Newsletter | 124 | 663 |
| Bethlehem Recreation Newsletter | 167 | 619 |
| Bethlehem Newsletter | 348 | 478 |
| Community and Economic Development Email Updates | 184 | 593 |
| City of Bethlehem Email Alerts | 420 | 429 |

Question 16 stated “Thinking about the various categories of communications with the City government, please rank those methods in order of preference...” Respondents indicated the following preferences when asked to name their most preferred method of communication.

| | |
|--|-----|
| City of Bethlehem website | 31% |
| City Print Newsletters: Live, Work, Learn, Play, Recreation | 5% |
| City Email Alerts and Updates | 38% |
| City Telephone Lines: Graffiti, Pothole, Non-Emergency, etc. | 3% |
| Online Services and Alerts: eGov Account, Code Red | 5% |
| Social Media Accounts: Facebook, Twitter, etc. | 18% |

3. Key Finding: Respondents to the survey were fairly evenly distributed by age

As reported in *Question 2* responses, the age ranges of the respondents were as follows:

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Under 18 | 1% |
| 18-29 | 7% |
| 30-39 | 20% |
| 40-49 | 18% |
| 50-59 | 21% |
| 60 or older | 33% |

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4. Key Finding: Many people are unaware of all of the various City of Bethlehem communication methods.

Throughout the survey, a common response to many questions was “I have not used this service.” Almost all of the survey respondents were aware of *some* of the communication methods but not all of the various ways to get information from the City of Bethlehem. This finding may be related to citizens searching for the channels that have the information that they are interested (i.e., streets or police news) in or rather because of the decentralized nature of Bethlehem’s online presence.

5. Key Finding: There is a digital divide in the City of Bethlehem when it comes to internet access.

According to the most recent City of Bethlehem census data (www.census.gov/bethlehem-pa.gov), 75 percent of City residents have an internet or broadband subscription at their house. 25 percent of City residents also speak a language other than English at home. 98 percent of the survey respondents (*Question 3*), however, stated that the main language spoken at home is English. It is clear from these numbers that English-speaking residents (and those who have internet access at home) have wider access to important City online services (which are also often directly related to quality of life neighborhood issues).

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C. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recommendation: Work with community partners to expand public and low-cost high speed internet access and eliminate the digital divide

As mentioned earlier, the digital divide is currently limiting the opportunities for some citizens to access municipal services which are often directly tied to neighborhood quality of life issues. The Bethlehem Area School District (BASD) has recently been studying the effect of the digital divide on our students. Students who lack internet access at home fall further behind their classmates who have the benefit of reliable, high-speed internet access. Working with the BASD and other community partners, it is vital for the future of Bethlehem that the digital divide is eliminated. We must be a city where your access to basic governmental services is not determined by your zip code or the location of your neighborhood.

Municipalities throughout the country have established task forces and regional cooperatives to promote the expansion of low-cost or public high-speed internet access. They have done so after hearing from community partners who have expressed the necessity for reliable, high speed internet access in the 21st century. The effective delivery of health care and increasing private investment into the local economy are two often repeated benefits of such an initiative.

It is also worth noting that most cities are not looking to make these financial infrastructure investments themselves. This is also not a conversation about building a municipal-owned utility or even a public broadband network (already limited by Pennsylvania state law). Municipalities are partnering with their colleges and universities, healthcare networks, and business communities to work with telecommunications companies who are in the process of building out their 5G networks. The municipal cooperation needed for the installation of required 5G infrastructure provides local governments the opportunity to narrow the digital divide through collaboration with telecommunications companies as they go through the required regulatory process.

Local governments are leading these conversations in an effort to make certain that no one is left behind in the 21st century on the issue of reliable, high-speed internet access. The City of Bethlehem should follow a similar course and create a task force dedicated to this issue if we are going to maximize the benefit that technology can have for our citizens, businesses, and most importantly, our children.

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2. Recommendation: Consolidate City online social media accounts into fewer, more centralized accounts

While the practicality of maintaining City print and online communication methods is a certainty, consolidating City social media accounts may be necessary to provide a clearer municipal communications framework. The organic development of Bethlehem's social media accounts over the last few years has led to a decentralized information sharing structure. Many survey respondents indicated a lack of awareness as to the existence of certain City social media channels. Other respondents indicated a frustration at the large number of social media channels that needed to be followed to receive all of the City information being shared. Development of one centralized City account that *shares all City information* and/or an online location for all City social media platforms may be strategies worth investigating. Currently, a number of City social media accounts share information that is not shared on other City communication channels. Therefore, the information is shared, but only a percentage of Bethlehem citizens actually receive it. Going forward, development of a centralized and coordinated communications strategy is necessary to improve the efficiency of the City's communications efforts.

3. Recommendation: Continue to offer print and online communication methods

As technology has improved, it has become commonplace to say "the future is the internet." While that is, of course, true, the survey shows that many people are still using traditional communication methods (mailed newsletters, phone calls, etc.) to access City services. The opening of the new Bethlehem Service Center has made contacting City Hall more efficient and is a very meaningful investment in allowing citizens to access municipal services 24 hours a day. The survey also almost certainly undercounted the amount of people who utilize traditional methods of communication (i.e. not using a computer) as paper copies were available at City Hall, but were not mailed directly to citizens. Citizens who do not use a computer to access City information were unlikely to log on to a computer to respond that they do not use a computer to access city information.

4. Recommendation: Investigate a strategy for more interactivity with citizens

Many respondents indicated a desire for more interactivity with City Hall staff when utilizing City social media accounts. Many Bethlehem social media accounts are directive-based (Maple Street will be closed on Tuesday, etc.) rather than being responsive or interactive. It is important to note that the survey was completed largely before the Bethlehem Service Center opened and the mobile application went live for use by the citizens of Bethlehem. Continuing to publicize the Bethlehem Service Center app (where pictures can be uploaded of potholes, snow issues, etc.) is vital to maximize the effectiveness of the Center as well as providing an efficient way for citizens to contact City Hall.