

Friday, June 21, 2019

J. Mitchell Graham/Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Awards

This application is for:

J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award

Project Title Dorchester County Online Newsroom

County/Counties Dorchester County

Staff Contact Tiffany Norton

Job Title Public Information Officer

E-mail Address TNorton@DorchesterCountySC.gov

Phone Number (843) 563-0084

Mailing Address 201 Johnston Street

St. George, South Carolina, 29477

United States

Please provide a summary of your entry (no more than 100 words) to be used in a handout for the awards competition and included in press releases/publications. You may either type the summary in the text box or upload it as an attachment below.

In the era of social media, smartphones and the 24-hour news cycle, anyone with a social following can spread information. Dorchester County needed to reduce the spread of misinformation and improve the quality of information communicated to the public. To meet its goals, Dorchester County developed an Online Newsroom, which is a central information hub that connects to citizens through traditional media outlets and social media. Through the Online Newsroom, the county tells its own story, provides important notifications in real time and significantly reduces the spread of misinformation.

Presentations may include more than one speaker; however, each speaker should be aware that the 10-minute time limit is strictly enforced. Please list the name, title, and e-mail address of each speaker:

Jason L. Ward, County Administrator, WardJ@DorchesterCountySC.gov Tiffany J. Norton, Public Information Officer, TNorton@DorchesterCountySC.gov

Will any of the speakers need accommodations (wheelchair accessibility, etc.) during the competition?

No

Please check boxes for attachments you will submit as part of your application

A concise Project Description to explain the purpose and significance of the entry (up to eight pages). Please follow the prescribed naming convention for your Project Description file.

Any additional materials needed to support your application (up to five pages).

To submit these attachments online, please upload Microsoft Word or PDF documents below.

Dorchester County 2019 J. Mitchell Graham Award Submission Project Description.pdf Dorchester County 2019 J. Mitchell Graham Award Submission Supporting Material.pdf

2019 J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award Competition

Submission by



Dorchester County Online Newsroom

DorchesterCountySC.gov/news

Benefit/Importance of Project

Why was the project undertaken?

The project was undertaken to improve information communicated to the public and to reduce the spread of misinformation. The 2013 Strategic Direction for Dorchester County, the county's strategic plan, identified "Strategic Issue 3. Delivery of County Services" as a major concern. Key Results included the following: "Reduce duplication of services, determine level of county services wanted by the public, and improve information communicated to the public." One strategy, to improve service delivery was "Strategy G. Hire a public information official."

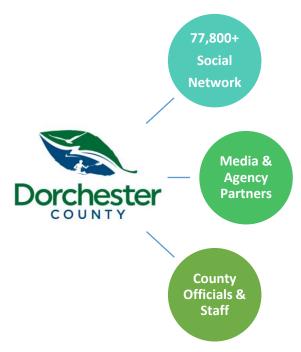
The County hired Tiffany Norton as the County's first Public Information Officer (PIO) in September 2016. Norton quickly got to work evaluating the County's current state of communications and drafted a three-year strategic communication plan. This plan serves as a road map to improve and enhance County communications. It was formally adopted by County Council on August 14, 2017. The capability to tell the County's story was also identified as key area of focus in the communication plan. The challenge was with just a Public Information staff of one. The office was inundated with data calls and lacked the ability to maintain a central source of information. The decision was made to combat this challenge by establishing a single point of information; an Online Newsroom (www.DorchesterCountySC.gov/news). All County departments would funnel information to this source and it would be prepared for publication by the PIO.

What Degree of success did the project attain? What major objectives were achieved?

During the first year of Dorchester County's Online Newsroom, 123 articles were published. The articles aided citizens of the county, county employees, and members of the media. The County maintained consistency of voice and used Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and NextDoor to draw traffic to our website for the most up-to-date information. We found this news distribution tool significantly reduced misinformation and time resources spent by the PIO to respond to data calls, creating a more efficient department and cohesive voice for Dorchester County. By creating one central location for information sharing, Dorchester County was able to develop a trusted voice, reduce the spread of misinformation, and become the most reliable news source for residents, business owners and visitors in Dorchester County.

This was accomplished by harnessing the power of social influencers. In the era of social media, smart phones and the 24-hour news cycle, anyone with a social following can spread information. By placing all information in one location and then sharing that location on multiple platforms, we ensured that each

time the information was shared it always redirected viewers/readers back to the County's Online Newsroom.



The Online Newsroom is especially helpful during severe weather events. During these events the homepage of our county's website, www.DorchesterCountySC.gov, becomes a hub for information on weather updates, road closures for state, county, and municipal roads, utility outages, school and government operations and closures, sand bag availability, debris removal and disposal, etc.

As the smallest County in the Charleston media market, Dorchester County had struggled to get important information out to newspaper readers and television viewers through traditional media outlets. The larger counties, Charleston and Berkeley routinely took priority and/or received better placement. Additionally, it was rare that "good news" out of Dorchester County ever made it on-air or in print. This was unacceptable. Creating our own Online Newsroom positioned Dorchester County to be our own media. To tell our own story in a meaningful and timely manner.

As result of the Online Newsroom, traditional media coverage, television and newspaper, coverage also improved as evidence by the number of positive stories in the local newspapers and local news channels. This included feature stories on fire safety, coverage of water and sewer and road projects, groundbreakings and building dedications, and the launch of new online services for citizens and businesses.

The Online Newsroom allowed the county's Public Information Officer to focus on proactive gathering and publishing information instead of constantly responding to data calls and correcting misinformation.

Project Effort/Difficulty

What did the County have to do to accomplish its objectives?

Before the newsroom could be created, the County first had to design, build and launch a new ADA compliant website to host the newsroom. As part of the new website, the six newest articles are strategically highlighted on the homepage for easy access.

After the new site was launched in August 2017, we then spent the next four months archiving past news articles and preparing the site to become the central information sharing hub for Dorchester County, beginning on January 1, 2018. During this time, we studied the media consumption habitats of our audiences to ensure that articles were written in a manner that would appeal to the end-user and shared on the appropriate platforms to better reach them.

Audiences were defined as residents, business owners, media, agency partners, elected officials and County staff. The overarching goal that was set during the planning phase was to create a central location for information sharing that would provide accurate, meaningful content to all audiences, in the quickest most efficient manner possible.

During the planning phase the PIO also spent several months meeting with various leaders in the organization, elected/appointed officials and other PR professionals to determine the best course for developing content. The final consensus was that beginning January 1, 2018 County departments/subject matter experts would send an outline/fact sheet of the information that was to be shared and the PIO formatted the information into news release/story form to ensure that the information was easily consumed by all audiences.

To keep the newsroom fresh and a focal point of the site, at least one new article was created and shared each week, and/or a previous article was updated with new information. All news that was shared externally, on social media etc. was linked to the newsroom. Teasers of the articles were used to attract attention and to leave the end user "wanting more" so they would click through to the website.

What challenges occurred during the project?

Change can be hard. Getting initial "buy-in" from some elected officials, department heads, stakeholders and subject matter experts was a challenge. However, after seeing the value of the Online Newsroom and the time resources that would be saved by funneling all information to one central location, all team members, some more reluctant the others got onboard. Once the newsroom launched even those that were "on the fence" saw the value and became ambassadors for the newsroom.

Additionally, by working to establish the county as a brand and creating a new county logo, we were able to raise the public's awareness of Dorchester County and drive traffic to the Online Newsroom. We changed the color, size, and format of the signs we use to post properties for rezoning and variances request and added the counties website to the signs to drive traffic to our website. We changed our website URL to the Dot.Gov format. We had county employees to include the links to our Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram pages to their email salutations. We replaced our old business cards with new double-sided color business cards with the county's new URL as a focal point.

Were there any community concerns?

Yes. Prior to the creating the Online Newsroom, the community would commonly share that they didn't have a good source to get important county information. We had complaints about our website being difficult to use and information being hard to locate. All of this changed with the launch of the new website and the newsroom. We effectively answered the needs of our community by becoming our own trusted media source. In order to meet this high level of engagement, staff continually works to ensure that the information in the newsroom is written in a way that can me useful to all audiences. This includes ensuring that the information is formatted correctly to meet all ADA standards so that information is easily assessable to the hearing and visually impaired. At Dorchester County we understand that information sharing is no longer optional. It's an expectation and we believe that all residents, business owners, stakeholders etc. have the right to receive timely information, directly from the County. The Online Newsroom is the most efficient manner to do so.

What were the nature and extent of the county government's efforts to alleviate the problem(s)? How difficult was it to accomplish the project's goals and/or objectives?

Better communication of County services was identified by County Council the Strategic Plan. The first step was to hire a Public Information Officer who then drafted the three-year strategic communication plan. Creating a central hub for information sharing and finding our own voice to proactively tell our own story was identified goals. Before we could create a newsroom, we first had to design and build an ADA compliant website to host the newsroom. We evaluated several different platforms and hundreds of other government websites to find the best platform to meet our unique information-sharing needs. The development of the County brand, website and communication plan took approximately one year to complete. This completed the "launch phase" of the website and from there work on the newsroom began.

After the new site was launched the PIO then began archiving past articles in the newsroom and working with/training department heads, stakeholders and subject matter experts on the new procedure for

disseminating information via the newsroom. The new procedure began in January 2018 with the official launch of the newsroom. This was the pivotal turning point for information sharing and media consumption in Dorchester County. From January 2018 on, all information is shared from the online newsroom. Throughout the course of 2018 the online newsroom gained notoriety, and by the end of 2018, we had successfully become the trusted news source.

The ongoing difficulty is time management to ensure that sufficient time is spent each week updating the newsroom with factual, usable content. The time commitment has decrease as department heads and subject matter experts become more familiar with the process and anticipates the information and data required for well-round information to be added to and included in the newsroom. The newsroom has also cut down on the number of calls to each department as information is readily available at our citizens, employees and the medias fingertips.

Was financing the project an obstacle?

Were there any unusual factors inherent in financing the project?

The decision was made to contract with Granicus (previously Vision Internet) to design and host the new site for \$31,530. This was a 12-month process with the new site launching in August of 2017. As part of the design the six newest articles are strategically highlighted on the homepage for easy access. The annual contract to host the site and newsroom is \$11,025. The initial website content development and conversion process was a challenge and maintaining the content to ensure the site stay relevant and up to date continues to me a high priority for Dorchester County.

The website hosting is a budgeted expense. No unusual factors have surfaced.

Did any agencies, citizens groups, or other organization assist your county with this project? Did their participation pose any particular challenges or offer any unique contributions or benefits?

The public information office works directly with several outside agencies to provide information to Dorchester County residents, business owners, and visitors via the Online Newsroom. These agencies include but are not limited to the South Carolina Department of Transportation, South Carolina Department of Revenue, the South Carolina Treasurer's Office, South Carolina Highway Patrol, Dominion Energy, Norfolk Southern, and Dorchester School Districts Two and Four. Working with these agencies and organizations provides our residents with a single source of information. Engaging the citizens, business, etc. via social media also gave us a way to interact and get real time information and feedback.

Are there any unresolved problems or other goals left to tackle?

While our initial goals have been met, we are now expanding the Public Information Office so that we can create a newsletter and a better platform to communicate information about rezoning requests, road projects, and progress towards the implementing our strategic plan. We continue to add new content to the newsroom, ensuring that all news is up-to-date and relevant. We are planning to add geocoded data to the newsroom in FY 2019-2020.

Justify the uniqueness of this project.

The County recognizes the need for open two-way communication, particularly as it pertains to providing information, and utilizing technology to disseminate and gather information. The Online Newsroom assists the County with informing, engaging and connecting citizens with County government while decreasing the spread of misinformation.

What makes it different from other projects designed to achieve the same objective?

The Online Newsroom is a digital communications tool that enables the County to reach a broad audience across several platforms with less resources and one cohesive voice.

Do you know of any other similar programs in South Carolina? If so, how is your program different?

Many organizations approach communication efforts with the assumption that every audience receives information the same way. This approach typically results in communications that are too general to have a significant impact. Different audiences have different informational needs and communication strategies should be devised for each group. While other counties have a news section on their website, we have not found many counties that consistently produce articles at such a high level or that produce their own news that is routinely shared by thousands outside of the organization.

What innovations were required in accomplishing your objectives?

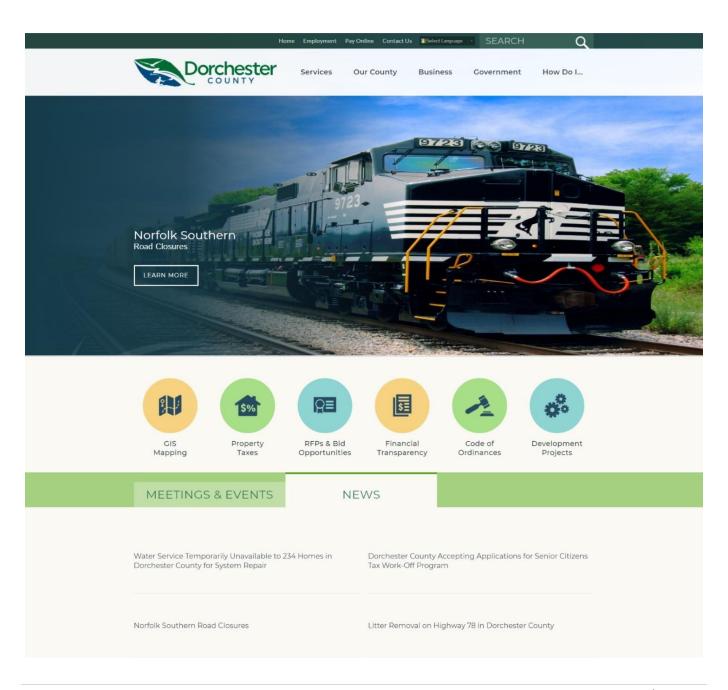
The newsroom would not have the same reach if it was not hosted on an ADA compliant website and maintained by staff strong in HTML coding with the skillset to ensure the content itself was ADA compliant.

The newsroom also requires an extremely assertive team that is socially engaged to anticipate the information needs of all audiences. The team must then work to collect and comprise the information in a timely and meaningful manner to ensure its usefulness.

Who provided the creativity and imagination in your project?

The Public Information Officer influenced the decision for Dorchester County to use a centralized approach to communication. This approach places the responsibility of coordinating public information and communications activities with Public Information Office. The Public Information Officer prepares and distributes information regarding County services, public meetings, news updates, etc. to all audiences via news releases and the Online Newsroom.

This program would not be possible with out the support of Dorchester County Council and senior leadership.



JASON L. WARD County Administrator

MEMORANDUM

June 21, 2019

J. Mitchell Graham Award Judges South Carolina Association of Counties 1919 Thurmond Mall PO Box 8207 Columbia, SC 29202-8207

RE: Letter of Support for Dorchester County J. Mitchell Graham Award Submission

Distinguished Judges,

It is my honor and privilege to submit this letter of support for Dorchester County's Online Newsroom for consideration of the J. Mitchell Graham Award.

By creating an organized approach to information sharing, utilizing available technologies and expanding social networks; Dorchester County successfully utilizes the power of social influence by placing all information in one central location, the Online Newsroom and then shares the information directly from this location across all platforms.

Through the Online Newsroom, the county able to tell its own story, provide important real time notifications and significantly reduce the spread of misinformation. In doing so Dorchester County has become the trusted voice while also reducing the time resources spent by the Public Information Office responding to data calls and media inquiries.

The value of Dorchester County's online newsroom is unquantifiable to the citizens, business owners, visitors, employees and media partners of Dorchester County.

I thank you in advance for your consideration of Dorchester County's Online Newsroom for the J. Mitchell Graham Award.

Regards,

Jason L. Ward

County Administrator



June 19, 2019

J. Mitchell Graham Award Judges South Carolina Association of Counties 1919 Thurmond Mall PO Box 8207 Columbia, SC 29202-8207

To Whom It May Concern:

Please consider Dorchester County's online newsroom for the South Carolina Association of Counties 2019 J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award. The website serves as a vital, informative research tool for all things Dorchester County-related and is not only a helpful aid for residents but also area visitors and media outlets.

As a local news reporter, the county's dissemination of information and timely updates to the online newsroom has become a game changer, for at least the last year, for how our publication seeks out accurate information for stories and stays on top of county meeting dates and agendas.

The innovative online resource is not only easy to access but also provides links, county contacts and other pertinent facts and data useful for on-the-go reporters like me to quickly find needed information while anywhere in the field and for members of the public to refer to in order to answer questions, raise awareness and improve overall quality of life for the community.

Often times the information provided relates to a county issue that's imperative for the public to know about or to know how to respond to—whether it's emergency related, when severe weather is expected to strike, or an important deadline regarding a tax bill or county registration, among other items.

Evidence of the newsroom's effectiveness is already making headlines across the county—and even state. In April the county received the coveted Silver Wing Award from the South Carolina Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the nation's largest professional organization for the communications industry, for its online newsroom. The county was also the only local government recipient recognized by the chapter at this year's award ceremony.

Sincerely,

Jenna-Ley D. Jamison

Staff Reporter,

Summerville Communications, Inc.

NEWS RELEASE #19-31

For Immediate Release

Contact: Tiffany Norton, Public Information Officer TNorton@DorchesterCountySC.gov | (843) 563-0084

Dorchester County Receives Silver Wing Award for Online Newsroom

From the South Carolina Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America

ST. GEORGE, S.C. (April 12, 2019) – Dorchester County's Online Newsroom has earned recognition from the South Carolina Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the nation's largest professional organization for the communications industry.

The organization announced Dorchester County as the Silver Wing Award recipient for Online Newsroom during an awards ceremony on Thursday, April 11, 2019. Entries were judged against national PRSA standards with a focus on research, planning, execution and evaluation.

The capability to tell the County's story was identified in the County's three-year strategic communication plan. The challenge was with just a Public Affairs staff of one, the office was inundated with data calls and lacked the ability to maintain a central source of information. The decision was made to combat this challenge by establishing a single-point of information, an online newsroom. All department heads and subject matter experts funnel their information to this source and it is prepared for publication by the Public Information Officer (PIO).

During the first (full) year of <u>Dorchester County's online newsroom</u>, the PIO published 123 articles. The central information hub strategically placed Dorchester County in a position to provide accurate, meaningful content to all audiences, in the quickest most efficient manner possible. The news distribution tool significantly reduced the spread of misinformation and time resources spent by the PIO to respond to data calls, creating a more efficient department and cohesive voice for Dorchester County.

Dorchester County Council Chairman, George Bailey, said "I am encouraged and proud that our Online Newsroom competed successfully with such high caliber work. This recognition proves that the County's Public Information Officer has elevated our communications management to the highest industry standards."

Dorchester County Administrator, Jason L. Ward said, "Tiffany Norton, County Council and county staff work to provide real-time information online to keep our citizens, businesses, and visitors informed of important programs, events, and emergencies. I am proud of this recognition of their hard work."

Dorchester County Public Information Officer, Tiffany Norton accepted the honor on behalf of Dorchester County.

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J. Mitchell Graham and Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Awards Competition

The 2019 J. Mitchell Graham/Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Awards Competition will begin at 1 p.m. on Sunday, August 4.

The J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award, established in memory of past SCAC President and Charleston County Council Chairman J. Mitchell Graham, recognizes excellence in governmental performance.

The Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Award, established in memory of past SCAC President Barrett S. Lawrimore, recognizes the most outstanding regional cooperative effort of two or more political subdivisions.

County Council Coalition Meeting

The County Council Coalition Meeting will be held from 9 a.m. to 12 noon on Monday, August 5. During the meeting, the S.C. Commission of Disabilities and Special Needs will present the annual Golden Palmetto Award.

Association Group Meetings and Workshops

Several county official associations will hold meetings from 8:30 a.m. to 12:00 noon on Monday, August 5.

The following four workshops, focusing on issues facing county government, will also be offered from 2 to 4 p.m. the same day:

- A Community Opioid Toolkit
- Building Resilient Communities
- Legislative Update
- Public Corruption and Fraud

Institute of Government for County Officials

The Institute of Government for County Officials will be held on Saturday, August 3, and Sunday, August 4 preceding the annual conference.

The Institute will offer the following courses:

Saturday, August 3

- Building Effective Intergovernmental Relations
- Effective Communications
- Ethical Leadership and Public Service
- Strategic Planning
- Strengthening Your County's Fiscal Fitness

Sunday, August 4

- Bridging the Digital Divide
- Legal Issues in County Government
- The Policy Role of Council



Dorchester County Receives PRSA Silver Wing Award

The S.C. Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) announced on April 11 that Dorchester County had won a Silver Wing Award for its Online Newsroom, DorchesterCountySC.gov/news. PRSA is the nation's largest professional organization serving the communications community. Tiffany Norton, Dorchester County Public Information Officer (PIO), accepted the award on behalf of the county.

Dorchester County's online newsroom, strategically set up

to serve as a central information hub for the county, enables the county to provide accurate, meaningful content to all audiences as quickly and efficiently as possible. It also significantly reduces the spread misinformation and time that the county's PIO has to spend responding to data calls, which created a more efficient



On April 11, Dorchester County Administrator Jason L. Ward accompanies Public Information Officer Norton as she accepts PRSA's Silver Wing Award for the county's online newsroom.

department and cohesive voice for Dorchester County.



SCAC Holds OSHA Training Class for Four Counties

Forty-seven county officials representing Spartanburg, Fairfield, Union and Anderson counties attended an OSHA training class, held by SCAC on April 23 in Spartanburg. Terry Booker, (Continued on next page)



OSHA training class, Cleveland Park, Spartanburg, Apr. 23 (Photo by Van Henson, CPM, SCAC Risk Manager)

Google Analytics

Source / Medium	Users ▼ ↓	Pageviews	Contribution to total: Pageviews ▼
	404,081 % of Total: 100.00% (404,081)	2,693,648 % of Total: 100.00% (2,693,648)	
1. google / organic	224,833	52.96%	7.9%
2. (direct) / (none)	88,199	14.10%	
3. ■ m.facebook.com / referral	33,190	2.67%	
4. dorchestercountytaxesonline.com / referral	29,175	10.36%	
5. bing / organic	27,082	7.86%	
6. ■ scemd.org / referral	10,210	1.00%	
7. January yahoo / organic	8,632	2.25%	
8. gisservices.dorchestercounty.net / referral	6,682	1.58%	
9. publicrecords.netronline.com / referral	4,911	0.53%	
10. ■ facebook.com / referral	4,134	0.53%	

Social Network	Users ▼ ↓	Pageviews	Contribution to total: Pageviews ▼
	40,266 % of Total: 9.96% (404,081)	95,397 % of Total: 3.54% (2,693,648)	
1. Facebook	39,100	96.50%	
2. ■ Twitter	1,018	3.19%	
3. ■ LinkedIn	60	0.11%	
4. Instagram	33	0.11%	
5. Instagram Stories	16	0.03%	
6. ■ Yelp	6	0.02%	96.5%