

JEFFERSON CENTRAL APPRAISAL DISTRICT

PUBLIC RELATIONS PLAN



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# **JEFFERSON CENTRAL APPRAISAL DISTRICT PUBLIC RELATIONS PLAN**

## **NECESSITY FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS**

A public relations program should provide current and useful information on the Jefferson Central Appraisal District's (the District) policies and practices, as well as a means of responding to public opinion. Such a program is essential to public awareness of the appraisal process and of the importance of property taxes in funding local government services. Public relations is an integral part of the District's work, and the public relations program should describe what the office does as well as how, why, and for whom its services are provided. An effective public relations program will result in a better-informed constituency.

The demeanor of District employees in serving the public is critical to maintaining good public relations. The IAAO *Standard on Communications and Outreach* provides specifically that "A solid public relations or communications and outreach approach is essential to ensuring the public trusts the assessment process and understands the importance of property taxes in funding local government." The District has made every effort to gain the public's trust. In order to ensure we treat the public with respect, all District employees are required to attend Customer Service training provided by the Three Rivers Chapter of the Texas Association of Appraisal Districts at least once every two years.

## **CORE CONSTITUENCIES**

The District must constantly be aware of a wide variety of core constituencies, including individuals or groups with special needs that require attention and focused communication. These constituencies may include property owners, the public, the taxing entities the District serves, civic and professional organizations, lending institutions, developers, attorneys, real estate appraisers and brokers, governmental agencies and policymakers, tax representatives, the media, and others.

## **PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICER**

The Chief Appraiser serves as the District's Public Relations Officer and spokesperson for the District. The Chief Appraiser may, as deemed appropriate, assign the duties to another senior staff person. The Public Relations Officer oversees the coordination of interviews, the writing and distribution of news releases, newsletters, reports, and correspondence; the posting of information on the District's website; the editing of special publications and annual reports; the release of information to media outlets; and sees that any other necessary components of the District's Public Relations Program have been accomplished.

All requests for media inquiries, whether received by phone, in writing, or by email, are submitted to the Public Relations Officer for a response. Request for interviews with the media are typically received by phone, with the Public Relations Officer scheduling all interviews.

## **METHODS OF COMMUNICATION**

The District must follow the Property Tax Code when notifying property owners of certain events; such as, notices of appraised value, cancelling any exemption or special-use appraisal, Appraisal Review Board (ARB) protest and hearing procedures, requirements for filing for exemptions or renditions, etc. USPS delivery is required by the Property Tax Code, with some notifications required to be mailed

certified. In 2024, the Property Tax Code was amended to allow property owners and/or their agents to request electronic communications between the District, ARB, and/or the Tax Office.

The District uses its website to provide valuable information concerning the valuation and protest process, deadlines, meeting agendas, truth in taxation notices and tax rates, contact information, value and financial reports, Reappraisal Plans, annual reports on the District's operations, and educational materials on the appraisal process and all of its components. Property owners can use the District's website to file protests, forms, and request electronic communications.

To reach the general public, the District places ads in the newspaper concerning:

- Availability of exemptions and deadlines for filing
- Availability of electronic communications
- Personal property rendition requirements and deadlines
- Requirements and deadlines for filing for special-use appraisals
- Requirements for deferring taxes
- Protest procedures and deadlines

The public can search the District's appraisal roll information on the District's website or by using the computer dedicated to public use at the District's office.

Jefferson County is subject to hurricanes and tropical weather systems that can cause significant damage to property. In those instances when the Governor has declared Jefferson County a Disaster Area, the District will use its website, social media, the local news outlets, radio, and mailings to inform the public of the need for reporting damages to their property and the availability of the Temporary Exemption Property Damaged by Disaster.

The methods of communication need to consider the District's demographic groups. Communications with the public should always be simple, direct, and in plain language using special care to avoid professional jargon and acronyms. Trends toward emails, social media, and the use of websites need to also consider the portions of the public that are elderly or economically disadvantaged and do not have computers or computer knowledge.

Jefferson County's population is 25 percent Hispanic and has a large Vietnamese population. The District has several Spanish-speaking employees and one Vietnamese-speaking employee to assist these non-English speaking property owners. The State Comptroller's Office translates several publications into Spanish, and the District provides these on its website and in its office.

Upon request, the Board of Directors will provide an interpreter for non-English speaking persons or for the hearing impaired for its meetings. The District provides handicapped parking, a ground floor meeting room, doors with no barriers, and restrooms equipped for people with disabilities.

## **LISTENING**

The District's public relations plan should begin with an understanding of the public's current image of the District. Listening is a critical part of any successful public relations program. It is essential in understanding the public's image of the District. It is particularly important to listen to what the public is saying and to observe its actions and reactions. This is accomplished in part through the proper training of appraisers and other employees who deal directly with the public. Such training includes the necessity of listening to taxpayers, making eye contact, identifying possible problems or opportunities, and interpreting public opinion.

## **COMPONENTS OF A PUBLIC RELATIONS PROGRAM**

A good public relations plan should consist of, at a minimum, research, action planning, communication, and evaluation. The Program should consist of research designed to gather meaningful data as to how the public perceives the policies, programs, and operations of the District; an action plan based upon that research; positive, courteous, and educational communication with the public; and evaluation of all aspects of the public relations program.

Proper research should provide an idea of the public perception of our policies, programs, and operations. Currently information is being gathered by means of questionnaires concerning information on income and expenses for apartment complexes and other businesses as well as survey cards filled out by taxpayers. We also gather data through our Customer Service Survey which is provided on the District's Web Site.

Our research is designed to provide meaningful data that can be used to improve the public image of the district and foster good relations with core constituencies.

The District strives to make sure that communications with the public are always positive, courteous, and educational; and that information is distributed in the most efficient and cost-effective means. As with any program, each and every aspect of the public relations program must continually be tested, evaluated, and enhanced as needed.

The District's biennial Reappraisal Calendar contains a two-year Work Calendar detailing the duties and responsibilities of each department, including when and how communications with the public are sent, along with any required deadlines.

The District has an Operations Manual that provides instructions and details for the duties of each department. The *Public Access, TLO, and Customer Service Procedures* detail the procedures for Open Records Requests made under Government Code Chapter 552. It also contains extensive procedures for customer service, including the required communication skills, telephone phone procedures, how to deal with an angry public, and correspondence procedures. A copy of the *Public Access and Customer Service Procedures* section of the operation manual is attached hereto as Addendum A.

## **ISSUES MANAGEMENT AND ACTION PLANNING**

The District endeavors to make sure that emerging issues are anticipated and appropriate responses are prepared in advance to minimize adverse public reaction. With proper training, many problems can be avoided. To ensure that the plan is effective, it is essential that an action time-table be developed that defines tasks and establishes priorities for resolving issues. The plan has to be well coordinated and must have the support of those at the highest levels of the District. The Chief Appraiser's approval of the plan is of the utmost importance to the staff's acceptance and implementation of that plan.

## **CRISIS PLANNING**

There should always be a clear written plan for handling crises and coordinating with governmental agencies. The District has developed such a crisis plan which specifies individual roles within the office and ensures that all personnel know their roles. By necessity, the guidelines to be followed are very specific. Our public relations spokesperson coordinates interaction with the media in a crisis and ensures that all information released is accurate and precise.

## **CRITICISM**

Criticism is best addressed by:

- Responding quickly, openly, and honestly
- Identifying our core constituencies and paying particular attention to their views
- Involving all personnel from the top down
- Preparing and preserving complete written documentation of any criticism and the solutions proposed or adopted

## **REVIEW AND EVALUATION**

Any Public Relations Manual must be reviewed and evaluated from time to time to determine its results and effectiveness. Establishing a Public Relations Program is an ongoing process. Segments that have become obsolete or ineffective are discontinued. Sources that are considered include newspaper articles, magazines, trade publications, suggestion boxes, online surveys, online community forums, e-mails, and others.

## **PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS**

The District has adopted certain professional standards. Those standards include, but are not limited to, the *Uniform Standards of Appraisal Practice* and *International Association of Assessing Officers* Standards. These standards should be followed at all relevant times in accordance with current law and as appropriate in any given situation.

## **IMPORTANT DATES AND DEADLINES**

All required deadlines are provided on the District's website by providing a link to the State Comptroller's Property Tax Assistance Division's property tax law deadlines. [Click here](#) to follow the link.

## **DISCLOSURE OF DATA AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

Guidelines have been established for the disclosure of different types of data and for confidentiality. Those guidelines may be found in the *Public Access, TLO, and Customer Service Procedures* section of the District's Operations Manual, refer to Addendum A. The guidelines cover requests for Public Information and provide an explanation of the records that are considered confidential. They also reference relevant sections of both the Texas Property Tax Code and Texas Government Code. This section also addresses how to handle Requests for Confidentiality Under Tax Code Section 25.025.

## **GUIDELINES FOR STAFF INTERACTION WITH PUBLIC**

The *Public Access, TLO, and Customer Service Procedures* of the District's Operations Manual, attached as Addendum A, details the procedures for answering the telephones, working the front counter, and email and written communications.

## **GUIDELINES AND AUTHORIZATION PROCESS FOR USE OF INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY, LOGOS TRADEMARKS AND COPYRIGHT**

The guidelines and an authorization process for the use of any intellectual property, logos, trademarks, and copyrighted material will be as set by the Chief Appraiser as he may deem necessary from time to

time in order to see that such property and/or property rights are protected. All such guidelines will be in accordance with Federal and state laws regarding protection of Intellectual Property.

## **PRIVACY STATEMENT AND POLICY FOR PUBLIC COMMENT**

The District's policy for public comments at Board of Director meetings can be found in the *Public Access and Customer Service Procedures* section of the District's Operation Manual. The Chief Appraiser may from time to time, as he deems necessary, issue a standard privacy statement. The District's policy regarding confidential information can be found in the *Public Access, TLO, and Customer Service Procedures* section of the District's Operations Manual attached as Addendum A.

## **RECORDS RETENTION POLICY**

Retention periods for documents including appeal records, appraisal cards, appraisal correspondence, appraisal field notes, appraisal monitoring documentation, appraisal rolls-amendments and notices, appraisal rolls, and abstracts are required by the State of Texas. These requirements differ from the record keeping requirements of the Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal Practices; therefore, a **JURISDICTIONAL EXCEPTION** applies. A copy of this retention period document as it applies to appraisal districts as well as a signed Certification and Acceptance sheet and a listing of the retention period codes is included as Addendum B of this plan.

## **CODE OF CONDUCT FOR ONLINE BEHAVIOR**

The Internet, E-Mail, and Computer Usage section of the District's *Personnel Policy*, attached as Addendum C, addresses the code of conduct for online behavior. The District's intentions for publishing an Acceptable Use Policy are not to impose restrictions that are contrary to the District's established culture of openness, trust, and integrity. The District is committed to protecting its employees, partners, and the District from illegal or damaging actions by individuals, either knowingly or unknowingly. The District's Policy Statement regarding Internet, E-mail, and Computer usage provides that the use of automation systems, including computers, fax machines and all forms of Internet/Intranet access, is for District business and for authorized purposes only.

The District's policy statement for Internet/Internet browser use further states that the Internet is to be used to "further the District's mission, to provide effective service of the highest quality to Jefferson County property owners, and to support other direct job-related purposes." The various modes of Internet/Intranet access are District resources and are provided as business tools to employees who may use them for research, professional development, and work-related communications. Limited personal use of Internet resources is a special exception to the general prohibition against the personal use of computer equipment and software, but personal use should, in no event, violate any other part of this policy. Employees who are not sure their planned use is compliant with this policy must ask for supervisory approval before proceeding.

Employees are individually liable for any and all damages incurred as a result of violating District security policy, copyright, and licensing agreements. All District policies and procedures apply to employees' conduct on the Internet, especially, but not exclusively, relating to intellectual property, confidentiality, District information dissemination, standards of conduct, misuse of District resources, anti-harassment, and information and data security. Employees are expected to comply with District policies when using their own web pages, web logs, and engaging in other Internet social communication (such as Facebook). The Social Media section of the District's *Personnel Policy*, attached as Addendum D, addresses the District's social media policy.

## **APPROPRIATE ONLINE USE OF DISTRICT'S NAME AND IDENTITY**

The Internet, E-Mail, and Computer Usage section of the District's *Personnel Policy*, attached as Addendum C, also addresses the appropriate online use of the assessing jurisdiction's name and identity. The Policy Statement provides that Electronic communication should not be used to solicit or sell products or services that are unrelated to the District's business; distract, intimidate, or harass coworkers or third parties; or disrupt the workplace.

The District's Policy Statement regarding Internet, E-mail, and Computer usage provides that the use of automation systems, including computers, fax machines and all forms of Internet/Intranet access, is for District business and for authorized purposes only.

## **ENDORSEMENTS AND POLITICAL STATEMENTS**

With regard to endorsements and political statements, the District's policy is that no employee shall give any endorsement or make any political statement on behalf of the District. It is further the policy of the District not to issue any political statements or endorsements. However, in the course of normal events, should the Chief Appraiser consider it necessary to issue any such endorsement or statement, such endorsements or statements shall be issued only from the Chief appraiser's office and only under her direction and with her approval.

## **SUGGESTED RESPONSES TO IRATE TAXPAYERS**

The District provides the following suggestions for responding to irate taxpayers:

- A friendly greeting can sometimes disarm the person and put them at ease.
- This is the perfect time to **LISTEN** and show the person that you are genuinely interested in what they have to say.
- Sometimes it is just necessary to let the person vent. Try not to interrupt until they have had their say.
- Try not to be argumentative. It will likely make the situation worse.
- Calm yourself. Having two irate people makes the situation worse.
- Be patient. Give the person a chance to explain.
- Ask what you can do to help. Do not dwell on what went wrong. Find the path to resolution.
- Go out of your way. Try to show the person you are doing everything in your power.
- Express empathy, not sympathy.
- **DON'T TAKE THINGS PERSONALLY.**

Obviously, these types of situations will come in all varieties and must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. What works for one may not be the best solution for all. Above all, use your good judgment, instincts and common sense based upon the factors immediately at hand to resolve a volatile situation.

## **GUIDELINES FOR HEARINGS AND APPEALS**

The procedures for filing a protest are posted on the District's [website](#) under the Protest Info section. The ARB Hearings Procedures are mailed to every party filing a protest. They are also posted in each of the three ARB hearing rooms and the waiting area. They can be also be found on the District's [website](#) under the Protest Info section.

## **PROPER STAFF APPEARANCE AND ATTIRE**

The District's appraisers must wear the District's official shirt identifying them as employees of the District when they are out in the field and during the protest process.

Proper staff appearance and attire are found in the Dress Guidelines section of the District's *Personnel Policy*, attached as Addendum E. It is the District's intent that work attire should complement an environment that reflects an efficient, orderly, and professionally operated organization. Dress, appearance, and hygiene should not be offensive or distracting to the public or other employees. Employees should be well groomed and good personal hygiene habits must be maintained.

Jeans are acceptable only when working in the field, if neat in appearance and worn with a belt, if they have belt loops. Frayed or faded jeans are not acceptable. Work boots are acceptable when working in the field. All other dress guidelines must be adhered to when working in the field.

## **BADGES, NAMEPLATES, AND VEHICLE IDENTIFICATION**

Nameplates are provided to all employees. Identification badges, nameplates, and vehicle identification are provided to all appraisers. Nameplates should be prominently displayed on each employee's desk. Each appraiser should have their identification badge with them at all times when engaging in District business. Vehicle identification should be attached to the appraiser's vehicle when the appraiser is working in the field. In an effort to avoid damage to or loss of vehicle identification, it should be attached to the appraiser's vehicle when the appraiser reaches his/her general working area. It does not need to be on the appraiser's vehicle while in route to the area where the employee will be working.

## **TELEPHONE AND E-MAIL ETIQUETTE**

The *Public Access, TLO, and Customer Service Procedures* of the District's Operations Manual, attached as Addendum A and the Telephone Use section of the District's *Personnel Policies*, attached as Addendum F, address telephone and e-mail etiquette. These documents outline the use of District phones, personal cell phones at work, the personal use of business cell phones and the safe use of cell phones by employees while driving. Efficient use of the telephone is vital to the District.

Employees shall answer all calls promptly and courteously, and always identify themselves and the department to the caller. Employees are asked to make personal calls on non-work time as much as possible and to ensure that friends and family members are aware of the District's policy.

The District is aware that employees utilize their cell phones for business purposes. At the same time, cell phones are a distraction in the workplace. While at work employees are expected to keep cell phones in a purse or in a holster on vibrate mode rather than on their desks to ensure the effectiveness of their work duties.

Employees whose job responsibilities include regular or occasional driving, and who are issued a cell phone stipend for work-related business use are expected to refrain from using their phone while driving. Safety must come before all other concerns.

## **STYLE AND STRUCTURE OF LETTERS AND E-MAIL**

The District provides specific written guidelines for correspondence in the *Public Access, TLO, and Customer Service Procedures* section of the Operations Manual. All District personnel should strive to ensure that any and all correspondence prepared on behalf of the District is grammatically correct and contains proper punctuation and sentence structure. All correspondence should be prepared on appropriate letterhead. Any and all emails should contain the proper disclosures, disclaimers and confidentiality and/or privacy statements.

Remember, your email is a Public Record, so act accordingly.

## **PUBLIC RECORDS**

Public access to appraisal records is crucial to good public relations. The District strives to maintain a climate of openness and transparency. District employees must know and understand policies and statutes relating to open records, public disclosure, and confidentiality, as well as an awareness of compliance timelines.

The Chief Appraiser has established guidelines for the dissemination of real estate records or taxpayer information, taking into consideration privacy concerns. Those guidelines are found at the *Public Access, TLO, and Customer Service Procedures* Section of the District's Operations Manual, attached as Addendum A.

The District has appointed a Public Information Officer to handle all Open Records Request made under Government Code, Chapter 552.

## **CORRESPONDENCE**

Written correspondence must follow these specific guidelines:

- All letters and e-mails should be answered promptly. If a prompt response cannot be made, then those letters and emails should be acknowledged with an approximate date for a response.
- Use common words and phrases when presenting information.
- Respond to all relevant questions.
- Always present a professional image.
- In situations where possible, add a personal touch.
- Make your correspondence positive.
- Make sure to retain a copy of all correspondence for future reference.
- Be consistent with the office's style

A response to criticism should always be made promptly and resolved in a non-judgmental way.

## **NOTICES OF APPRAISED VALUE**

Notices of appraised value must contain the information outlined in Property Tax Code Sec. 25.19, including the following:

- Name and address of the assessment jurisdiction
- Purpose of the notice
- Tax year
- Date of notice

- Owner's or taxpayer's name
- Mailing address
- Parcel identification number
- Legal description
- List of taxing units taxing the property
- Market value of property in current and previous tax years
- Assessed value of property in current and previous tax year
- Taxable value of property in current and previous tax years
- Amount of exemptions in current and previous tax years
- A statement as to whether the property qualifies for the circuit breaker limitation
- Effective date of the ass
- Property address
- Appeal rights, hearing procedures (informal and formal), and dates
- Notice of availability and purpose of informal conference prior to protest hearing
- A link to the District's Truth In Taxation website

## **FORMS AND QUESTIONNAIRES**

The District's Operations Manual for each department addresses the forms, questionnaires, and letters for recurring events. Included in these files are:

- Appeal Forms
- Exemption Applications
- Income and expense questionnaires
- Sales Questionnaires
- Correspondence on policy
- Personal property forms

Useful information can be obtained through the use of carefully crafted questionnaires. The use of postage-paid return envelopes can increase the return rate.

## **ANNUAL REPORTS**

Local, state, and provincial agencies should prepare annual reports summarizing activities and accomplishments and providing statistical information. The District's Annual Report is generally submitted to the Board of Directors at their March meeting of the subsequent year. Once accepted by the Board, the Annual Report is published on the District's website under the Reports Section. These reports can be used to maintain an historical record of property and property tax data and include the following:

- District goals
- Total number of parcels
- Value information
- New construction information
- Top taxpayers
- Uses of property
- Exemption data
- Property owner appeal data
- Lawsuit and arbitration data
- Results of PTAD's Property Value Studies and MAP Reviews

- Duties of departments and personnel
- Budget comparisons
- Results of customer service surveys
- Legislative changes

## **MEDIA PROCEDURES AND CONTACTS**

The District maintains a list of media contacts. The list is reviewed at least annually and includes contacts in all types of media. Media contacts include news releases, interviews and conferences, and public service announcements.

News releases are a valuable tool for promoting activities, communicating policies, and informing the public about District issues. A news release should be newsworthy, not longer than two pages, and localized. The most important facts should appear first, and the release should always be proofread. All District staff should be given a copy of the release, and those mentioned in it should be notified before it is sent. The District's news releases begin in January with the "Notice of Availability of Electronic Communications" and continue on with the "Property Tax Benefits and Information" which is published in early March. The "Property Tax Protest and Appeal Procedures" press release is published in early May.

In an interview or telephone conversation, the spokesperson should be accurate, impartial, and avoid vague answers and comments off the record. If the spokesperson does not know the answer to a question, the response should be "I will get back to you." Also, if possible, a review of the questions in advance is advisable.

Public service announcements are sent to radio and television stations beginning with the announcements entitled "Rendering Property" and "Property Taxpayer Remedies" which are sent in late January or early February to be aired between February 15 and April 15. The announcements for "Homestead Exemptions" and "Productivity Appraisal" are generally sent in early March to run between March 15 and April 30. Broadcast announcements should be brief; a 25-word announcement takes about 10 seconds of airtime. Announcement dates should be specified and the spokesperson identified for follow-up questions.

## **SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS**

Speaking engagements are an important opportunity for contact between the District and organized groups. They can be spur of the moment or scheduled. An opportune time to meet with groups is just before the mailing of notices or a major reappraisal effort. Generally, speaking engagements take place January through December.

## **CONTACTS WITH OTHER PUBLIC OFFICIALS**

The District must deal with other agencies and officials at all levels of government. An effective working relationship with all these officials must be maintained. Communication with other officials is conducted throughout the year, from January through December. Unreasonable demands and public criticism of other departments should be avoided.

## **PUBLIC EDUCATION**

Taxpayers need to know the reason for assessments and the public services paid for by property taxes. They should understand that one of the main goals of assessment is to ensure that the tax burden is equitably distributed according to the appraised value of various properties. They should be made aware that they have a voice in the local budgetary process. They elect officials who set the tax rates, they can attend public hearings, and they can vote on bond or expenditure referendums. It is the District's responsibility to inform the taxpayer about the appraisal process, the information available for review, procedures for protesting and filing an appeal, and filing deadlines. Generally, this information is provided throughout the year from January 1<sup>st</sup> through December 31<sup>st</sup>.

Portions of this document were taken directly from and it is generally patterned after the format of the International Association of Assessing Officers *Standard on Public Relations*. If any part of this manual is found to be in conflict with the Uniform Standards of Appraisal Practice (USPAP) or state laws, USPAP and state laws shall be followed.