

Elected Officials and the Media: Be Responsive, Prepared & Transparent

Be Responsive:

- Don't say "no comment" – always try to offer something or respond that "At this time, there isn't any information I can share."
- If a reporter asks for an interview, but you feel uncomfortable with that due to the subject matter, offering a written statement is better than nothing.
- You represent your county, so stop and think before you say yes or no to the media. Make sure you aren't getting ahead of your county government in announcing something, sharing information that isn't public yet, or worse yet – is not legal to say.
- Get to know your local media partners, so they can be your advocates and you can have a good working relationship. This will create greater confidence in you and the county overall.

Be Prepared:

- If it is a scheduled interview, ask the reporter for questions ahead of time. They are often willing to share those with you in advance, so you can be as prepared as possible.
- Preparation looks different for an on-camera interview, a Zoom, a phone interview, or emailed questions. So know the media outlet and the form of the interview, and cater your responses accordingly.
- Make sure you have the background needed for the interview (ask the county's subject-matter experts for help if you need it), and come with talking points to the interview that you can refer to. You always want to make sure you are sharing facts.
- Try to focus your comments on the subject of the interview, so you do not accidentally open up a new line of questioning that you are not prepared for.

Be Transparent:

- Don't avoid tough questions. Answer them head on, with facts and not just opinions. This will enhance your credibility.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. You can tell the reporter you will get back to them with the answer (and a follow up email or phone call is usually sufficient) or refer them to the person who would have the answer.
- There is no such thing as "off the record." Anything you say to a reporter can serve as context for a story – so just because a reporter puts away a notebook or turns off a recorder, it doesn't mean the interview is over and you are free to say anything.
- Avoid saying anything disparaging or negative about another individual or entity. This creates divisiveness and remember – you are representing your county in everything you do and say.

Most reporters are cordial people and aren't out to get you (even though it may feel that way sometimes!). They are real people, with friends and family that likely live in your community, and they want to deliver a story that is accurate and informative. So building and maintaining relationships with them is important to ensure positive media coverage and a better informed public.