



Staff Report to Council

DATE: Monday, April 7, 2025

DEPARTMENT: Administration

SUBJECT: Social Media Policy Update

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

In June 2023, Langford updated its Social Media Policy to prepare for launching the City's first Facebook account. The account was opened in August 2023 as a tool to communicate City projects, events, business openings, media releases, advisories, and other City business with the public. Over the past year, City staff have encountered increased challenges with respect to monitoring the Facebook account and are recommending updates to the Policy to foster a safe and respectful information sharing process.

In addition to removing comments that directly violate the Policy, staff spend considerable time reviewing comments that do not breach the policy but could reasonably be harmful to residents and staff. This duty to monitor, evaluate, and remove comments in order to create a safe online environment requires staff to monitor the account outside of regular working hours. The public and staff are also reporting mental fatigue as many of the comments are offensive and unkind which can be challenging to read. This report details the Policy review process taken and sets out three options for Council's consideration.

BACKGROUND:

POL-0172-ADMIN titled "Social Media Policy," was adopted by Council in June 2023. The Policy provides rules and guidelines for the use of the City of Langford's official social media accounts and content related to the City of Langford by the public, employees and members of Council. Further, the Policy supports the City's commitment to provide accurate, transparent, and publicly accessible information on City policies, programs, and services.

The intention of launching social media pages, and specifically the City Facebook page was to provide another avenue to inform the public about City business, such as events, openings, projects, media releases, and advisories. In general, social media has proven to be an effective resource for quickly sharing information with residents and other interested parties. However, over the past year, the Facebook account has become an outlet for unkind and inappropriate dialogue amongst members of the community. While the City encourages respectful debate and differing points of view, more

commonly the conversations are verging on bullying. More frequently, threatening, racist, homophobic, or defamatory comments have to be deleted. Due to the increasing occurrence of inappropriate conversations, staff have been closely monitoring the Facebook page outside of office hours often late into the evening and all day and night on weekends. Monitoring is generally managed by the department manager with some outside support. Staff believe it is time to review and amend the Policy to ensure the page is a useful tool for sharing City information while respecting staff's personal time.

While it should be noted that there are not currently issues with other social media pages, staff recommend turning off commenting on all social media pages. As set out below, there are a multitude of options for the public to connect directly with staff and Council without having a need for social media commenting. Further, while there are currently no issues with other pages, there is no guarantee that this will continue to be the case.

COMMENTARY:

Current Policy

POL-0172-ADMIN was adopted by Council in June 2023 and has not been amended since.

Since the City's Facebook page was launched in summer of 2023, staff have noted the following challenges online that are not sufficiently covered within the existing Policy:

- Disrespectful and unproductive conversations occurring between residents in the comment sections of City Facebook page posts, resulting in the need for staff to monitor outside of office hours including evenings and weekends to uphold the Policy.
- A general decline in civility including but not limited to bullying, hateful, or intimidating comments on the City's Facebook page, creating an unproductive and unkind online environment.
- Ability to share misinformation, which detracts from the intent of sharing City messaging and can cause confusion for the general public.

As a result, staff spend a significant amount of time intervening or removing comments entirely. With the current staffing levels, the need to constantly monitor social media accounts has become unmanageable. Staff believe that the proposed amendments to the Policy as outlined in this report and in Attachment 2 would eliminate this demand.

Staff believe the City's social media accounts should serve solely as a tool that supports information sharing, not as a two-way engagement tool. Staff would like to note that there are multiple opportunities for the public to engage directly with the City:

- Through online surveys on LetsChatLangford.ca (an online engagement tool aimed at enhancing community involvement, on which the City has conducted 19 online projects since its inception).
- Attending a Council meeting in-person or on-line.
- Sending an email or letter to Council.
- Attending a public engagement event (which have taken place at different locations and have encompassed both community events and standalone sessions such as open houses, and most recently an *ideas fair*).
- Phoning or coming into City Hall.

Together, these on-line and in-person engagement opportunities have been healthy forums that provide meaningful opportunities for conversation and helpful feedback for staff.

Research

Since the Policy's implementation in summer of 2023, staff have continued to compile and review Social Media policies from other jurisdictions. Through this research, staff were able to identify other communities experiencing similar declines in online civility and have opted to disable commenting on social media, including:

- City of Victoria
- City of Duncan
- City of Port Alberni
- District of Tofino
- City of Cranbrook
- City of Fernie

Staff wish to note that while amending the Policy to implement more stringent comment guidelines has been utilized by other jurisdictions, this amendment will continue to result in staff spending a considerable amount of time reading, evaluating, monitoring, and deleting comments and posts. Removing the ability to leave a comment will not require additional staff time online.

Proposed Policy Updates

Staff have drafted an update to POL-0172-ADMIN (see attached) for Council consideration to eliminate public commenting on all City social media pages. All sections related to public commenting have been amended or deleted as the context requires.

The policy itself has been placed into the current policy template that meets the brand standards and enhance accessibility.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

Removing the ability to comment on all City social media platforms, will save considerable staff time. Similarly, this proposed amendment will alleviate the need for staff to work on evenings, weekends, and statutory holidays to monitor, evaluate, and remove posts and comments. As mentioned above, additional guidelines may increase civility but will require the same amount of staff time to maintain a safe environment online. Additional staff capacity will be required to maintain this level of review should staff continue to experience objectionable comments online.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS:

There are no legal implications associated with this report.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

5 – Good Governance

5g – Maintain the City’s Long-Standing Corporate Efficiencies

OPTIONS:

Option 1

THAT Council approve POL-0172-ADMIN “Social Media Policy” Amendment No. 1 as presented.

OR Option 2

THAT Council direct Staff to close the City’s Facebook account.

OR Option 3

THAT Council take no action regarding POL-0172-ADMIN “Social Media Policy” at this time.

SUBMITTED BY: Donna Petrie, Senior Manager of Communications & Economic Development

Concurrence: Melisa Miles, Manager of Legislative Services

Concurrence: Donna Petrie, Senior Manager of Communications & Economic Development

Concurrence: Yari Nielsen, Director of Parks, Recreation and Facilities

Concurrence: Matthew Baldwin, RPP, MCIP, Director of Development Services

Concurrence: Leah Stohmann, RPP, MCIP, Director of Community Planning and Climate Change

Concurrence: Katelyn Balzer, P.Eng., Director of Engineering and Public Works

Concurrence: Michael Dillabaugh, CPA, CA, Director of Finance

Concurrence: Marie Watmough, Director of Legislative & Protective Services

Concurrence: Braden Hutchins, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer

Concurrence: Darren Kiedyk, Chief Administrative Officer

Attachments: Attachment 1 – Current POL-0172-ADMIN “Social Media Policy”

Attachment 2 – POL-0172-ADMIN “Social Media Policy” Redline Copy

Attachment 3 – Proposed POL-0172-ADMIN “Social Media Policy” Amendment #1