



Town of North Topsail Beach Public Communications Report

August 2019 to May 2020
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SUMMARY

In the past nine months, town staff has introduced new public communications initiatives while improving existing methods. The platform switch for the town's Sunshine List constitutes the most notable change, resulting in a 178% increase in subscribers since the launch of the new system in late February. Staff began to streamline the town website to make it more navigable and consistent across its many pages. Regular content has been posted to Facebook, which staff believes attributed to the 7.7% increase in followers. In addition to these efforts to improve upon existing procedures, the performance of other novel communications initiatives such as public awareness campaigns surpassed expectations. Staff is pleased to present a more detailed summary of these efforts in the following communications report.

SUNSHINE LIST

The contact information for the Sunshine List was originally housed on the town clerk's email account as an Outlook contact group, a cumbersome method in more ways than one. First, adding and removing members to this list had to be done manually, taking up valuable staff time. Second, only the town clerk had the ability to send information over the Sunshine list, which prevented cross-training in public communications. Allowing multiple employees access to communication platforms ensures a timely release of town announcements should the town clerk be out of the office and would ensure a smoother transition of responsibilities when employee roles shift. Perhaps the most vivid example of how this isolation prevented staff from completing adequate communications occurred during Hurricane Florence. The town clerk's email was reported as spam, and her account was locked for two days. Staff printed a copy of the contact list prior to the storm and was able to create a generic Gmail account. Staff manually typed the email addresses to distribute information. However, the clerk was unable to access other emails for the two-day stretch, which proved cumbersome during the emergency.

To address these problems, the Sunshine List was moved to a new platform, Wix's "blog" feature, in late February 2020. Using the blog streamlined subscription management and the distribution of town announcements. Users can subscribe with one click on the town website, automatically adding them to the distribution list (Figure 1). Subscribers automatically receive email notifications of new "posts" on the blog, labeled as the "News Center" on the website. Users can also easily look through and share posts on the news center, even without a Sunshine List subscription.

For staff, these posts automatically populate the "Recent Updates" section of the homepage of the website and make sharing the posts to Facebook possible with one click (Figure 1). Posting information

from the Sunshine List to the website previously required uploading notices to Dropbox and then manually placing on the homepage, but the blog cuts out these time-consuming steps.

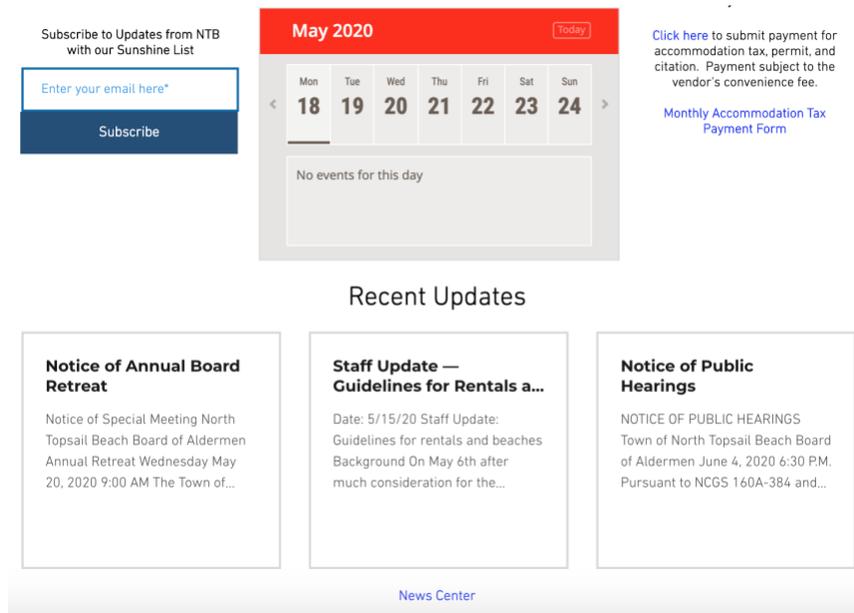


Figure 1. NTB homepage with subscription box and "Recent Updates" section.

The move to the Wix blog rapidly increased accessibility to town communications. When the contact group was first migrated from Outlook to Wix on February 25th, there were 497 subscribers to the Sunshine List. On May 11th, there were 1,360 subscribers, a 178% increase (Figure 2). Since the launch, the blog has had a total of 51,434 views. While there is no data on forwarding and sharing from the Outlook version, it is safe to say that an email that went out to 500 people had nowhere near the reach of the 6,000 unique views the most popular blog post has amassed.

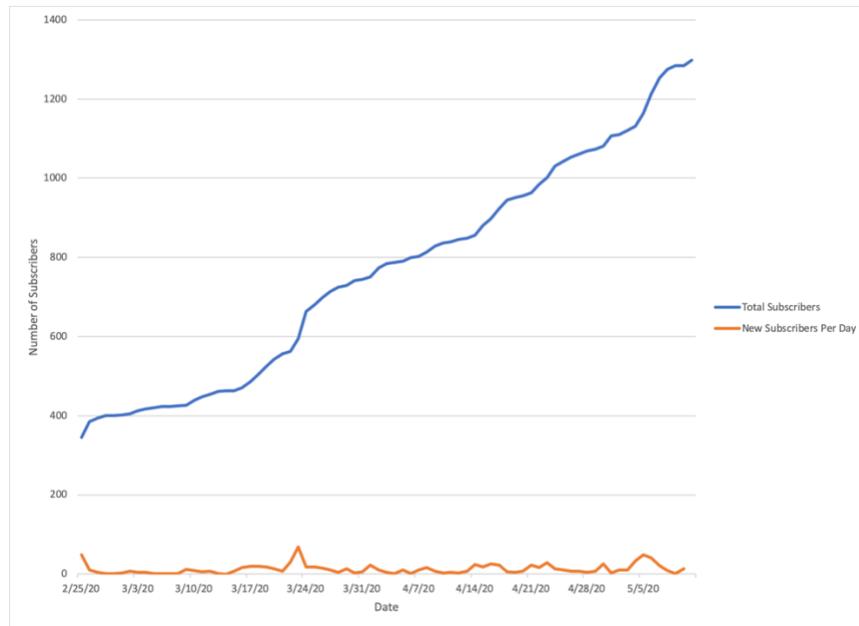


Figure 2. Total number of Sunshine List subscribers over time

WEBSITE

Since January 2020, steady improvements have been made throughout the town website to streamline content, improve consistency and increase navigability for the approximately 20,000 monthly users (Figure 3). The number of sections in the navigation bar has been consolidated and reordered to reflect a more intuitive navigation flow through the website. A consistent design style has been implemented across the website to promote uniformity and professionalism while increasing ADA accessibility (ex: using dark text on a light background to increase readability). This first wave of edits has also made the website mobile-friendly, essential for the over 60% of total users viewing the website from a mobile device.

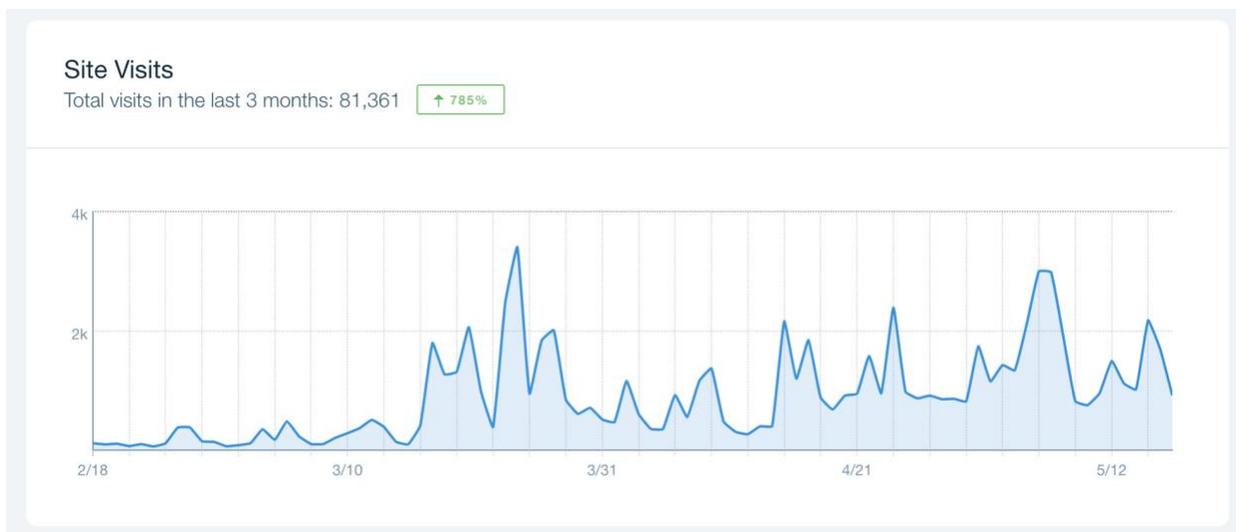


Figure 3. Total visits to the town website from February 2020 to May 2020, representing a 785% increase from the previous 3-month period.

Several pages have been updated with more current information and/or redesigned. Department pages have been standardized and updated, with the help of staff in that department when necessary. With the help of Barry Burke, the waste collection page was redesigned to emphasize the most important information. Other pages with a significant redesign include CBRA, hurricane preparedness, and shoreline protection. Broken links have also been fixed with the help of Keri Simpson.

Recordings of Board of Aldermen meetings have also recently switched platforms, thanks to the work of Planning Director Deb Hill. She moved streaming the meetings from Facebook to YouTube, which will increase accessibility because it does not require an account to view, unlike Facebook.

FACEBOOK

Since August 2019, Facebook posts have followed a regular monthly content program to better engage citizens online while maintaining organization and consistency. The program includes the following every month:

- Reminder to register for CodeRed
- Reminder to register for the Sunshine List
- Guidance for waste collection (increased frequency in summer months)
- Environmental education
- Town project/shoreline protection update (as needed)
- “Fun Fact Fridays”
- Beach rules and ordinances (summer months only)

The content program is tailored to each month to include town holidays and events. Over this 9-month period of regular content, there has been a 7.7% increase in followers on Facebook.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Hurricane Dorian

Overall, town staff used a clear, frequent communication strategy that received positive feedback from citizens. Some posts needed more specificity (ex: definition of mandatory evacuation, when the bridge closes, etc.), but any resulting confusion was cleared up in subsequent posts.

Beginning August 27th, the Town of North Topsail Beach communicated regularly with citizens about town preparations, evacuations, and safety measures for Hurricane Dorian. Communication efforts included the following:

- 60 Facebook posts
- 6 press releases
- 4 CodeRed alerts
- Citizen call center, beginning 2 p.m. September 4th
- Interviews with the press

Based on Facebook comments (which are hidden to the public), citizens were pleased with the town's overall communication efforts, especially from September 4th onward. A complete communications report on Hurricane Dorian was sent to the Board of Aldermen in September 2019.

COVID-19 pandemic

Since the state of emergency declaration issued on March 17th, communications on town operations, restrictions and guidance has gone out to the public at least once a week. During the peak of the crisis in late March, updates were posted several times a week. These updates were distributed as press releases and staff updates through the Sunshine List, Facebook and CodeRed.

A "[COVID-19 Guidance and Resources](#)" page on the website regularly compiles information from both the town and the state. The page includes documents on the town's state of emergency declaration, the governor's stay at home order and CDC and NCDHHS guidelines on how to slow the spread of the pandemic. With the lift of the ban on short-term rentals, staff also added a shareable, printable [packet with guidance](#) for visitors and rental agencies to maintain the community's health and safety.

OTHER COMMUNICATIONS INITIATIVES

Shoreline management map

To help the public understand the town's complex shoreline management strategy, staff created an online [interactive map](#) where users can type in their address and view the upcoming shoreline projects planned for their property (Figure 4). During the Hurricane Matthew Phase 5 Dune Restoration Project, the map was updated at least once a week to reflect the project's progress. These updates were also posted on Facebook and included photographs. The map is also periodically updated when the town confirms new developments in future shoreline projects.

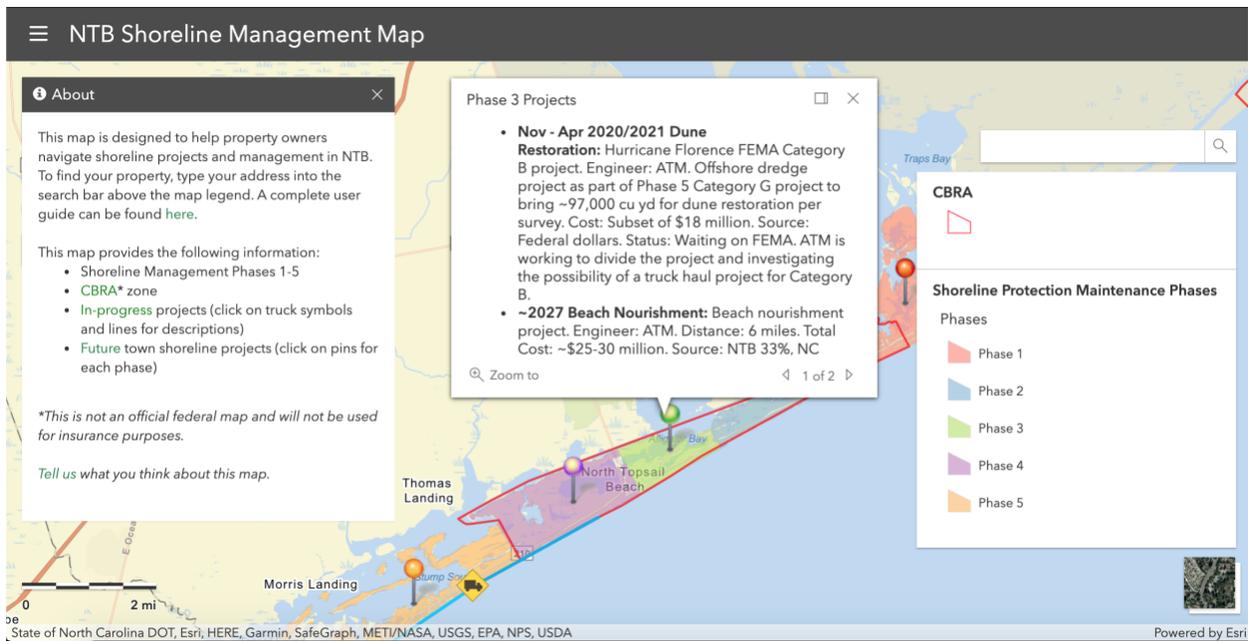


Figure 4. Screenshot of NTB shoreline management map

IHA shoreline protection update

To inform property owners and residents affected by the N.C. Coastal Resources Commission's proposed Inlet Hazard Area (IHA) boundary update, the town prepared and distributed [a special edition](#) of the Shoreline Protection Update newsletter. The newsletter included a fact sheet distilling the most important changes in the CRC update and emphasized the dates for the public comment period and public hearing. The letter was emailed to HOAs and physically mailed to owners of all other residences within the proposed IHA boundary.

Alderman Benson read the town's official public comment at the December 18, 2019 public hearing in Sneads Ferry. To amplify the voice of the town's residents and property owners, the comment was [published online](#) as a petition, which had amassed 181 signatures at the time the public comment period closed.

CBRA letter campaign

To help push forward legislation in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to remove North Topsail Beach from the Coastal Barrier Resources System (CBRS), staff created [an online letter writing campaign](#). Staff designed the campaign to engage property owners from across the country to contact their legislative representatives on the issue. As of May 19th, 131 people have participated in the campaign with 393 letters total sent to congressional representatives.

NEXT STEPS FOR COMMUNICATIONS

To further improve citizen engagement and government transparency, there are two discussions the town should consider next:

1. **Website Re-design:** The town website has been steadily and continuously updated over the last five months to improve clarity and usability. Launching a complete re-design initiative would be a reasonable next step, which would include a possible platform change away from Wix to better manage the town's extensive online content. Hiring a professional web designer for this project would put the town's online presence in more experienced hands.
2. **Evaluate current social media policy:** While government use of social media continues to be a gray area, experts from the UNC School of Government have increasingly advised governments to use social media as it was designed to do so — a two-way form of communication between government and its citizens. North Topsail Beach, among many other counties and municipalities, hide all comments on Facebook in an attempt to make it a form of one-way communication, similar to the website. To better protect the town from legal action while promoting government transparency, the Board may consider opening up comments and the purchase of a web archiving service to main adherence to public records retention schedules.

Staff's goal is to develop a plan that creates consistent opportunities for citizen engagement. The Board's direction following this report will help staff further these goals.