One of the City of Tamarac, Florida’s five Strategic Goals is “Clear Communication”. This goal is to “ensure effective communication within the organization and throughout the City, and enhance the visibility of City programs and services.” Like most local and state governments, the City of Tamarac has been doing more with less. The recession of the past couple of years has taken a significant toll on the revenues of the City and has caused us to look for new ways to achieve our goals in the most cost effective way possible.

Although the City has been able to maintain its quarterly resident newsletter, the *Tam-A-Gram*, economic realities meant increasing the frequency of the publication, or developing other similar, more traditional, forms of communication was impossible. Staff began looking for alternatives and quickly realized the solution to increased communication (at little to no cost) was all around them. The ways by which people were getting and sharing information had changed drastically from past years; it was instantaneous and it was free. It was Social Media and other Web 2.0 technologies.

In December 2008 the City got its feet wet by begging to test the use of Twitter. The official site, @CityofTamarac, went live to the public in February 2009 and with that, Tamarac became the first City in Broward County (the second largest county in Florida) to launch a Twitter site; a significant achievement considering the City was originally founded as a retirement community. Just a few short years ago the average resident’s age was in the mid to upper-60s! Today, Tamarac’s great location and affordable housing have attracted more families and young adults; the latest census data show the City’s average age to be in the mid-40s.

To introduce and advertise the City’s Twitter account, an entire campaign was developed and produced in-house which included counter displays, posters, “take-one” informational cards, and articles in the *Tam-A-Gram* newsletter. The only expense was for two ads placed in local newspapers (at a cost of less than $600).

The response was great. The media picked up the story of “sleepy Tamarac” becoming the first City in Broward County to start a Twitter account. Residents “tweeted” that they were proud that their City was “with it”. Further buzz was created by Twitter-only contests – for example, staff would “tweet” before or during an event a message such as: “The first person to come up to the guy taking photos at the Springfest event tomorrow and say ‘I follow you on Twitter’ gets a prize!” The marketing worked and the number of followers continued to grow.

In addition to Twitter, the City started a Facebook page (www.facebook.com/ TamaracFlorida), again a first in Broward County. The page quickly caught on, and both the Twitter and the Facebook pages became popular ways to communicate with the community.

Another first in South Florida was the creation of the City’s emergency-only Twitter account, @COTemergency. This account was launched a few months after the original Twitter account and was marketed as a way for the City to get important information out to the public in case of an emergency. Thankfully the City has not had occasion to use this venue.

Embracing Social Media was not easy. The State of Florida has strict public records laws and the question as to whether staff would be able to effectively keep track of “tweets” and postings needed to be addressed. Social Media was new territory for a city government. Working with the City Attorney, it was determined only “transitory” information would be conveyed (transitory information does not need to be held past 30 days). This includes items such as event and meeting promotion, event and meeting cancellations, road closures, and utility work related notices. Items related to legislation, the City Commission, or the budget would not be allowed. The other question was how to deal with anyone who contacted the City through the Twitter or Facebook accounts. It was decided to answer questions in the open – in other words, post responses so everyone could see the answers, and to direct people to call or email the City directly. Working with the City Attorney, content guidelines were set and a Social Media Policy was established. Working with the IT department, a means to collect the Twitter “tweets” was devised through the RSS feature of Outlook.

In addition to social media, the City also embraced other Web 2.0 technologies such as: Flickr.com to host the City’s photos, and Scribd.com and Issuu.com, both of which are used to make available various City publications, brochures, press releases, etc. on-line.

Most recently Tamarac has embraced the use of QR Codes – another first for a City in Broward County. These two-dimension bar codes have been gaining in popularity over the past several years (they’ve been popular in Japan and Europe for much longer) and are essentially quick short-cuts to more information. The City rolled-out the use of QR Codes in the *Tam-A-Gram*. The codes have also been deployed on signage (at a cost of less than $650) at various city facilities and parks as a quick and easy way to provide additional information.

The best part about Social Media and Web 2.0 technologies, beyond the interaction with the public and the ability to convey more information, is that that their usage can be monitored and tracked. This includes new followers on Facebook or “re-tweets” on Twitter; new subscribers on Scribd.com or views on Flickr.com; and most recently, how many times a particular QR Code has been scanned. This tracking provides the City the ability to judge the effectiveness of its communication methods.

**Scope, Importance, and Value of Activity/Contribution:**

These services, Social Media and Web 2.0 technologies, are extremely important to Tamarac and its strategic goal of “Clear Communication.” Not only has the usage of these technologies benefitted the City by adding additional tools of communication, but it has also given the City a change in image; of being “cool” and up-to-date with the latest trends. It has also benefitted the public by providing quick and easy access to information about their City.

“Inclusive Communities” is another of Tamarac’s Key strategic goals, given our rapidly changing demographics, and the use of these technologies has provided an additional layer of transparency. Ensuring our residents are kept abreast of City issues and by providing an additional forum to request information has reassured them of the professionalism of staff; reaffirmed our commitment to providing honest open communication; expanded the communication venue beyond print to social media; and helped to engage the younger members of our community who are more prone to utilize this forum than traditional print.

**Quality and Creativity:**

Tamarac’s use of Social Media and Web 2.0 technologies has served as an example to other cities, not just in South Florida, but around the country as well. Once the Twitter site was launched, the City’s Public Information Office received calls from other cities and government entities asking “How did you do that?” The usage of these technologies demonstrates leadership as Tamarac took the lead in implementing them; it also shows that the City is innovative, using tools that are free, new, fun, and outside the box for a governmental agency.

**Effectiveness Measures:**

Using these technologies has helped the City expand its communication efforts in a very cost effective manner. The services are free to use; the staff time necessary to update, post, and maintain the sites is minimal; and costs have been minimal. Using Social Media and Web 2.0 technologies enabled Tamarac to reach a larger audience; an audience that tends to be more tech-savvy and engaged – they are receiving, and noticing, information about the City that they may not have received before. The usage of these technologies can easily be replicated in other cities.

**Other Feedback:**

Tamarac has benefitted immensely by its use of Social Media and Web 2.0 technologies; we’ve reached a new audience that has chosen to receive our messages and the feedback has been very positive from constituents. There have been some barriers along the way including pushback internally from some staff who felt that this type of technology was unnecessary or could be time-consuming; but as time has gone by they’ve come to see the benefits. Although the feedback from the community has been overwhelmingly positive, there have been a few comments regarding the potential cost of these technologies and that many of the population does not use them. These concerns are easily addressed by educating our constituents about the costs and that the reality is that these sites and technologies are being used more and more by many of their neighbors.

To date the City of Tamarac has over 970 Twitter followers, 340 Facebook followers, and hundreds of scans of our QR Codes. Tamarac has embraced these new technologies to communicate with the public the way the public is communicating with each other; the way we all communicate and share with our friends and family. Tamarac’s use of Social Media and Web 2.0 technologies has not replaced any of our more traditional communication methods, but it has enhanced our efforts and helped us to reach a broader audience. For these reasons, we believe it to be a resounding success.