**HARRISON CENTRAL APPRAISAL DISTRICT**

**Standards on Public Relations**

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**HARRISON CENTRAL APPRAISAL DISTRICT**

**STANDARDS ON PUBLIC RELATIONS**

**1. SCOPE**

The Harrison Central Appraisal District (HCAD) recognizes the need to establish consistent, effective, two-way communications with a wide range of core constituencies whose interests in appraisal district functions must be served.

The goals, standards and objectives outlined in the plan consistently endorse and mirror the standards published by the International Association of Assessing Officers (IAAO).

As a matter of principle, HCAD’s role as a government agency establishes a high threshold of performance in terms of both proactive and responsive communications on all matters involving the administration of the district.

The district’s standards on public relations include traditional means of communication. The plan also acknowledges that a primary focus must also include a consistently high quality of personal interaction with property owners who call or come to the district for service. Training of personnel to ensure the attainment of goals and standards continues to be a requisite responsibility of all managers within HCAD.

**2. INTRODUCTION:**

HCAD’s public relations standards require that there be a systemic awareness among its entire workforce that every interaction of every employee with those who turn to the district for information, guidance and problem resolution is an important opportunity to project the highest standards of the district’s commitment to professional, courteous and efficient service. It is vital that there be a genuine awareness by the district’s employees that an effective public relations program is not a ‘now and then’

duty. Every employee of the district who interacts with a member of the public is a public relations official of the district.

**2.1 NECESSITY FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS:**

An appraisal district operates in an environment in which conflict, disagreement, tension and bad publicity are a ‘part of doing business.’ The negative can come in the form of a news media inquiry over a controversial development or issue. It can come at the front counter when an irate property owner does not ‘get the answer’ one hopes to get. It can come because state law ties the hands of an appraisal district or because someone at the district made an honest mistake. The negative can come at a second’s notice. Because of the media environment in a digital world, bad news travels exponentially fast and too often without context.

A comprehensive public relations plan recognizes that there are literally hundreds of interactions between the district and its core constituencies. Some are routine and impersonal. Many are complex, personal and involve areas of contention in which constituents can judge themselves to be ‘winners’ or ‘losers.’

As a matter of principle, the district’s comprehensive plan for public relations is dedicated to the belief that the more these groups and individuals understand about the property tax system the more opportunity there is to diminish the occurrences of conflict, anger and frustration.

Thus, the district’s success in implementing an effective public relations plan is greatly enhanced because the district has developed a comprehensive understanding of its primary core constituencies and the unique needs of each.

**2.2 CORE CONSTITUENCIES**

HCAD has the statutory duty to appraise over 300,000 parcels of property each year, the list of constituencies is significant and varied. The full scope of expertise within HCAD is a vital component of its ability to meet the needs of each of its core constituencies.

These core constituencies are as follows:

**Taxing Jurisdictions**: Within HCAD’s boundaries, including the county, are twenty-two school districts, cities and special districts. HCAD’s prime responsibility is to appraise real property in Harrison County allowing these jurisdictions to obtain and certify their property tax rolls. The taxing jurisdictions are as follows:

Harrison County

City of Hallsville

City of Longview

City of Marshall

City of Waskom

Elysian Fields Independent School District *(split county)*

Hallsville Independent School District

Harleton Independent School District

Karnack Independent School District

Marshall Independent School District

New Diana Independent School District *(split county)*

Ore City Independent School District *(split county)*

Waskom Independent School District

Emergency Services District #1

Emergency Services District #2

Emergency Services District #3

Emergency Services District #4

Emergency Services District #5

Emergency Services District #6

Emergency Services District #7

Emergency Services District #8

Emergency Services District #9

 **Property Owners/Taxpayers**: While state law regulates much of the communication with

 individual property owners, the district is fully dedicated to going beyond the mandatory

 communications.

**Sub-Groups**: The district routinely responds to invitations to meet with groups of taxpayers in ‘their settings’ whether these are civic organizations or special purpose groups.

**Comprehensive Information**: The district maintains a website with comprehensive information on major aspects of the property tax system. HCAD’s website is an integral part of communication efforts.

**In-House Information Services**: The district maintains a staff of trained personnel to answer the broad range of questions that the general public may have. As well, the district has computer resources within its lobby that are available for property owners to research key sections of the district’s database that is available to the public by state law.

**Traditional News Media**: The district maintains regular communications with newspapers and radio stations. There are no local television stations available in Harrison County for the district to maintain a relationship with. The district understands there are at least two major kinds of interaction with the news media: a) The district wants to get information to the public and b) the news media wants information from the district. The first involves the district asking for help to reach property owners with important information. The second involves the news media seeking and sometimes demanding information and answers about specific matters. The district recognizes that the more effectively it deals with the second with speed and accuracy, the more likely it is to get cooperation on the first. The district’s policy with the news media is straightforward – when the media wants something, HCAD delivers it as quickly as feasible. While state law establishes how long a governmental entity can take and the methods of delaying response, HCAD prides itself on prompt responses as a matter of operational principle.

**Non-Traditional Media**: Internet usage has grown significantly and the district utilizes internet capabilities to communicate with property owners who prefer the non-traditional ways of receiving information.

**2.3 THE COMPONENTS OF A PUBLIC RELATIONS PLAN:**

Research, planning, communications and evaluation as needed are integral components of the district’s public relations program. The district’s overall efforts include both traditional duties such as proactive and responsive interaction with the news media, the general public and its core constituencies.

HCAD notes that some of the broader public relations standards stipulated by the IAAO involve specific matters that are enumerated in Texas state law. As such, rigorous compliance of these standards are ensured by the appropriate divisions and departments of HCAD and fully documented pursuant to state law. Compliance with many of these specific standards is monitored by the State Property Division of the office of the Comptroller of Public Accounts for the State of Texas.

The primary components of the district’s public relations plan involve several strategies that fully encompass the broad range of standards stipulated by the IAAO:

 1. **HCAD Memorandums**: This written documentation serves as an internal communications

 vehicle. HCAD publishes information on internal events for the staff and focus on news,

 analysis, legislative updates, TDLR information, and information distributed by the

 Comptroller’s office.

 2. **Written Communications**: These communications are distributed to the news media and

 core constituencies at critical times during the property tax year. The district maintains a

 record of its responses to formal public information requests.

 3. **Core Constituencies**: Meetings during the property tax year are held at the request of

 constituencies or the district to address a full range of property tax, appraisal administration

 and other matters of operational concern to property owners.

 4. **Professional Training**: HCAD provides for professional training for all certified employees in

 conformance with IAAO professional appraisal standards. Training is usually held outside the

 district office and full participation of all certified employees is required. This commitment to

 training ensures both professional compliance as well as preparing employees to be fully

 prepared to effectively interact with property owners.

 5. **Professional Organizations**: Professional organizations help both management and staff to

 keep fully abreast of laws, regulations and the best practices. The district encourages staff to

 be active in professional organizations. This professional development enhances the ability

 of the district personnel in its interaction with its core constituencies.

 6. **Education**: A comprehensive commitment to education of the full range of property tax

 laws, regulations and administrative issues are accomplished through the districts website.

 The website serves as a property owner’s ‘front door’ to the tax system. Through providing

 its own downloadable data such as forms required by property owners to linking to vital

 outside sources of data, the district’s website is a full-source destination for property tax

 information.

 7. **Personal Interaction**: Personal interaction with property owners occurs as a ‘front counter’

 operation where answers and direct help are provided on a full range of property tax

 matters. The customer service area provides property owners with access to important

 critical data bases.

 8. **Professional Resources**: The district monitors the Texas Legislature during its biannual

 sessions and key professional organizations such as IAAO and TAAD. This commitment plays

 an integral role in the district’s ability to educate and interact with its local core

 constituencies.

**3. DEVELOPING A PUBLIC RELATIONS PROGRAM:**

**3.1 PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICER:**

The district does not pursue a philosophy that there should be a single spokesperson for HCAD. However, the district does believe that it is critical that there be specific personnel assigned the duty to coordinate all such communications. There are two staff members who share in this initial responsibility.

One staff member is designated as the custodian of public records and responsible for accepting requests that are defined under the Public Information Act of the State of Texas. All such formal requests are routed, tracked and recorded through this individual. This position also coordinates non-statutory related requests for information or assistance when the inquiries come from individuals. This staff member has the responsibility to ensure that the district’s upper level management is kept fully informed on all such requests.

It is the responsibility of the chief appraiser to determine on a case-by-case basis who will be assigned the responsibility of speaking for the district in on the record situations with the news media or others. The Chief Appraiser is the official spokesperson for the district regarding the news media.

The cross training and professional experiences of key employees at every level of the organization offers stable transitions in the event of the loss of key personnel in current positions.

**3.2 LISTENING:**

The district receives significant input from its core constituencies. Problems are routed to department management as needed. Management undertakes the initial task of listening in the following ways:

 \* Listen to what is being said by the property owner/public

 \* Observe public’s actions and reactions

 \* Observe economic, social and political environments

 \* Identify possible problems or opportunities

 \* Interpret and/or evaluate public opinions

 \* Feedback is obtained from the public using comment cards available in the lobby

 \* Discuss results with key staff members

**3.3 ISSUES MANAGEMENT AND ACTION PLANNING:**

HCAD incorporates the standards of this requirement. It does so in the context of the goals, policies and objectives previously noted in “The Components of a Public Relations Plan.”

**3.3.1 CRISIS PLAN**

A crisis to an appraisal district should be perceived in a different context that a crisis that might confront a city, county or special jurisdiction like those served by HCAD. The core mission of an appraisal district is to provide its taxing jurisdictions with certified property records from which tax rolls can generate the dollars necessary to fund the operations of these governmental entities.

Dealing with the controversies that erupt in the political environment of the property tax system are an integral part of the public relations program and the skills of the individuals who are assigned those responsibilities. These matters should not be confused with a crisis that would jeopardize the district’s core mission.

The common denominator of both kinds of potential crisis is that the Chief Appraiser is the absolute final voice of decision on all communications. At his/her discretion and depending upon circumstances, he/she will perform the communication tasks personally or delegate it to specific individuals as appropriate.

In terms of other kinds of legitimate crisis that could affect the core mission, the cross training and professional experiences of key employees at every level of the organization offer stable transitions in the event of the loss of key personnel in current positions.

**3.3.2** **CRITICISM**

HCAD takes immediate action to criticism from outside sources. The district handles criticism in various ways depending on the nature of the complaint. Key personnel will:

 \* Respond quickly, honestly and openly

 \* Identify person or group with complaint and pay special attention to their views

 \* Involve top staff members

 \* Prepare and preserve complete written documentation of the criticism and the solutions

 proposed or adopted.

**3.4 COMMUNICATIONS**

The district incorporates the principles and standards defined by the IAAO in its section on “Communication.” However, the district notes that it does NOT permit its employees to use social media in the performance of HCAD duties. Communications between appraisal districts and property owners are most often dictated by state law. Social media is simply too unstructured to protect the legal interests of property owners and the district.

**4. PUBLIC RECORDS**

HCAD promotes transparency and openness of records. The district maintains a computer public area within its lobby that is available for property owners to research key sections of the district’s database that is available to the public by state law.

The district takes precautions for the dissemination of real estate records or taxpayer information and is sensitive to privacy concerns.

One staff member is designated as the custodian of public records and responsible for accepting requests that are defined under the Public Information Act of the State of Texas. All such formal requests are routed, tracked and recorded through this individual. This position also coordinates non-statutory related requests for information or assistance when the inquiries come from individuals. This staff member has the responsibility to ensure that the district’s upper level management is kept fully informed on all such requests.

Cross training and professional experiences of key employees at every level of the district offer stable transitions in the event of the loss of key personnel in current positions.

**5. PRINTED INFORMATION AND CORRESPONDENCE**

In preparing printed materials and correspondence for the public, the district pays special attention to form, content, length and language. Printed materials conform to property tax laws and rules from the Texas State Comptroller’s office.

**5.1 CORRESPONDENCE**

All correspondence is answered promptly by the staff. While state law establishes how long a governmental entity can take and the methods of delaying response, HCAD offers prompt responses as a matter of operational principle. HCAD tries to answer all correspondence the day it is received. Correspondence is answered in clear and concise phrases, with all relevant questions answered.

Copies of correspondence and answers are scanned into the property owner’s account and then filed in the property owner’s appropriate file.

Responses to criticisms are answered promptly and resolved in a non-judgmental way.

**5.2 ASSESSMENT NOTICES**

Notices of Appraised Value (assessment notices) processed by the district meet all requirements of the property tax laws and rules of the comptroller.

These notices contain:

 \* Name and address of the assessment jurisdiction

 \* Purpose of the notice

 \* Tax Year

 \* Property owner’s name

 \* Property owner’s mailing address

 \* Parcel identification number

 \* Legal description of the property

 \* Tax district information

 \* Effective date of the assessment

 \* Property address

 \* Exemptions applied to the stated property

 \* Total appraised value

 \* Taxable value if different from appraised value

 \* Statutory level of assessment

 \* Prior assessment

 \* New assessment

 \* Net change in assessment

 \* Reason for new assessment

 \* Appeal rights, hearing procedures and dates

 \* Date of notice

 \* Class or type of property

 \* Tax impact statement showing projected property taxes for the upcoming tax year

**5.3 SPECIAL PURPOSE MESSAGES**

Special purpose messages are published in the local newspaper for the public. These announcements may include, but are not limited to:

 \* Available Exemptions

 \* Filing of Various Applications (Ag, Timber, Wildlife, etc.)

 \* Tax Deferral Information

 \* Rendition Notices

 \* Declaration Reports

 \* Protest and Appeal Procedures

**5.4 FORMS AND QUESTIONNAIRES**

The district maintains forms, questionnaires and letters for recurring events. These files include:

 \* Appeal forms

 \* Exemption applications

 \* Income and Expense questionnaires

 \* Sales Questionnaires

 \* Correspondence on policies

 \* Personal property forms

**5.5 ANNUAL REPORTS**

An annual Mass Appraisal Report is produced yearly. The report is published on the districts website to provide citizens and taxpayers with a better understanding of the district’s responsibilities and activities. The Mass Appraisal Report was written in compliance with Standards Rule 6-7 of the Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal Practice (USPAP) as promulgated by the Appraisal Standards Board of The Appraisal Foundation. The Mass Appraisal report is prepared under the provisions of the Texas Property Tax Code.

**6. MEDIA CONTACTS**

The district maintains regular communications with traditional news media such as newspapers and non-traditional media such as the districts website. There are no local television stations available in Harrison County for the district to maintain a relationship with.

Communication is maintained with the following media outlets:

 Marshall News Messenger

 Longview News Journal

 Districts’ Website

**6.1 NEWS RELEASES**

News releases are used to communicate policies and inform the public of assessment issues. News releases are distributed to district staff prior to public release. News releases contain:

 \* District contact information

 \* Short, concise and easily understandable information

 \* Information is localized

 \* Important information appears first in news releases

**6.2 INTERVIEWS AND CONFERENCES**

The spokesperson for the district conducts interviews and conferences with accurate and impartial information. Vague answers and comments off the record are avoided. Answers to questions that are not known are answered with “I will get back to you on that particular item.” An advance review of the questions is requested by the spokesperson and occasionally visual aids are used in presentations.

**6.3 PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Public service announcements are provided to local newspapers and radio stations yearly and are posted within the districts office and on its website. Public service announcements may include:

 \* Electronic Communication Notices

 \* Rendition Notices

 \* Productivity Appraisal information

 \* Homestead Exemption information

 \* Disabled Veterans Exemption information

 \* Special Appraisals information

 \* Renditions and Declaration reports

 \* Deferred Property information

 \* Deadlines for various property owner filings

 \* Protest and Appeal Procedures

**7. SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS**

District officials are routinely involved in outside speaking engagements with the full range of core constituencies and professional associations. This would include but not be limited to elected public officials including mayors, councils, board members and other local officials.

The district maintains an active speaker’s outreach effort where the chief appraiser will address community organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, various civic groups, taxing entities, and various elected officials.

The district also hold seminars yearly for elected officials and taxing entity staffs to disseminate current information on appraisals of real property, commercial property, industrial property, personal property and mineral valuations.

**8. PUBLIC OFFICIAL CONTACTS**

The district maintains an effective working relationship with other agencies and officials at all levels of government. The district keeps these agencies informed of any public announcements that could cause unreasonable demands and public criticism for them.

Working relationship are maintained with elected officials, appointed officials (superintendents), taxing entity personnel (business managers, accounting departments, tax collectors), special districts board of directors and attorneys for all taxing entities within the county.

**9. APPEALS PROCESS**

HCAD makes every effort to keep property owners informed of the appeals process. Media advertisements are made detailing protest and appeal procedures. When property owners file a formal protest the district sends each individual property owner the following:

 \* Notice of Hearing

 \* Information packet on how to prepare for hearing

 \* Property Taxpayer Remedies

 \* Informal Hearing information

 \* Frequently Ask Questions

**10. PUBLIC EDUCATION**

The district places significant emphasis upon public education. The district’s website provides the public with extraordinary levels of information about the full range of issues involved in the property tax system.

The district’s website contains various information and links to educate the public in property taxation. Some examples are: District contact information, tax rates, links to other appraisal districts, link to the comptroller’s office, available exemptions, plats, forms, frequently asked questions, tax calendar, filing of online protests and property tax basics.

**11. INTERNET**

The internet is an effective way to inform the public about appraisal issues. HCAD uses its web site to inform property owners on various issues of the Property Tax Code. The district’s website contains various information and links to educate the public in property taxation. Some examples are: District contact information, tax rates, links to other appraisal districts, link to the comptroller’s office, available exemptions, plats, forms, frequently asked questions, tax calendar and property tax basics.

**11.1 LOCAL JURISDICTION WEB SITE CONTENT**

HCAD’s website contains various information for the public to review. Items are routinely updated and may include:

 \* Office hours, location and contact information

 \* Property information, including ownership, property characteristics, and valuation

 \* News releases

 \* Mission statement

 \* Appeals process

 \* Exemptions

 \* Q & A page

 \* Applications

 \* Maps

 \* Taxpayer forms

 \* Intergovernmental Links

 \* Links to other relevant web sites

**11.2 SOCIAL MEDIA SITES**

The district incorporates the principles and standards defined by the IAAO in its section on “Communication.” However, the district notes that it does NOT permit its employees to use social media in the performance of HCAD duties. Communications between appraisal districts and property owners are most often dictated by state law. Social media is simply too unstructured to protect the legal interests of property owners and the district.

**12. SPECIFIC ACTION PLANS:**

January-December

* Throughout the year, the chief appraiser or a designated employee shall attend commissioner’s

court, city council, school board and other governmental body meetings as invited. He/she will also attend meetings of professional groups, neighborhood association or other groups as invited to provide information and offer guidance an any matters related to property taxation.

* Customer service surveys will be re-evaluated to address specific areas as indicated by those completed and returned during the prior year. *(See example following this timeline)*
* Update the district website as needed.
* Throughout the year as property inspections are performed a “door hanger” will be left either on the door, along with the visiting appraiser’s card, in the event the property owner has questions or concerns regarding HCAD’s inspection.
* All appraisal staff will leave a card with a property owner that is present during an on-site inspection should they wish to follow up with that appraiser.
* All appraisal staff will wear identification while doing inspections and their vehicle will be clearly marked.

January

* Review local documents and develop up to date information relating to any new legislation that may be effective regarding exemptions, special appraisals, and rendition requirements.
* Staff meetings to ensure all information provided to property owners is up to date.
* Publish locally and on the website the availability of Electronic Communications.
* Publish locally requirements and availability of applications for deferrals, homestead exemptions, renditions and agricultural appraisals.
* Meet with the Agriculture Advisory Board to review and update information regarding agricultural and timber requirements.

February-March

* The district shall conduct Open Meeting and Public Information training for designate district staff. Training may include training videos and other materials developed by Attorney General’s Office as well as internally developed materials.
* The district shall conduct Customer Service training for all district staff. Training may include external training courses, webinars and internally developed training material.

March – April

* Send designated staff to ARB training conducted by the comptroller’s office in order to stay abreast of any new procedures. Those staff members will return and instruct staff.
* Review and development of public information materials related to appraisal procedures, notices, protests and evidence production. Care and attention will be paid to updates for internal procedural changes and/or changes prompted by legal opinion and/or new legislation.
* Develop protest procedures for the current year and hold training for all staff members.
* Provide public notice of hearings for reappraisal plan and annual budget.

April

* Begin holding informal hearings with concerned property owners.
* All appraisal staff will keep a log of all incoming calls in regards to property owner’s concerns regarding exemptions, special evaluations and/or value issues. This will enable the managerial staff to track responses and address any issues promptly and professionally in the event a concern should arise regarding the staff’s response to their inquiry.
* Publish notice in local newspapers about requirements and availability of applications for deferrals, homestead exemptions, renditions and agricultural appraisals.
* Prepare press release for notices of appraised values and protest process.

April – May

* Continue informal hearings with concerned property owners.

May

* Publish notice in local newspapers about taxpayer protests and procedures.
* Conduct staff meetings as needed to address concerns or questions that may arise during the protest period.
* Conduct on- site inspections of protested properties in order to possibly resolve concerns property owners may have and facilitate an agreement with the property owner.

 July

* The chief appraiser shall provide weekly to staff, Appraisal Review Board chairperson, and chief financial officers of taxing units- status updates on the district’s certification efforts.
* The chief appraiser will hand deliver the certified values to the taxing units and/or their financial officers.

August-October

* Managerial staff will review current procedures and address areas of concern in regards to further customer service training and communications recommendations.
* Begin compiling information needed to update website content.
* Preparations begin for the tax collection season. In house review and training where necessary to answer concerns property owners may have concerning their statements, exemptions, and special appraisals. Specific areas of concern regarding payment options will be addressed.

November – December

* Begin review, update and development of website content, specifically sections explaining appraisal district policy and procedures, to include but not limited to frequently asked questions, tax information, forms, district statistics, and property information.

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