

Social Media Case

The municipality was initially reluctant to join the ranks of those communicating with their constituents via social media. But the new IT director convinced the council and the manager that there were economic advantages to using social media. However, many in the municipality were uncomfortable and believed that without a social media ethics policy in place only problems would ensue.

Within a few months the municipality had a presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media outlets. Shortly after the launch, negative and, in the minds of some, unproductive comments from citizens were on all the social media outlets. The police chief was concerned that certain comments might incite violence because of racial overtones.

The municipality deleted the negative comments from the social media without keeping a record of them. Some municipal employees were outraged that citizens were not allowed to express their opinions. These employees believed the citizens were only “telling it like it is.” So the employees posted comments, including “learn more about your freedom of speech,” and “be an active citizen -- participate and communicate.”

In addition, some employees began using the municipal Facebook page for private messages. These messages contained content like “fire the IT Director.” Still other municipal employees started using the municipality’s social media as an opportunity to expand their social network by setting up private lunches, dinners and dates.

Issues Identified by Ethics Summit Participants

1. Clarify social media policy providing employees with guidelines and training. Policy should at least cover:
 - Site administration (posting/reviewing content)
 - Employee posts as a “private” citizen.
2. Destruction of public records may violate the law.
3. Freedom of speech issues, especially when regulating content.
4. What other issues do you see? Email further thoughts to cbellamy@kdlegal.com. If your comments are posted, can we use your name or would you prefer anonymity?