

## **SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The following policy pertains to official ("Town") and non-official ("Personal") use of social media services and tools. The Town of Merrimac permits the use of social media sites and social networking sites (collectively "social media sites") as a means to disseminate information from the Town to the members of the public. Consequently, the Town has both an expectation and a responsibility regarding the integrity and presentation of information posted on its social media sites and the content that is attributed to the Town, its Departments, and its officials.

This policy sets forth general guidelines that must be adhered to with respect to utilization of social media sites for official Town purposes. Questions regarding this Policy should be directed to the Board of Selectmen. These guidelines may be supplemented by more specific administrative procedures and rules. Furthermore, this Policy may be amended from time to time, and is meant to be read in conjunction with all other applicable policies and procedures of the Town of Merrimac.

### **II. DEFINITIONS**

1. "Social media sites" and "social networking sites" refer to websites that facilitate user participation, networking, and collaboration through the submission of user-generated content. Social media in general includes tools such as blogs, wikis, microblogging sites, such as Twitter; social networking sites, such as Facebook and LinkedIn; video sharing sites, such as YouTube; bookmarking sites such as Reddit; and media sharing sites such as Instagram and Snapchat.
2. A "social media identity" is a specific user identity or account that has been registered on a third party social media site.
3. A "blog" (an abridgement of the term web log) is a Town website with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video.
4. A "moderator" is an authorized Town of Merrimac official (appointed or elected) or employee designee, who reviews, authorizes and allows content submitted by the Town officials, employees and public commentators to be posted to a Town of Merrimac social media site or sites.
5. "Town social media sites" means social media sites and content that the Town establishes and maintains, with the exception of content from advertisements or hyperlinks provided by the social media site's owners, vendors, or partners. Town social media sites do not replace the Town's required notices and standard methods of communication.
6. "Posts" or "postings" means the content, information, articles, pictures, videos or any other form of communication posted on a Town social media site.

### **III. POLICY**

The establishment of official Town social media accounts of any type may only be initiated, established, and/or authorized by the Board of Selectmen or their designees, and published using social media platform and tools approved by the Board.

1. Once authorized, all Town Departments and Divisions can establish a social media account. The accounts should be used to promote the department and its functions and in a manner which complies with the applicable requirements of this Policy.

2. Departments have the option of allowing employees to participate in official Town recognized social media sites as part of their job duties. Department Heads may allow or disallow employee participation in any social media activities in their departments.
3. All Town social media sites shall adhere to applicable state, federal and local laws, regulations and policies including the Public Records Law, Open Meeting Law, Public Records retention schedules, Copyright Law and other applicable Town policies. All social media sites and entries shall clearly indicate that any content posted or submitted is subject to public disclosure.
4. Public Records Law and e-discovery laws and policies apply to social media content. Accordingly, such content must be able to be managed, stored and retrieved to comply with these laws. Furthermore, once such content is posted on a social media site, it should stay posted, unless it is removed for one of the reasons set forth below in Number 10, or it is changed to fix spelling or grammar errors.
5. Each Town social media site shall include an introductory statement, which clearly specifies the purpose and topical scope of the blog and social media/network site. Where possible, social media sites should link back to the official Town of Merrimac on Internet site for forms, documents and other information.
6. Each Town social media site shall indicate to users that the site is subject to a third party's website Terms of Service. Furthermore, each Town social media site shall indicate that: the social media site provider could collect personal information through user's use of the social media site; and that this personal information may be disseminated by the third party; and that such dissemination may not be governed or limited by any state, federal or local law or policy applicable to the Town.
7. All social media sites shall clearly indicate that they are maintained by the Town of Merrimac and shall have the Town of Merrimac's contact information prominently displayed.
8. The Town reserves the right to restrict or remove any content that is deemed in violation of this policy or any applicable law.
9. Town social media content and comments containing any of the following forms of content shall not be allowed for posting:
  - a. Comments not topically related to the particular site or blog article being commented upon;
  - b. Profane, obscene, or vulgar language or content;
  - c. Content that promotes, fosters or perpetuates discrimination on the basis of race, color, gender, gender identity, national origin, religion, ancestry, age, sexual orientation, disability, maternity leave, genetic information, or active military status;
  - d. Sexual content or links to sexual content;
  - e. Conduct or encouragement of illegal activity;
  - f. Information that may tend to compromise the safety or security of the public or public systems; or
  - g. Content that violates a legal ownership interest of any other party.
10. All Town social media moderators shall be trained regarding the terms of this policy, including their responsibilities to review content submitted for posting to ensure compliance with the policy.
11. Where appropriate, Town policies shall apply to all social media sites and articles.

12. Officials (elected or appointed) and employees representing the Town via social media sites must conduct themselves at all times as a representative of the Town and in accordance with all applicable rules, regulations, and policies (including personnel policies) of the Town of Merrimac. See Section III, Employee Guidelines for Use of Social Media Sites.

13. No Town or department social media site can endorse (either with approval or disapproval) vendors, suppliers, clients, citizens, coworkers or other stakeholders.

14. Employees found in violation of this policy may be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment.

#### **IV. EMPLOYEE GUIDELINES FOR USE OF OFFICIAL SOCIAL MEDIA SITES**

**1. Electronic Communications and Computer Usage Policy.** All employees are responsible for understanding and following the Town of Merrimac Electronic Communications and Computer Usage Policy, in addition to this Policy.

**2. First Amendment Protected Speech.** Although the Town can moderate the social media sites that accept comments from the public (such as blogs and wikis) to restrict speech that is obscene, threatening, discriminatory, harassing, or off topic, employees cannot use the moderation function to restrict speech with which the Town merely disagrees (i.e. subject matter restrictions). Users have some First Amendment rights in posting content to public social media sites hosted by municipalities. Moderators must respect those rights by posting all comments other than those excluded for specific legitimate reasons, as referenced above.

**3. Copyright Law.** Employees must abide by laws governing copyright and fair use of copyrighted material owned by others. Never reprint whole articles or publications without first receiving written permission from the publication owner. Never quote more than a short excerpt of someone else's work and, if possible, provide a link to the original.

**4. Protect Confidential Information.** Never post legally protected personal information that you have obtained from the Town (e.g., information that is not public record under the Public Records Law, G.L. c.66, § 10 and G.L. c. 4, §7(26), or whose dissemination is restricted under applicable Federal or State privacy laws or regulations). Ask permission to publish or report on conversations that occur within the Town. Never post information about policies or plans that have not been finalized by the Town, unless you have received explicit permission from your supervisor to post draft policies or plans on the department's social media sites for public comment.

**5. Consider Your Content.** As informal as social media sites are meant to be, if they are on a government domain or a government identity, they are official government communications. Social media sites will be sought out by mainstream media so a great deal of thought needs to go into how you will use the social media in a way that benefits both the Town and the public. Employees should not comment about rumors, political disputes, or personnel issues, for example.

**6. Handling Negative Comments.** Because the purpose of many social media sites, particularly department blogs and wikis, is to get feedback from the public, you should expect that some of the feedback you receive will be negative. Some effective ways to respond to negative comments include:

- a) Providing accurate information in the spirit of being helpful;
- b) Respectfully disagreeing; and
- c) Acknowledging that it is possible to hold different points of view.

**7. Respect Your Audience and Your Coworkers.** Do not use ethnic slurs, personal insults, obscenity, or engage in any conduct that would not be acceptable in your department's workplace. Do not be afraid to be yourself, but do so respectfully. This includes not only the obvious (no ethnic slurs, personal insults, obscenity, threats of violence, etc.) but also proper consideration of privacy and of topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory-such as party politics and religion. Do not use your department's social media presence to communicate among fellow Town employees. Do not air your differences with your fellow Town employees.

**8. Use the Social Media Site or Identity Only to Contribute to your Department's Mission.** When you contribute to your department's social media site or identity, provide worthwhile information and perspective that contribute to your department's mission of serving the public. What you publish will reflect on the Town. Social media sites and identities should be used in a way that contributes to the Town of Merrimac mission by:

- a) Helping you and your co-workers perform their jobs better;
- b) Informing citizens about government services and how to access them;
- c) Making the operations of your department transparent and accessible to the public;
- d) Creating a forum for the receipt of candid comments from residents about how government can be improved; and
- e) Encouraging civic engagement.

**9. Mistakes.** The Town policy is that once something is posted, it should stay posted. Only spelling errors or grammar fixes should be made without making the change evident to users. If you choose to modify an earlier post, make it clear that you have done so do not remove or delete the incorrect content; provide the correct information and apologize for the error. Ways to accomplish this include:

- a) Strike through the error and correct; or
- b) Create a new post with the correct information, and link to it from the post you need to correct or clarify.

Either method is acceptable. In order for the social media identity or site to achieve transparency, the Town cannot change content that has already been published without making the changes evident to users.

**10. Media Inquiries.** Town or department social media identities or sites may lead to increased inquiries from the media. If you are contacted directly by a reporter, you should refer media questions to the Department Head.

**11. Records Retention.** Social media sites will contain communications sent to or received by Town officials and employees, and are therefore Public Records. Ensure that the Town or department retains a copy of the social media content in accordance with Public Records Retention Schedules. Review the third party social media service provider's terms of service for its record retention practices. Note that while third party social media providers will most likely save your content for some period, they generally will not save it indefinitely. To the extent their policies are inconsistent with Public Records Retention Schedules, the Town or department should retain copies of social media posts such as by printing or otherwise storing periodic "snapshots" of the social media sites.

**12. Open Meeting Law.** Be aware of the Open Meeting Law and possible violations for improper deliberations outside of a posted meeting. A series of individual postings on a social media site cumulatively may convey the position of a quorum of a governmental body regarding a subject within its jurisdiction, and may constitute improper deliberation among the members of a board or committee.

## V. Non Official Personal Use

The town recognizes that personal use of these types of social media and social networking tools services sometimes blur the line between professional and personal interactions. Therefore, Town employees are reminded that as representatives of the town, the above rules and guidelines should be taken into consideration when participating in these media outlets at any time, particularly when identifying themselves as employees for the Town or when context might lead to that conclusion. Town employees should use discretion and common sense when employing social media to prevent inadvertently compromising professional, legal, or ethical standards. Town employees should refrain from using social media services and tools for personal use during working hours or when using Town provided equipment, unless it is work-related as authorized by the Department Head. Town employees should have no expectation of privacy when using social media sites at the workplace, or when using Town computers, systems, or other technology. The Town reserves the right to access, view, and act upon any information on its computers, systems or other technology without notice.

4. You may not misrepresent any non-Official Social Media site as a Town of Merrimac Official Social Media site. The use of the Town's name and/or of the Town Seal are prohibited unless approved by the Board of Selectmen or his/her designee. Misuse of the Town Seal is a criminal act punishable pursuant to M.G.L c. 268, s.35. You may not post information on a non-Official Social Media site that can be read as indicating that you are posting the information in your capacity as a Town employee or official, that it constitutes official information of the Town, or that it represents an official viewpoint of the Town.
5. **Employee or Official Profile.** It is advised that you ensure your profile and related content is consistent with how you wish to present yourself to colleagues, residents and other stakeholders.
6. **Personal Comments.** If in connection with a posting on a non-Official Social Media site you identify yourself as a Town employee or official, or it is reasonable to conclude that readers will know that you are a Town employee or official, make it clear and use a disclaimer such as this: "This posting is not made on behalf of; and does not represent an official viewpoint of, the Town.
7. On personal sites, it is advised that no employee should "Friend" any employee to whom the employee reports or who is in a position to supervise or manage the employee's work/performance. Employees participating in professional sites, such as LinkedIn, may designate co-workers as friends or associates.
8. **Defamation.** Be aware that employees acting in their individual capacity (not on behalf of the Town) are not immune from defamation claims. Under Massachusetts law, defamation is established by showing that the defendant published a false, non-privileged statement about the plaintiff to a third party that either caused the plaintiff economic loss or was of the type that is actionable without proof of economic loss. Some statements, like imputation of a crime, are defamatory per se. Avoid statements that may be interpreted as defamatory.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY**

This acknowledges that I have received and reviewed the Social Media Policy, with attachments, of the Town of Merrimac ("Policy"). By signing this form, I agree to abide by the Policy and any Guidelines promulgated thereunder, and I agree to review periodically any changes or modifications. I recognize that the law and associated Policy regarding use of Social Media are continually evolving. Therefore, I understand that my regular review of this Policy, as it may be amended, is required.

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*To be included in employee's personnel file*