

TO: LMRWD Board of Managers and Executive Staff

FROM: Joseph Barisonzi, President

DATE: 06-25-2025

SUBJECT: Strategic Communications Must Be Timely, Visible, and Internalized

Colleagues,

As President of the Lower Minnesota River Watershed District, I want to speak directly and constructively about a persistent gap that is limiting our effectiveness as a public agency: **our communications capacity**.

Let me begin by acknowledging the positive step we've taken in contracting with **Tunheim Partners**. Their work, focused on synthesizing feedback from the **January 2025 Listening Session** and shaping messaging around our strategic plan, is welcome and necessary.

But we must recognize that this is a **limited, project-based engagement**, not a comprehensive solution to our broader communications needs. It does not address day-to-day visibility, responsiveness, or the infrastructure required to consistently engage the public.

That gap has consequences. The Listening Session occurred **six months ago**, itself a response to a natural disaster **five months prior**. We are only now beginning to act on the public input gathered then. More recently, **a full week has passed** since our meeting where we addressed the situation regarding Melissa, yet we have not shared anything with the public. We have several single points of failure in our capacity for rapid response. **Our primary platform, LinkedIn, has had virtually no meaningful presence for over a year.**

In addition, we currently:

- **Do not have clear distribution lists** for sending different types of communications (e.g., press, stakeholders, project updates, community partners).
- **Do not offer a way for people to register** to receive our updates or follow our work regularly.
- **Do not maintain consistent or regular communication** with our friends, allies, or key audiences.

These are not just technical oversights. They are **fundamental gaps in strategic infrastructure**.

At a recent meeting, I heard it said: *"We can be fast, or we can be strategic."*

Let me be clear: **this is a false choice**.

Being **fast, responsive, and visible** *is* strategic. It is the only way to lead in a landscape shaped by rapid media cycles, climate urgency, and community expectations for transparency.

As I said during my speech at the TRWNW:

“There is nothing strategic about being silent when the world is listening.”

“If we are not part of the story, we become part of the background.”

Last year, I presented a **Communications Strategy to the Board** that would have established the infrastructure and expectations for more timely communication. At the time, it lacked consensus—understandably so. We were dealing with **outstanding questions surrounding our education and outreach contracts** and navigating **instability within the Board itself**. As a result, the proposal did not move forward.

But that moment has passed. Now, the need is even clearer—and more urgent.

Moving Forward: Proposal and Policy Alignment

At the **August meeting of the Personnel Committee** (we will not meet in July), I will present a **revised communications strategy** focused on building sustainable and accountable internal capacity for timely public engagement. This proposal will address **staffing, systems, protocols, and expectations**—all aimed at ensuring we can respond to the public in real time, not weeks after the fact.

I will **circulate the draft strategy in advance of the meeting** to solicit feedback and reactions from both managers and staff.

In parallel, I've asked our **new Watershed Administrator** to review our current **strategic plan, budget, and contracts** and identify what **additional action may be needed by the Board** to ensure we can implement a communications strategy that is both strategic and nimble. Their insights will help align our planning with our operational capacity and legal authority.

To succeed, we also need the **Board to establish a clear policy** that authorizes staff to communicate proactively and promptly, without unnecessary delays or ambiguity. Strategic communication cannot thrive without **policy-level clarity and trust in staff judgment**. If we want effective execution, we must remove structural hesitation.

What I Expect from Now On:

1. **Communications tied to board actions, community events, and public interest must be posted within 24–48 hours.**
2. **Our social media presence must become active and purposeful.**
3. **We must establish basic infrastructure**—distribution lists, subscription tools, and regular updates to key audiences.
4. **Strategic communication is not optional.** It is a core part of who we are as public servants, and must be resourced and empowered accordingly.

We are a small agency with a big responsibility. We cannot fulfill that responsibility quietly or invisibly. We must be present, vocal, and prepared to lead—not just with policy, but with public presence.

Thank you for your continued commitment to the mission of the LMRWD. I look forward to working with all of you to ensure our communications match the impact of our work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joe Barisonzi". The signature is stylized with a large, looping "J" and "B".

Joseph Barisonzi
President, Lower Minnesota River Watershed District