Draft SORO NC Communications & Brand Guidelines

29 April 2013

SORO is a collection of neighborhoods bound together by shared interests and concerns. But the larger area itself has been known over the years by a number of names: Pico-Robertson, Palms (in some areas), Beverlywood (in others). The SORO name is relatively recent.

Building a coherent and recognizable identity out of all the different neighborhoods has been a challenge, but an important one: neighborhoods decay when no one cares. We feel that it's far easier to feel pride in a place when it has an identity, when residents can say, "I'm from SORO"—and other people know what they mean.

That shared identity also helps build the business community. The SOROCard is a great example of how being part of a place can benefit, attract and retain businesses.

As a practical matter, identity can be built over time by disciplined, visible, consistent communications and branding. This guide should help.

Communications

Why have communications guidelines?

It's natural that as Board members we sometimes disagree. Having guidelines about NC communications is not intended to stifle open discussion. As elected Board members, we have the right (and indeed, obligation) to express our individual opinions.

Yet when we speak as a *Council*, the representative body for our neighborhood, it's important that we project an open, trustworthy and unified voice to the public.

Bear in mind, too, that in some cases we're bound by restrictions on what we can say by the Brown Act and City guidelines.

Tone

The tone should be friendly, forthright, balanced, and welcoming. We should avoid jargon whenever possible, and define "insider" terms and acronyms if we do use them. Remember that the goal is to encourage community participation, so we should use every opportunity to invite people to get involved.

SORO NC has an editor who may edit your copy before it goes live. It's nothing personal; we're just trying to be as clear and consistent as possible. See more at "Who can post," below.

Avoiding bias

In accordance with our bylaws, we should never take a position on an issue without express Board action and approval. We can highlight issues—say, a pending, controversial City Council action—but should not take sides until/unless the Board as a whole does.

Candidates for office

As a Council, we are explicitly prohibited from endorsing any candidate for office at any time. All candidates must be given fair and equal access: if we offer time to one, we must do so for all.

As a citizen, you may of course endorse any candidate you wish. You may also identify yourself as SORO Board member in your endorsement, but you may not suggest that the Board as a whole does so.

Ballot measures, legislation, and lobbying
The Neighborhood Councils exist to provide advice to the City's decision-makers. We can—and should—weigh in on the issues that confront our community.

But we must be fair when we do so. That means treating both sides of an issue equally, providing neutral, objective, factual information to the public, and using public meetings to gather input from our stakeholders.

If the Board does take a position on an issue, we should direct that opinion solely to the City. We are not chartered to lobby state or federal entities.

Nor may we use public funds to publicly advocate for that position, other than to note that we've voted. That means no flyers, yard signs, banners on our website, emails, etc. that urge people to vote one way or another.

Again, as a private citizen, you can advocate for your personal position as long as you're not using NC funds.

The Los Angeles City Attorney has issued guidelines on how the Board should deal with candidates, ballot measures, and pending legislation. You can read more here and here.

Dos and don'ts

Do be accurate
Always make sure that the information we put out to the public is as factual and accurate as possible. If the situation or facts change, update the information and explain why.

Do be transparent
The goal should be building trust. We should always try to make government as understandable to the public as possible. If we make a mistake, we should own up to it as quickly as possible.

Do know the rules
Understand how the various systems work (website, social media, press releases, etc.) BEFORE using them. You never want to be in the position of accidentally posting something intended for other audiences.

Also take the time to understand the best way to use each of our communication channels (see below).

Do keep personal views separate
As an individual citizen and Board member, you have the right to express your opinion. When you communicate on behalf of SORO NC, however, your public responsibility is to be fair to both sides or, if the Board has taken action, to accurately communicate the decisions of the Board as a whole.

Do be respectful and inclusive
Treat the public with respect, even if you disagree. Always look for opportunities to encourage people to participate or offer suggestions for improvement.

Do proofread
Sadly, nothing undermines respect for an organization faster than sloppy grammar and typos. Double- and triple-check your writing before making it public. Enlisting someone else to check it is always a good idea.

Don't engage in online back-and-forth with stakeholders or other Board members
Not only is this often a serious violation of the Brown Act (e.g. serial communication), we don't want to ever come off as defensive or argumentative.

Don't steal images
This is a legal and ethical issue. Always make sure you have the right to use an image beforehand. Doing a Google image search does not grant you permission to use anything you find.

Don't stifle opposing voices
Dissent is a fundamental right in a democracy. Even if the public responds in a way that is unreasonable or highly critical of the Board or its actions, we should allow the comment to stand. However, spam, offensive comments, or personal slurs may be removed at the editor's discretion.

Communication channels

Website
Our website has a number of areas that can be updated regularly, most notably the homepage blog, the press release section, and the event calendar.

Posting to the blog is moderated, which means that an editor checks and in some cases edits the articles before they go live. Each article should be assigned appropriate tags (tags are nothing more than keywords that help categorize the article). Tags will also cause the article to be emailed automatically to people who have subscribed to that topic. Because these are automatic emails, don't over-tag articles.

The website (and its search ranking) benefits from frequent posting.

Social Media
Currently, we post regularly to Facebook and Twitter. Both are excellent channels for community news, and have the advantage of being easily shared. They also are able to handle a larger number and variety of posts than the website or email. Since there is no moderation, only committee chairs and authorized editors may post on these channels.

Generally speaking, you want to link back to the SORO NC website whenever possible in your posts.

One complicating factor with Facebook: people can comment on posts. This is a good thing, but we have to be careful **never** to engage in debate or be anything but factual and respectful if we do respond. In some circumstances, posting in public could also be considered serial communication between Board members. It's best to use a light touch.

We include a feed of recent Facebook posts on our website. We also can pull in tweets from Twitter if they include a specific hashtag.

Twitter hashtags are similar in concept to website tags (one difference: they are always preceded by the # pound symbol). All our hashtags begin with "#soro" for consistency and to build community identity. Each of the major committees has its own hashtag that we use to pull our tweets into the site:

- Education: #soroschools

- Green Team: #sorogreen

- Outreach: #soropride

- Land Use: #soroplans

- Transportation: #soromoves
- Public Safety: #sorosafety
- Economic Development: #sorobiz

We can also create new hashtags for special events: #sorovotes, #sorofest, etc. Consistent use is key.

Press Releases

Once the NC has taken an official position on an issue or wishes to announce an NC event, it may issue a press release. Press and other interested parties can subscribe to a list to be automatically emailed when one is published on the site. (You can also subscribe to SORO NC press releases via RSS reader.)

The approval process for press releases is the same as for other posts to the website.

Press releases are a great way to publicize NC actions and increase the visibility of the NC. They are created on the site like any other page and follow a set format:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Eye-catching headline

LOS ANGELES, California (date) - First sentence that summarizes the action and says why this is noteworthy ("...the first Neighborhood Council in the City of Los Angeles to support...").

Rest of the content: provides detail and context. Should include attributed quotations from the Board and other parties. All terms and abbreviations should be defined. Ends with the following paragraph:

About SORO NC

The South Robertson Neighborhoods Council (SORO NC) is chartered and funded by the City of Los Angeles to promote citizen participation in government at a grassroots level. SORO NC gives area stakeholders a voice in the issues, decisions and programs that affect their lives; provides a direct line of communication to the City to help address their unique needs; and builds a stronger community, one step at a time.

Contact:

Official contact name, title (should be the person who can speak most knowledgably about the issue)

Their email address

Their phone number

# # #

Press releases always end with three spaced pound symbols. **Proof carefully before posting**.

Outbound Email

Email is a highly sensitive channel. Unwanted email (spam) has caused many people to be cautious about giving out their email address, and if we abuse our email list, SORO NC could start being blackballed as a spammer itself. If enough people mark our emails as spam or start complaining about us, **all** of the soronc.org email addresses could be blocked. For that reason, we have to be careful how and when we use it.

We use a service called MailChimp to manage our email list. While it's a bit more of a hassle to use MailChimp, they have robust reporting on how many people open our email and how many people click links; branded SORO email templates to help keep our profile high; and protections in place (things like unsubscribe links, limits on importing names, etc.) to help minimize the risk that our email gets marked as spam. We **never** use a personal soronc.org account to email large groups of people. Ever.

We also should never add an email address to our list unless the person has given us explicit permission to do so (aka "opted in"). Permission can be the person filling in our subscription form online or on paper, checking a box to be added to our list, or any other specific request. Just because a person attends a meeting or generally provides an email address does not constitute permission—they have to ask to be on our list. While it can be tempting to dump every email address we find into the list, if someone doesn't want to receive our email it will do far more harm than good.

One safe way to solicit email subscriptions (say, from someone who has provided an email address for another purpose) is to send a single, one-time email that thanks them for their participation, explains our email options, and provides a link to sign up. At that point, the person can decide for themselves whether or not to join the list.

Segmented and Automatic Email
We also have the ability to send email to particular segments of the list. An email on zoning changes, for example, might be boring to most people, but highly compelling to people who've marked Land Use as an interest when they signed up for email updates.

Our site can work with MailChimp to **automatically** email updates on a topic to interested people through the use of tags. If I assign the "Transportation" tag to a post on the site, it will get emailed at the end of the day to everyone who subscribed to that interest category. Again, if we overuse this, it will become less effective, so we're carefully testing this capability.

Best practices
A good email is short, easy to read, has a clear and intriguing subject line, and above all is **interesting**.

Email gets marked as spam when people don't find it valuable. Most email programs also scan the text for words and phrases that spammers use often (overwrought and ambiguous subject lines like "URGENT! ATTENTION NEEDED!", use of one big graphic rather than text, overuse of exclamation points, etc.). Interestingly, we've found that attaching files (like agendas) to email causes a dramatic increase in unsubscribes, which is why we now always link out to files. Bottom line, if it feels like spam, it will be regarded as spam.

The other component of keeping our email list healthy is to keep a handle on the number of emails we send to the list. Generally speaking, we shouldn't send more than four a month to the full list. For that reason, only the Board's editors will be allowed to send to the full list. If you have an item you'd like to be included in the next email, you can send it to editor@soronc.org.

Who can post?

Any Board member may write an item for one of our communication channels (refer to the "What should be posted where?" chart below for guidance on where it should go).

Any Board member can post directly to the website once they've completed City ethics training and NC training on how to use the site. Each post will be reviewed and (potentially) edited for style, length and content by a site editor. You'll have a chance to see the edited post before it goes live.

If you have an item you'd like included in a press release, social media post, or email, you can send it to editor@soronc.org. You should write your item to conform to the NC standard, although again the editor may need to make changes before it goes live.

Site editors are chosen by the Board. They are responsible for ensuring that posts follow the SORO editorial guidelines, including tone, grammar and spelling. They also ensure that posts conform to City Attorney guidelines for fairness. The Board may also opt to appoint an Editor-In-Chief, who is responsible for recruiting writers, coordinating editors and proposing editorial guidelines.

Editors are also available to provide advice, although ultimately you are responsible for writing your own items. Note that posts may also be rejected if they don't conform to the NC's communication guidelines, if they violate City rules, or if they require extensive rewrites.

If you disagree with an editorial decision, first talk to the editor and Editor-In-Chief. Most issues can be resolved there, but if not, you may appeal to the full Board by preparing a motion. Provided the motion is received in time, the Board will consider the arguments at the next scheduled meeting. The Board's editorial decision is final.

Officers and committee chairs may also post updates in social media channels, provided they adhere to NC guidelines.

What should be posted where?

	Always
🟩 (green)	Always
🟧 (orange)	Sometimes (if it is compelling, of general NC interest, and has an NC angle)

	NC News & Issues	NC Committee Updates	NC Actions & Positions	NC Programs	Safety & Emergency	Community News & Events	City News & Events	Local Businesses Openings	Community Volunteer Opportunities
Site Blog	Always			Always	Sometimes		Sometimes		
Site Press Releases			Always	Sometimes					
Site Calendar	Always			Always		Sometimes			
Email General List	Always	Sometimes		Always	Always	Sometimes	Sometimes		
Email Special Lists *	Sometimes			Sometimes	Always	Sometimes			
Email Auto - Generated **	Sometimes	Always	Always	Sometimes					
FaceBook	Always	Always	Sometimes	Always	Always	Always	Always	Sometimes	Always
Twitter	Always	Always	Sometimes	Always	Always	Always	Always	Sometimes	Always

* Such as neighborhoods@soronc.org
** Generally, tagging content on soronc.org will trigger an email.

Branding Guide

Introduction

This style guide has been developed to aid in the development and consistent use of the South Robertson Neighborhoods Council brand in publications, website and other associated marketing materials.

It contains standards with regard to the logo, typography, color usage, layout and other brand specifications that should be considered when developing new content for the brand. It is structured, yet flexible, allowing you to develop the most appropriate creative solution to suit a variety of situations.

Importance of consistency

While it may be unusual to think of the "brand" of a neighborhood, it does makes sense. A brand, after all, is the sum of your experiences with—and expectations of—any given entity.

SORO NC is trying to shape our neighborhood's identity through its programs, leadership development, and communications. There is much to celebrate about SORO already, of course; our job is to tell those stories in a way that builds community pride and increases awareness.

Part of that effort is creating a recognizable visual identity. The goal is to have elements that become instantly recognizable as "SORO." Since we're building that awareness from scratch, we have to be particularly careful that we use the elements consistently. Repetition is our friend.

Logo

The official SORO NC logo is a combination of a strong graphic (the "curlicues"), a logotype ("SORO") and text. Use this whenever you need a self-contained logo.

The official logo has several formats, depending on usage. It may appear in approved colors or black and white.

- Horizontal
  [example and links to downloadable files]

- Horizontal alternate with City seal and URL
  [example and links to downloadable files]

- Vertical
  [example and links to downloadable files]

- Type-only treatment
  [example and links to downloadable files]

- Horizontal for smaller sizes (smaller than 1.5" wide in print or 120 pixels wide on screen)
  [example and links to downloadable files]

Color palette

SORO NC's identity is strongly tied to the color green. Green-to-yellow and green-to-green gradients work well as backgrounds. Orange is often used as an accent color.

If exact matching is not possible (t-shirts, for example), similar colors are acceptable.

Primary color
The official SORO NC dark green is PMS 356.

For process color printing, use 90C / 30M / 95Y / 20K

For digital, use 17R / 92G / 35B (#115c24).

Accent colors
[Will include PMS, CMYK and RGB definitions]

- Orange

- Light green

- Yellow

Sample gradients
[Will include CMYK and RGB definitions]

- Green-to-green

- Green-to-yellow

Typeface

The primary SORO NC font for headlines and larger applications is Dundee Bold (although "SORO" in the logo is set in Grover).

[Example]

Download Dundee Bold

Use Helvetica (or Arial) for running text.

[Example]

Expanded logo treatments

The core elements of the logo may be recombined to create a flexible graphic system in instances where the item is entirely SORO NC-branded.

The curlicue pattern may be detached from the rest of the logo, rotated, flipped, and/or inverted. Whenever possible, try to anchor the piece to the lower-left cropped curlicue and preserve the entire graphic. [graphic pointing to the lower-left curlicue in several design contexts]

In general, pieces benefit from a bold use of color and the curlicues.

[examples]

Logo usage

[with examples of each]

- Do not set the logo in a non-approved color

- Do not break apart the logo when used with other logos

- Do not recreate the logo using a font

- Do not distort the logo

- Do not reproduce the logo in a pattern or textured treatment

- When in doubt, use the official logo

Editorial Guide

The basic reference for SORO NC communications is the most recent edition of the <u>Associated Press Stylebook</u>. Additional guidelines are noted below; new items will be added as needed.

Abbreviations

Only use abbreviations after first introducing the full name:
> *The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) is the body that oversees Neighborhood Councils. DONE has ruled that…*

Naming

Follow capitalization rules:

- The organization is *"the South Robertson Neighborhoods Council"* (note plural "Neighborhoods"), *"South Robertson NC,"* or *"SORO NC"* (all caps, space after "SORO").

- The neighborhood is *"South Robertson"* or *"SORO."*

- The annual community festival is the *"SoRo Community Festival"* or *"SoRo Fest"*

- The neighborhood non-profit is *"the SoRo Community Foundation"* (formerly "SoRo, Inc.")

- The business discount program is *"SOROCard."*

Website URLS

It is not necessary to include "www." in a site address:
> *soronc.org*, **not** *www.soronc.org* or *http://www.soronc.org*

Titles

Gender-neutral versions of elected titles are strongly preferred. Use compound words:
> *Boardmember* and *Councilmember* **not** *Board member* and *Council member* ;
> **but** Committee member **not** committeemember

etc.