Community Relations Helps Mason Assist the Surrounding Region

By Buzz McClain

George Mason University’s Community and Local Government Relations staff works at making the school a welcome neighbor to residents and a helpful resource to regional business and government leaders. Easy, right?

But keep in mind, George Mason has some 33,000 students and 6,000 faculty and staff on three campuses; the Community Relations staff accounts for three and a half of those employees — three full-time and one part-time.

There’s a lot to juggle, but unlike their counterparts in the federal and state relations offices, the local relations office “isn’t looking to our local elected officials to approve our legislative agenda,” says director Traci Claar. “But we work with them, as well as our local chambers of commerce, to partner on pieces of our legislative agenda that may be beneficial to us all. We make sure that our local leaders are up to date so they can help us on the issues where they can help us.”
The assistance goes both ways. Fairfax-based Claar and assistant director Sarah Gallagher position the university as a public resource, offering expert faculty and their groundbreaking studies to help on appropriate local issues. A “listening tour” of elected officials last year resulted in a spreadsheet of “more than 30 topics of interest,” says Claar. “If the topic was affordable housing, we could send them an article or research that might be helpful to them.”

Four county boards of supervisors and the mayors and councils of two cities — the City of Manassas and the City of Fairfax — count on the office “to keep them apprised of what’s going on at the university that may be of interest or impact their constituents, opportunities for partnerships, and university services and resources available that may assist them in their day-to-day lives,” says Claar.

“Loudoun and Prince William counties have been focused on Lyme disease prevention and they have committees researching what they as a government can be doing for their constituents,” says Gallagher. “We told them about the research being done at Prince William’s Center for Applied Proteomics and Molecular Medicine and sent them the articles and contact names in case they wanted to call on experts to work on these committees to help resolve problems.”

“It gives them a new way to think about the university,” says Claar. “We help them look at the university as a resource beyond traditional education.”

The expertise on the campuses led to the creation in 1993 of Mason Speakers, a bureau of more than 150 professors and staff — including the provost, deans, researchers and alumni — that serve on panels or address audiences for service organizations, schools and business associations, up to three times a year at no cost.

**Raising Arlington’s Profile**
Closer to home, the “community relations” aspect of the office includes informing neighbors of future events (and their possible impacts on traffic and noise) and working with off-campus students to be good neighbors. This effort often circles back to helping municipalities with issues.

On Mason’s Arlington Campus, Community Relations Associate Director Toni Andrews raises the profile of the nearly three-year-old Founders Hall facility by engaging the public in partnerships and events, many of them open to the public and free of charge.

“We want to make this a hub of activity and community engagement,” Andrews says, pointing to diverse events such as the Virginia lieutenant governor candidates’ debate, the 200-student Latino Youth Leadership Conference, Operation Rain Barrel that engages local public school students in a sustainability project and the “Pizza and Perspectives” series of hot-topic forums featuring Mason professors and featured speakers. She also builds relationships with the leadership of Arlington County and the city of Alexandria so as to develop proactive partnerships across a large geographic area.

Outcomes Based on Response
representatives measure success in “anecdotal stories, comments and feedback,” Claar says. Recently, officials from the City of Fairfax acknowledged improved interaction and a more successful relationship with the school; area residents confirm that increased communication prior to major events in Fairfax helps them plan ahead — and reduce stress.

“They noticed a response to their needs and commented on the changes,” says Claar, adding that a 13-member Fairfax Campus Advisory Board of citizens and elected officials “really helps engage them and give them a better understanding of how the university operates.”

The staff has developed A University Engaged, a school-wide “repository of all of the programs and partnerships that the university has with the external community,” Claar says. No aspect of local life is untouched, from programs for K-12 students to community health to the arts. “We share those quality of life pieces with our elected officials so they have an idea of what we are doing with and for their constituents.”

There’s also Community Connections, a “one-stop website for our business community to engage with the university,” Claar says. “Many times they have no idea who to call for things such as getting involved with Homecoming, or how to advertise in the student newspaper or put up a poster for an event.”

Then there's corporate relations development, which makes crucial connections with businesses that want involvement on campus. Northrop Grumman, Verizon, Inova Health System and BAE are examples of companies that have recently found help navigating the Mason network.