



Midpeninsula Regional  
Open Space District

R-25-55  
Meeting 25-12  
April 23, 2025

## AGENDA ITEM 8

### AGENDA ITEM

Public Affairs Update & Departmental Growth Model

### GENERAL MANAGER'S RECOMMENDATION

Receive a Public Affairs informational update on fiscal year and calendar year 2024 activities, and information on the proposed departmental growth model. No formal action is required.

### SUMMARY

Public Affairs made significant strides in advancing the agency's communications and governmental affairs initiatives over the past year. In Fiscal Year 2023-24 (FY24), Public Affairs achieved a total reach of 3.5 million across all communications channels and supported 109 Capital Improvement and Action Plan (CIAP) projects. Key accomplishments for 2024 include work to support the passage of critical legislation enabling a \$10 billion climate bond; implementation of a 10-year Measure AA anniversary campaign to build voter trust and transparency; the grand opening of Bear Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve Phase II Trails; and the intentional growth of the Partnerships Program to reach underserved communities.

As Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (District) has evolved to become more widely recognized as a strategic leader by a larger, more diverse community, the workload and complexity of the responsibilities of the Public Affairs Department have increased substantially. The expansion of ecologically sensitive access to the preserves and the growth in the action plan projects has increased public interest in, and media scrutiny of, its programs and decisions. As the District expands its coastal preserves, establishes an ongoing presence in the coastal area, and plans and constructs new public access across its jurisdiction, the Public Affairs department will be expected to not only communicate with the public, but cultivate and maintain positive and lasting relationships across these communities that are critical to the District's success.

To maintain a high degree of public trust, a realignment of the Public Affairs Department is necessary to ensure the District is positioned to have a strategically planned, proactive community, media and governmental relations approach to meet these needs effectively. As part of a departmental growth model, Public Affairs is proposing two FOSM recommended-based positions as part of the FY26 Budget and Action Plan, and a General Manager-approved reclassification of a Public Affairs Specialist II to a III in FY25.

## DISCUSSION

### **Public Affairs Report 2024**

In 2024, Public Affairs progressed its strategic communications work across its various streams and successfully advanced policy advocacy efforts through the governmental affairs program.

#### ***Governmental Affairs***

The Legislative Program reviewed over a thousand bills in 2024 and identified specific legislation for action. Four out of five (80%) of the Program's Priority 1 bills were signed into law by the Governor, with the District providing primary testimony for two of these bills, including SB 867 (Allen) leading to the \$10 billion climate bond (Prop 4) designating \$180 million for wildlife crossings and approximately \$3 billion in total allocations that the District may access. Other successful Priority 1 bills addressed rodenticides, CEQA streamlining for restoration projects, and state-level actions in support of wildlife connectivity.

To further build relationships, the Governmental Affairs Program engaged 84% of District partners in FY24. "Walk and Talks" were held with California State Senator Becker in Skyline Ridge Open Space Preserve and California Assembly Member Pellerin in Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve, and the District hosted a Highway 17 Project tour for U.S. Senator Padilla's staff. In addition, the program participated in three statewide and two regional coalitions to progress policy and relationship building on issues critical to the District.

#### ***Marketing***

The quarterly newsletter continues to be a valued resource. With over 12,000 subscribers in 2024, this quality print publication has a dedicated audience. "Views" is supplemented by the monthly electronic newsletter "Plug Into Nature," which had over 25,500 subscribers in 2024.

In spring 2024, Public Affairs successfully launched the Preserve Guide to effectively showcase the full range of District open space offerings, with the inclusion of maps, history and flora and fauna highlights of the 25 preserves. The guide generated significant interest with 10,000 copies distributed and over 700 webpage views, reinforcing the District's brand and reach.

Additionally, new brochures, including an English/Spanish Coastside general overview, were created to enhance District communication efforts, while six existing brochures were updated to ensure all content remains relevant and aligned with current branding and messaging.

#### ***Media Relations***

Press releases and pitches were sent at least monthly in 2024, with all but three resulting in earned media stories in a variety of outlets. District print and electronic newsletters also sparked media inquiries with 83% of the newsletters generating media stories.

#### ***Outreach***

Public Affairs has steadily grown its outreach program, tabling at 44 key public events reaching approximately 4,000 people in 2024. These events provide opportunities for face-to-face interaction with communities, raising awareness of the District and allowing for meaningful conversation and direct feedback. This is a 25% increase from 2023, with 20% of events specifically focused on the Coastside and 10% resulting from Board/leadership requests for District involvement.

Public Affairs also oversees info@, which serves as a direct communication channel for addressing public inquiries, feedback and concerns. In FY24, Public Affairs handled over 840 info@ inquiries with 92% responded to and resolved within two business days.

### ***Partnerships***










The Board of Directors set a goal to expand educational programs to reach underserved communities, recognizing the importance of engaging youth, families, seniors and historically underserved groups. The Public Affairs Partnership Program provides opportunities to engage surrounding communities through educational and enriching outings and events provided by our community-based partners with support from the District.

The Partnership Program is designed for the organic building of relationships and is broken into three tiers of partnership.

- Pilot: Establishes pilot partnerships every fiscal year with a stipend of \$2,500 per partnership intended for one pilot event each, planned by the community partner with light guidance assistance from District staff. A majority of our pilots have used the stipend for transportation, equipment, food, marketing and chaperone costs. This phase is crucial for developing new relationships and strengthening our place in the surrounding community. By starting small, the program can identify which partnerships are most effective, have the potential for growth and serve new constituencies that the District is currently not engaging through other outreach methods.
- Tier 2: Expanding on relationships with successful pilots, through a second, deeper tier of collaboration based on a combination of interest and availability from the community partner and the District's interest in their community reach, includes a budget between \$5,000 and \$20,000. This level of partnership involves formal contracts and sets outreach goals and deliverables for the community partner, solidifying the District's place as a community collaborator and teammate for investing in the sustainability of partner organizations and their benefits to District communities.
- Tier 3: of the Partnership Program involves a multi-year commitment and increased funding support. This deeply collaborative relationship significantly benefits both partners through not only community outreach but mutual content creation, speaking engagement opportunities and establishes the District as a regularly recognized primary partner for the organization.

Through the Partnership Program, the District touches a diverse range of people, providing the extra boost they may need to engage in the outdoors in a holistic, community supported way. The Partnership Program works to address barriers such as transportation, language support, safety concerns, knowledge about outdoor recreation, and other resources needed that provide comfort and ease to individuals unfamiliar with outdoor recreation and enjoyment. Supported community partners foster dialogue and create opportunities to bridge gaps in understanding and ensure that a wider range of community members have the opportunity to enjoy and learn safely in open space lands.

Participating partners in 2024 included the following:

Partners		Tier	Annual Level	Events	Demographics Served
	<b>Latino Outdoors</b> 2015	3	\$44,000	8 community hikes 1 virtual program	Latino families, youth, seniors and particularly new preserve users
	<b>Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition</b> 2021	2	\$18,000	6 community bike rides	Diverse communities consisting of new and experienced riders
	<b>Bay Area Older Adults</b> 2019	2	\$15,000	6 community hikes	Seniors with financial, physical and educational barriers
	<b>Saved by Nature</b> 2023	2	\$15,000	6 community hikes	All Bay Area residents but especially communities who have been historically underfunded
	<b>Branching Out</b> Fall 2024	1	*\$2,500	1 pilot hike	LGBTQIA+ <i>*Moved from tier 1 to tier 2 partner in March 2025</i>
	<b>Boys and Girls Club of the Coastsides</b> Spring 2024	1	*\$2,500	1 pilot hike	<u>Coastsides</u> youth and young adult <i>*Moved from tier 1 to tier 2 partner in February 2025</i>
	<b>Student Conservation Association</b> Summer 2024	1	*\$2,500	1 week-long field project	Youth and young adult conservation career seekers <i>*Moved from tier 1 to tier 2 partner in January 2025</i>
	<b>Vista Center</b> Summer 2024	1	*\$2,500	1 pilot hike	Blind and visually impaired peoples <i>*Moved from tier 1 to tier 2 partner in January 2025</i>
	<b>East Palo Alto Library</b> Summer 2024	1	\$2,500	1 pilot hike	Families, youth, seniors from the East Palo Alto area

### Social Media

Due to the ever-evolving nature of social media as a communications channel, the social media strategic plan was revised in summer/fall of 2024. After analyzing the different platforms, Public Affairs determined that platform-specific goals, strategies and success metrics—rather than a generic approach to all social media—could strengthen the District’s overall social media impact.

To enable Public Affairs ability to reach new audiences, an Instagram-specific strategy was implemented with an objective to increase Instagram reel production. Instagram Reels are short-form, engaging videos, traditionally from five to 90 seconds that can incorporate music, effects, and creative editing tools. (Note in 2025, the maximum length of a reel was extended to three minutes). Reels are the platform’s most effective tool for reaching new audiences as they are subject to a broader discovery mechanism than image-based posts. Reels can be found by non-followers and the Instagram algorithm will promote reels to different tabs when they perform well initially with followers, potentially exposing reels to more non-followers. In addition to utilizing this platform’s specific functionalities, Public Affairs implemented social media content strategies such as highlighting people and their connection to nature, and showcasing staff and the care with which they do their work to deepen community understanding and support of the District.

Implementation of the updated social media strategic plan began in fall 2024. As analytics through 2024 would only cover a few months, the below includes information through March 2025.

- Instagram reels: 26 created and posted
- Instagram engagement: 48% increase
- Facebook reach: 450% increase
- Facebook and Instagram audience: 67% increase

Note some of the growth can be attributed to a handful of posts that have gone viral due to the updated strategy.

***Capital Improvement and Action Plan (CIAP) and Special Projects***

In addition to its core work, Public Affairs also supported 109 CIAP projects, as well as special projects, events, and focus areas such as wildland fire resiliency and the District's coastal mission. This portfolio encompasses a remarkably broad range of initiatives, and its expansive scope necessitates deep expertise in navigating complex issues and diverse community interests.

Within the CIAP umbrella, Public Affairs oversaw the Bear Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve Phase II Trail Opening, which included elected representatives, funding partners, community and stakeholders representatives and garnered significant media coverage. Other major projects with considerable Public Affairs involvement included the Good Neighbor Policy update, Highway 17 Crossings Project, Rancho San Antonio Multimodal Study and the Alpine Road Regional Trail Improvement Project.

Public Affairs also led the 10-Year Measure AA (MAA) Anniversary celebration, which resulted in:

- Anniversary Webpage receiving 4,000 views
- 14 MAA focused earned media stories
- Bay Nature Magazine summer issue and four quarterly ads
- OpenRoad episode broadcast viewed by 300,000
- Social media MAA Mondays posts in June and July
- 25 tabling events sharing MAA info
- Customized trailhead signboard fliers
- Newsletter + Newspaper insert: over 135,000 print and 300,000 digital distributed

In addition, the department oversaw the communications strategy and messaging for the District's first prescribed burn in 15 years, and managed special events such as the Larry Hasset Bench dedication.

Public Affairs played a critical role in addressing the District's multifaceted needs in 2024. This comprehensive coverage is essential for the overall success and sustainability of the District.

**Public Affairs Strategic Plan*****Background***

In 2019, Public Affairs worked with a consultant to create a strategic communications plan to provide an organizational roadmap for District communications over the next three years. A FY21 in-house update reflected changes to the Board-approved District strategic plan.

A new Public Affairs Manager was hired in July 2024, and a refinement of the strategic communications plan occurred with the intention that this FY25-26 update serve as a transitional bridge, ensuring continued alignment with District goals and objectives.

***FY25-26 Refinement***

Building upon the solid foundation of the existing communications strategic plan, the FY25-26 refinement identifies the following priority strategies:

- Restructure the public affairs department to foster a thriving, resilient team with the capacity to meet the growing needs of the organization, while facilitating deeper subject matter understanding and maintaining core functions.

- Make external communications more engaging and impactful to maintain and grow public awareness, trust and support.
- Strengthen crisis communication preparedness to enable the public affairs department to more efficiently and effectively communicate during emergencies such as natural disasters and safety incidents, or when complex, sensitive issues arise.
- Engage and build a broader base of open space allies, ambassadors and champions.
- Position the District as a thought leader in open space protection, stewardship and ecologically sensitive access, whose work is essential for healthy habitats for plants, animals and people (and climate resiliency).

Public Affairs will work to implement these strategies in FY25 and FY26 through tactics such as:

- Enhancing department cohesion and positive engagement through open communication and a culture of appreciation; refining departmental processes and procedures to streamline workflows and remove barriers to efficiency; and encouraging professional and leadership skill development.
- Reimagining the social media strategic plan for a dynamic, modern approach that amplifies engagement; evaluating existing publications and pinpointing opportunities for improvement to boost effectiveness; building stronger relationships with media outlets, including ethnic media, to deliver targeted, impactful and culturally relevant stories; assessing and redefining the online store and overall advertising approach
- Developing and implementing a crisis communication readiness plan, including conducting trainings and simulations; and implementing a wildland fire resiliency campaign prior to each fire season
- Forging meaningful relationships with delegation members and key influencers to build support for the District's mission and projects; growing community partnerships to engage community leaders as ambassadors and to build trust; expanding reach of current outreach program to foster deeper connections within the communities the District serves
- Raising the profile of the District's engagement in panels, coalitions and events that shape the open space realm; and hosting expert spotlight events to share knowledge and demonstrate thought leadership

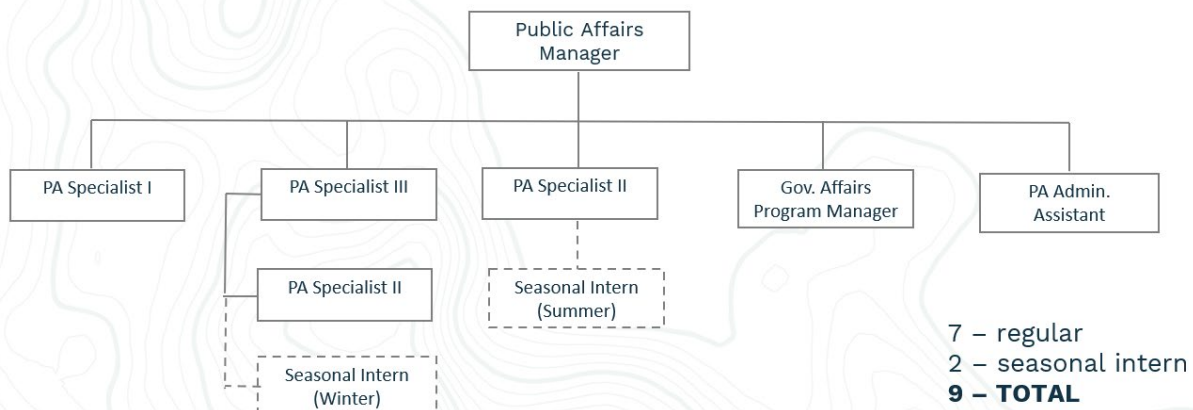
In parallel to the FY25-26 work described above, a comprehensive process with a consultant will be undertaken in FY26 to develop a renewed strategic communications plan that could serve the District for another three to five years.

### **Departmental Growth Model**

#### ***Background***

The Public Affairs Department currently includes the following positions: Public Affairs Manager, Public Affairs Specialist I/II and III, Governmental Affairs Specialist (working title Governmental Affairs Program Manager) and Public Affairs Administrative Assistant. Under the previous Public Affairs Manager, the department underwent several staffing structures ranging in size from nine to 10 members, including temporary staff such as limited term and interns.

In the summer of 2024, the department's structure was generally flat, with all but one full-time employee reporting to the Public Affairs Manager:



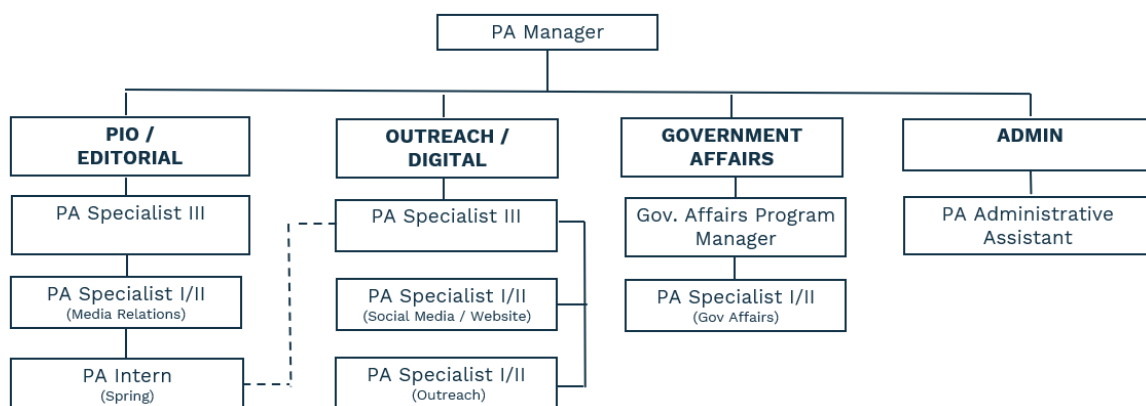
Following the appointment of a new Public Affairs Manager in July 2024, a needs assessment and open dialogue with internal stakeholders was conducted. This process yielded valuable insights leading to the development of a departmental growth model designed to improve productivity, efficiency and quality.

As the Public Affairs Manager already serves in a dual role, both as department manager and chief public information officer, the new growth model allows the manager to allocate attention beyond supervisory duties to strategic improvements. It also aligns the department's structure with Public Affairs core focus areas: Governmental Affairs, Editorial/Media Relations, and Outreach and Digital. A Public Affairs Specialist III (or Governmental Affairs Program Manager) with senior-level experience would supervise each stream, with Public Affairs Specialist I/II's reporting to Public Affairs Specialist III's, creating opportunity for improved workflow and succession planning.

To meet the District's evolving demands and fully realize the potential of this forward-looking structure, Public Affairs is requesting two FOSM recommended-based positions as part of the FY26 Budget and Action Plan that will be presented this year to the Action Plan and Budget Committee (May 6, 2025), followed by the full Board (June 11, 2025). A General Manager-approved reclassification of a Public Affairs Specialist II to a III will occur this fiscal year.

The total position count for the new Public Affairs departmental growth model is 10. The current total position count (with temporary staff) is nine. Note that all Public Affairs specialists are also generalists in that they provide Public Affairs coverage and support to all District preserves and projects alongside their core work.

The Public Affairs Departmental growth model is depicted in the organizational chart below (see also Attachment 2).



### ***FOSM Considerations for Additional Public Affairs Capacity***

To support the District’s commitment to implement Measure AA projects efficiently and effectively while maintaining on-going operations and programs, the agency chose to evaluate its structure, capacity and financial sustainability, resulting in the Financial and Operational Sustainability Model (FOSM) Report in 2015. The FOSM is a proactive effort to address the changing demands of the organization and was refreshed in 2023, prior to the hiring of the new Public Affairs Manager. The following two new positions are recommended for inclusion based on the emerging needs of the District and align well with the considerations expressed in the FOSM Refresh for additional future capacity in specific public affairs focus areas.

#### ***Public Affairs Specialist I/II (Governmental Affairs)***

Over the last nine years since the District’s Government Affairs Program was initiated, the District has made great strides in pursuing mission-positive legislation and funding sources (over \$25.5 million in state, federal and county member requests alone) and helping to shape regional and statewide policy. This has allowed the District to issue-spot, identify and advocate against detrimental state policy and successfully pass bills and actively support beneficial legislation. However, with the expansion of the District’s holdings and project growth the necessity for productive partnerships with a large delegation and key stakeholders has increased. In addition, changes to the state funding landscape, the growing threat of climate change, and dramatic shifts at the federal level have impacted the scope of work and program needs which have increased beyond the capacity of a single person.

The addition of another government affairs-focused staff will assist with succession planning and help create a long-term career ladder for this critical program that encompasses a substantial number of elected officials (44) and jurisdictions, including three counties and 17 cities. In addition, the position will allow for increased engagement with national, regional and state partner organizations to advance initiatives such as [30x30](#), [Outdoors for All](#), and the [California Natural and Working Lands Climate Strategy](#) that can translate into future opportunities to support the District’s mission.

The Board has voiced support for the building of the District’s government affairs capacity to ensure robust intergovernmental support. The FOSM notes that “the potential for establishing a broader role for the public affairs team may be envisioned. The work of the government affairs specialist, the grants manager and the public affairs manager offer some opportunity for synergy and heightened coordination, especially as the District



contemplates the value of greater autonomy and the related need for strong relationships regionally.”

*Public Affairs Specialist I/II (Outreach)*

The Public Affairs Specialist I/II position that is focused on outreach reflects the need for additional capacity to keep pace with the outreach program's successes and meet the needs of a growing District, including the desire to expand the District's outreach and engagement in Coastside communities.

The 2023 FOSM refresh states that “[s]ince the last FOSM, the growth of social media and the addition of online access to public meetings has drastically lowered the old barriers to participation and increased the desire of the public to participate in the discussion of local issues that impact their lives,” and that the District will need to continue “to expand its public affairs footprint knowing that today you can never ‘overcommunicate.’”

A strong outreach program is a tangible expression of the District's values, demonstrating the District's commitment to building long-term, meaningful relationships within the communities it serves. Through tablings, events and partnering with local organizations and leaders who are respected and trusted the Outreach Program builds ongoing organizational capacity for the delivery of organizational priorities.

These two new positions will better position the District to deliver on Measure AA, the Vision Plan and organizational priorities in the Annual CIAP, as the District is planning some of the most exciting projects in its history: a new coastal field office to better serve the Coastside, a major renovation of the Skyline Field Office, a new shuttle program at Purisima, new trails, major wildlife and trail crossings and a critical wildland fire resiliency program.

As the District implements FOSM Recommendation 42 to expand career ladders and as FOSM-directed growth continues to yield an increase in projects and productivity, it may become necessary to reassess Public Affairs staffing levels over time. Future positions that reflect this model will be brought to the Board of Directors year by year as part of the annual budget.

## **FISCAL IMPACT**

There is sufficient funding in the FY25 Budget for the General Manager-approved reclassification of a Public Affairs Specialist II to a III. The two FOSM recommended-based positions will be included for consideration with the FY26 Budget and Action Plan, which will be presented this year to the Action Plan and Budget Committee (May 6, 2025), followed by the full board (June 11, 2025).

## **PRIOR BOARD AND COMMITTEE REVIEW**

This report was not previously reviewed by a Committee.

## **PUBLIC NOTICE**

Public notice was provided as required by the Brown Act.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE**

This item is not a project subject to the California Environmental Quality Act.

**NEXT STEPS**

- The General Manager-approved reclassification of a Public Affairs Specialist II to a III will occur in FY25.
- Two additional positions will be included in the FY26 Budget and Action Plan presented to the Action Plan and Budget Committee on May 6, 2025, and to the full Board of Directors on June 11, 2025.
- Upon board approval, the General Manager will create the two positions. The Public Affairs Manager will create the position descriptions, start the hiring processes and implement the departmental growth model in FY26.
- Future positions that reflect the model would be brought to the Board as part of the annual budget process.

## Attachment(s)

1. [Financial and Operational Sustainability Model \(FOSM\) Refresh](#)
2. Public Affairs Growth Model Organizational Chart

Responsible Department Head:

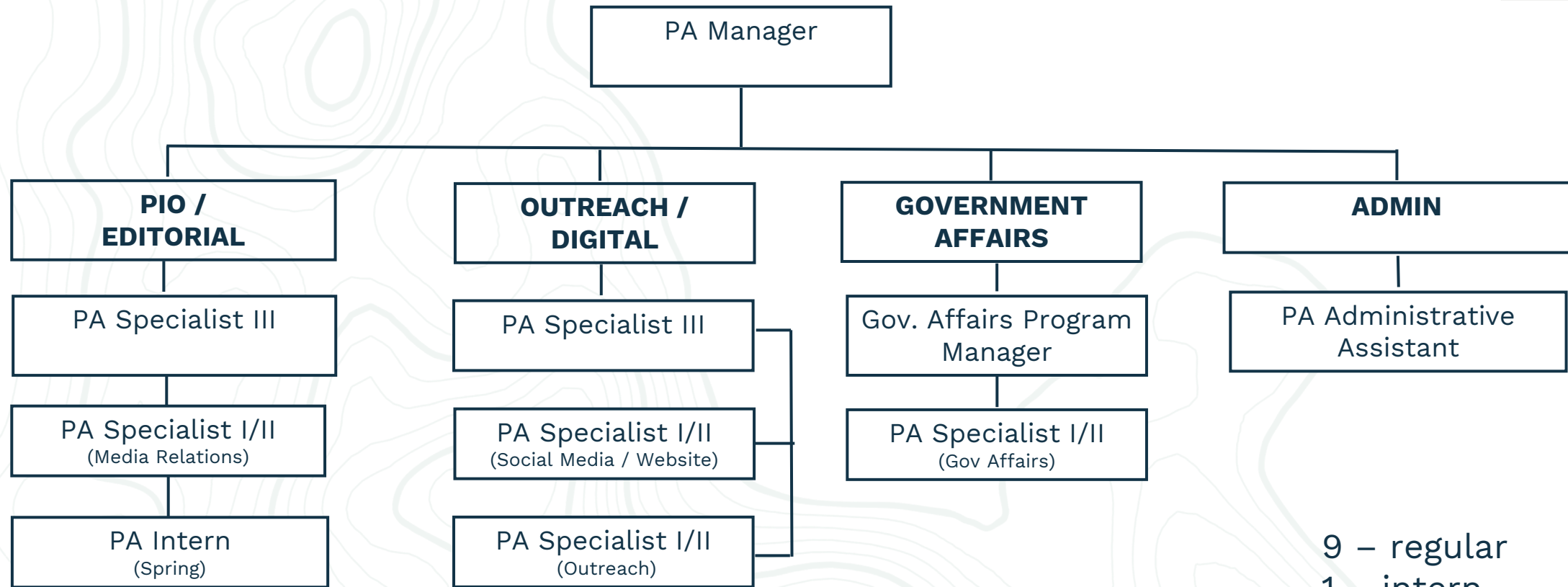
Ana Maria Ruiz, General Manager

Prepared by/contact person:

Lori Low, Public Affairs Manager, Public Affairs



# Department Growth Model



9 – regular  
1 – intern  
**10 - TOTAL**