

Communicating Effectively With The Public

BY NAZIR LALANI AND DAVID G. GERARD

Transportation engineering is always a subject of high interest with members of the public. Public agencies need to develop effective methods for communicating vital information about current and future transportation projects and problems with residents of their communities. There are a number of effective strategies for communicating with the public, including citizen brochures, radio talk show interviews, regular newspaper columns, block parties, project newsletters, speaking to organized groups such as Lions and Rotary clubs, and community workshops. This article discusses these strategies in detail.

Presentation to Community Leadership Groups

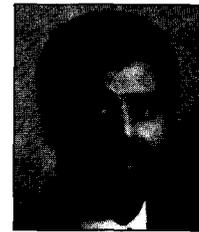
One of the most effective ways of communicating an agency's transportation program is to obtain a list from the local Chamber of Commerce of the local Lions, Rotary and Optimist clubs, mobile home park and other homeowner associations, as well as other business and social groups. A letter should be sent to each group offering to speak at one of their meetings about the agency's transportation program. An effective slide show should be prepared illustrating short-term traffic improvements, major transportation projects, new traffic signals, computerized signal coordination systems, and the agency's program for addressing community concerns and citizen requests. This type of slide show is an extremely effective way of disseminating information about

the agency's transportation program, as well as for promoting specific projects. This approach has been used by the City of San Buenaventura, Calif., for a number of years, and has led to at least 100 presentations being made over a period of 10 years to different community leadership groups with audiences of 50 or more people. The presentations are always received very well, and generate lively discussion as well as question/answer sessions that communicate a lot of valuable information to the public.

The advantages of such a proactive approach are numerous. First, it provides the ability to educate a broad and diverse group of citizens about transportation issues, problems and proposed solutions. Second, it enables transportation professionals to obtain input from a wide cross-section of the community. Third, it allows transportation professionals to develop a relationship with various groups that can be of value for years to come. These types of meetings, particularly if held on a recurring basis, can "humanize" transportation by changing its image from that of a faceless bureaucracy to that of a profession whose members live and work in and care for the community.

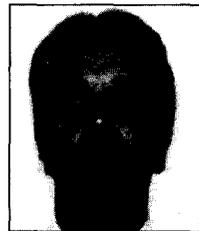
It is extremely difficult to implement any transportation improvement that does not result in an adverse impact, real or imagined, upon someone. Right-of-way acquisition or access modifications are often considered adverse impacts by adjacent property owners. Hopefully, the proposed project provides benefits to the community that outweigh the negative

impacts. By working with various leadership groups, a constituency can be built that will come out in support of projects, thereby balancing the oft-heard negative comments.



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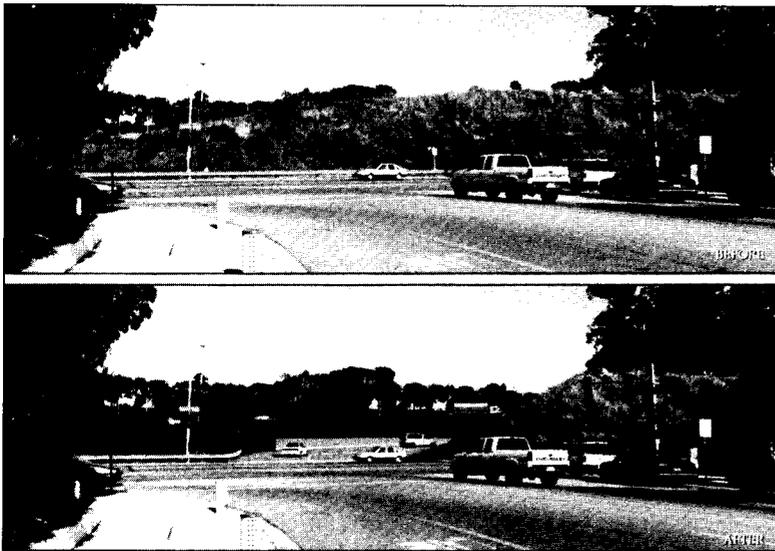


Figure 1. A computer-generated visual simulation, such as this one of a proposed new on-ramp, can considerably enhance the public's understanding of the type of facility being proposed and its impact.

Public Workshops, Using Computer Visual Simulations

In order to provide an opportunity for citizens to comment on large transportation projects that will have significant impact in a particular area (perhaps required by the environmental process), agencies frequently hold public workshops to solicit public input. This is always a good idea, whether it is required for environmental reasons or not. The use of computer visual simulations at such workshops to provide a visual rendering of the proposed change in the transportation facilities is always a good idea. Figure 1 illustrates an example of a roadway under existing conditions and a computer-generated visual simulation of a proposed new on-ramp to the U.S. 101 Freeway in Ventura, Calif. This kind of visual simulation can considerably enhance the public's understanding of the type of facility being proposed and its impact.

Ceremonial Grand Openings

Ceremonial grand openings of major transportation facilities can often generate media interest and publicity, as well as create positive feelings towards the project. Caltrans recently opened a segment of Highway 118 in Ventura County—a long-awaited, significant \$25 million project, involving constructing two new bridges and realigning Highway 118. The project's purpose was to provide better transportation to an area of the county that had long suffered from neglect and poor circulation. As soon as the project was open to traffic, a grand opening ceremony was held and the following strategies implemented:

- Public announcements were sent to the media, all elected officials and the nonelected leadership of all area communities, inviting them to the grand opening.
- Politicians involved in obtaining the financing were invited to the grand opening.
- A parade was held along the facility, with all the dignitaries as well as local merchants invited to participate.
- A street fair was held in the project vicinity to enhance further positive feeling toward the project.

The event was well covered in the press and several thousand people attended the grand opening ceremony.

Block Parties

Block party presentations are yet another example of a valuable avenue of communication with the public. Each May, the City of Ventura's police and fire departments invite the entire city to a block party, where the city's traffic engineering staff provide a computerized slide show display that highlights the various projects that the city is working on, including the traffic signal system and traffic improvement projects. Citizen brochures are available from a special display area.

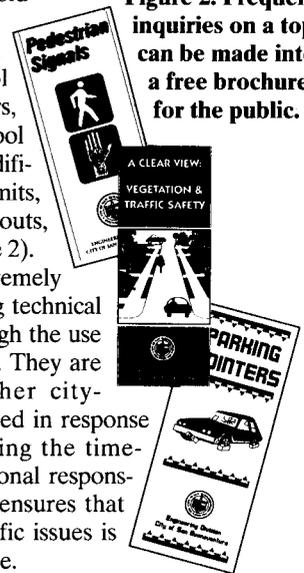
Citizen Information Brochures

In response to a large number of inquiries to its traffic engineering office, the City of San Buenaventura has developed a series of brochures that are designed to address issues citizens bring to the office's attention. Topics include speed zones, stop signs and traffic signals, marked crosswalks, flashing beacons, pedestrian signals, traffic signal systems, avoiding parking tickets,

future traffic improvements, traffic safety tips, adult school crossing guards, parking pointers, left-turn arrows, suggested school route program, traffic flow modifications, residential parking permits, children at play signs, roundabouts, and trees and shrubbery (Figure 2).

These brochures are an extremely effective way of communicating technical information to the public through the use of graphics combined with text. They are used at workshops and other city-sponsored events, and are mailed in response to citizen inquiries (eliminating the time-consuming task of writing personal responses). Further, use of brochures ensures that information provided on specific issues is consistent in quality and message.

Figure 2. Frequent inquiries on a topic can be made into a free brochure for the public.



Project Newsletters

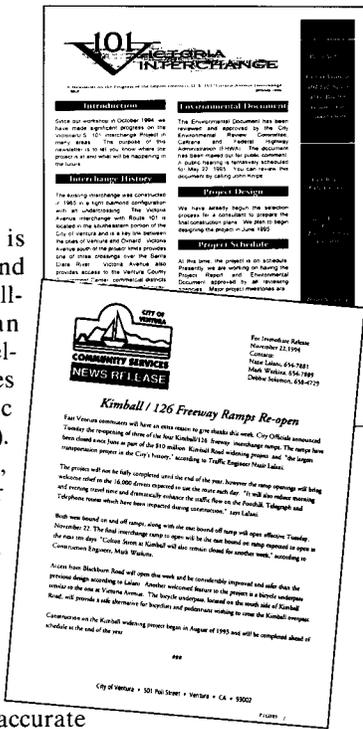
Agencies frequently involve business and property owners who are impacted by a specific project in workshops. This usually occurs as part of the environmental process, especially if right-of-way acquisition is involved. Once these workshops have been held, there is often no further contact until the right-of-way acquisition process has begun or actual construction of the project. This lack of communication can lead to members of the public being unpleasantly surprised by unexpected activity.

To avoid such surprises, many agencies now issue quarterly newsletters to keep all interested parties informed about a specific project (Figure 3). The newsletters include a project schedule, describe critical activities that have been undertaken since the previous newsletter, and list contacts that members of the public can call for more information. The City of Ventura also sends out newsletters on small projects, such as new traffic signals and minor intersection widenings, to property and business owners within 300 meters of the project location to alert them of upcoming projects.

Figure 3. Newsletters and press releases are an effective way of communicating with and informing the public.

Press Releases

Whenever a project is being opened to traffic and nearing completion, a well-written press release can stimulate the press to develop an article that provides information to the public about the project (Figure 3). Aspects such as financing, benefits and reasons for constructing improvements that are not always immediately apparent to the public can be included in a press release. If a press release is not distributed, the public often receives incomplete or inaccurate information that the media has been able to obtain through secondary sources.



Weekly Newspaper Column

Some newspapers have started publishing a regular "Street Smart" newspaper column where the public sends questions to the newspaper regarding traffic and transportation concerns. A reporter is assigned to research answers, and the agency's response is published along with the letter from the citizen raising the questions. This method is very popular because it provides direct answers to citizens' questions.

In Austin, Texas, the City's Transportation Manager, David Gerard, answers frequently asked questions about traffic engineering-related issues in a regular weekly article. "This helps to educate all the citizens," Gerard says. For example, a recent column addressed the legality of cars parking in bicycle lanes in Austin, and then discussed ways that bicyclists and vehicle owners can try to understand and be considerate of each others' needs and make the roads safer for everyone.



Figure 4. Traffic columns in your local newspaper—written either by a reporter or a city traffic engineer—are widely read by the community, and can be used as another forum for information.

The City of Austin also uses this weekly column to promote specific programs and projects. If there is some opposition to a proposed project, the city may pose a question such as "Why can't something be done

to improve traffic along..." and the city's answer would explain its proposal, inform the public about anticipated benefits, and solicit public comment on the proposal (see Figure 4).

Monthly Radio Talk Show Interviews

Local radio talk shows, particularly those that allow listeners to call in with questions, provide a good avenue for disseminating information about upcoming projects and their impacts, and perhaps some impacts to the transportation system in the agency.

The emphasis should always be on providing positive information about upcoming projects. Unfortunately, there is a greater likelihood of encountering unexpected or adversarial questions during radio talk shows than during community groups. Remember, you aren't just talking to 40 to 50 people in a room; you're talking to listeners from all over the community. Talk show hosts can be opinionated and sometimes create bias by their comments, or even by the way they introduce you. Therefore it's especially important to be well versed on your subject and be able to "think on your feet" when appearing on radio talk shows.

Cable TV Public Announcements/ News Segments

Agencies can frequently obtain a 15–30 minute segment on cable television before regularly televised City Council or County Board meetings to broadcast a public announcement or news segment about agency-related news and information. Televised interviews at field locations enhance viewer interest and frequently engender better comprehension of the proposed project.

Many local government channels broadcast throughout the week and are often in search of interesting and informative segments. It is important to work with channel broadcast staff to develop concepts or ideas that go beyond just general project-specific information.

Conclusions

All agencies should consider using the strategies in this article for communicating with the public. The transportation profession must communicate information about the benefits of transportation projects and programs, or risk losing public understanding and support, which is especially critical at times of budget reviews and bond elections to finance projects. Consultants specializing in media relations can be used effectively to develop publicity material and coordinate special events. Unlike parks and libraries, which typically generate considerable vocal support for financing, in most communities there is not a natural advocacy group or constituency that automatically steps forward to support transportation improvements. That support has to be generated, encouraged and maintained. Without public support, even the best transportation programs eventually will falter and not reach their full potential.

Additional Information

If you are interested in obtaining free copies of the citizen brochures, newsletters or other items mentioned in this article, contact Nazir Lalani, City Transportation Engineer, P.O. Box 99, Ventura, CA 93002, phone 805/654-7781, Fax 805/648-1809. ■