PR Strategies for Public Works

By Douglas Rooks

Road projects can be a messy business, when, as one observer put it, "the dust and the heat are rising." Although virtually all Maine residents appreciate the results of the highway, bridge, and culvert work that goes on all over the state, in every municipality, the inconveniences and annoyances that come with construction can create a backlash.

So it's doubly important, say the experts, that municipal road projects include a public relations plan – and the bigger the project, the bigger the effort that's likely to be needed.

Road budgets were hard hit over the winter, not only by a huge increase in the cost of snow plowing, but – looking ahead – budgeting for the expenses of road repairs that are also sure to be well above average.

A sampling of news accounts from this year's March town meetings give an idea how prominent public works departments are in the scheme of things, and the minds of taxpayers:

• In Jackson, selectmen proposed raising $110,000 to pave roads, saying that state funding has declined and pavement is deteriorating. In this town of 519 residents, that would have raised the tax rate by nearly $5 per thousand of value. "We didn't expect it to pass at all," commented Selectman Cindy Lunden, but said the town "needs to start talking about what we'll do with our roads." The town meeting rejected the warrant article, but did agree to spend $25,000.

• Peru decided, for the third time, to keep electing its road commissioner, this time by a vote of 58-53. Selectmen expressed continued frustration about difficulties with state grants and their oversight of previous commissioners. But a former selectmen, Richard Powell, said town meeting wants to retain a direct say in road projects.

• Norridgewock voted to spend $500,000 to rebuild the Wilder Hill Road, despite the vocal protests of several residents of the road who believe the new pavement will increase speeding violations.

• And in New Vineyard, voters decided to take up the most expensive of three options a five-member citizens' committee prepared to reconstruct the Barker Road, spending $224,000 on two of the worst sections. The decision was doubtless made easier because the money was available from surplus.

These examples could be multiplied dozens of times around the state – and in larger communities with town and city councils, road projects are often equally hotly debated.

Opinion from those who represent the voters, those who provide professional services for construction, and public relations specialists, appears unanimous: When it comes to major road projects, and even some minor ones, communication is the name of the game.

It's important not to wait until construction starts to begin the discussion, said Steve Johnson. "You need to be as proactive as possible – get out there and provide the opportunity for public input, and walk people through every phase of the project."

Johnson was public works director in South Portland from 1999-2005, and is now a senior project manager for Oak Engineers, working out of Portland; he's also the immediate past president of the Maine Chapter of the American Public Works Association.

The secret to getting public acceptance is public involvement, Johnson said. "Even before the project goes out to bid, even before it gets off the drawing board, you have to make contact."

When a street is being reconstructed, residents want to know how long it will take, where the work will take place, and how much disruption they can expect – those are givens, he said.

Yet communication is a two-way street, he points out. The real value of notification and community meetings is that the road planners find out valuable information that can save the town time and money, and produce better results.

Johnson recently engineered a project for the Skillin Road in Cumberland, and the public phase began with a neighborhood meeting – in the evening, when people are most likely to attend.

"You don't always get a big turnout, but between meetings, mailings to abutters, and public notices, you can inform the public," he said.

In the Cumberland case, the engineering survey took place in August – not the time of year most likely to reveal subsurface drainage problems.

"We got a lot in input from people who'd lived there for years," he said. In one instance, a seasonal spring flowed regularly that hadn't appeared on the maps. "These are the nuances you can't find on maps or surveys," he said, "but the people who live on the road usually know about them."

He also discovered that a previous state project on the road hadn't provided the rip-rap that was part of the design, and made sure that the new effort included that feature.

The value of public input is often significant, he said. "People know about hidden culverts, which could save a lot of digging. They provide in-

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sights into what will work, and what doesn't work," for a particular project.

Not everyone who comes to a meeting is helpful. "Sometime you will hear that it has to be done a certain way, that it's the only way to do it – even if you know it's not." But by and large, residents are not only happy to be listened to, but are more understanding when unexpected obstacles arise during the construction phase, Johnson said.

Bob Malley, Cape Elizabeth's public works director, not only shares Johnson's views on public input, but also has institutionalized the process into virtually everything his department does that might affect abutters and townspeople.

"You've got to start communicating right from the beginning," he says, emphatically. "If you show up on the street with an excavator and some dump trucks, it's way too late.

Malley uses a 2006 sewer project as an example of how it works. The neighborhood meeting he set up was not especially well-attended – about 20 people showed up – but it proved a catalyst in getting the project familiar to the neighborhood. The town followed up with a mailing not only to abutters, but to those who might use the road in question. Contractors for the project were involved, because they're the most direct point of contact. "If someone has a suggestion, we want them to be able to make sure it gets directly to the people doing the work," he said.

Cape Elizabeth, too, gets valuable information by doing its public communication in advance. "We find out that someone has an irrigation system we need to work around. People will tell us about their dog fences, and we'll try to work around it, even if it is in the right-of-way," Malley said.

The sewer project description was posted on the town's website, with a link to the engineering firm showing the design; weekly updates during construction were also provided.

Even some seemingly routine projects benefit from communication up front. Last fall, Cape Elizabeth decided to trim some trees on a residential street that were overhanging the road and interfering with large vehicles, such as public works trucks. "When you start cutting trees in front of people's houses, you often get a big reaction," Malley said. "I knew if we'd just sent the crew and started cutting, there'd be trouble." By providing advance notice to the whole street, though, things went smoothly. "I don't think I got a single call," he said.

Steve Johnson said that some means of communication are easy and simple – if towns happen to think of them and make the effort. He credits Michelle Sturgeon, a secretary in the South Portland public works department, with the idea for an e-mail list

Road PR Tips from the Professional

The issues surrounding some of the biggest highway projects in Maine turn out to be much the same as those municipalities confront when they start digging up pavement and hauling gravel.

Steve Mason, managing director for Swardlick Marketing Group in Portland, which has done extensive public relations work for both the Maine Turnpike Authority and Maine DOT, says that the focus of every project starts with the same goal: "Doing a great job without interfering unnecessarily with the public's use of the road."

Sometimes, of course, that's easier said than done, and some of MTA's and MDOT's projects make statewide news over a considerable period of time.

Swardlick's work can be relatively basic – a press release and buying space for the required public notices. But at other times, a full-fledged campaign is needed.

That was the case when the five-year turnpike widening between York and Scarborough was carried out, with the theme "Thinking Ahead." The widening, which was authorized by a statewide referendum in 1997, reversing a vote six years earlier that had prohibited it, led to numerous innovations in the way the turnpike authority deals with the public.

"That was what created the website, and the e-mail alert system," Mason said – changes that have also been picked up by MDOT. While he didn't have exact figures, both agencies have "very extensive mailing lists" of those who've signed up for e-mail notices.

The widening campaign also featured newspaper, TV and radio advertising – clearly beyond what most towns and cities would need for their own road projects. But the goals of the program may sound familiar. "The objective is to empower citizens so they can stay informed, plan ahead, and deal with the consequences of the work that has to be done," Mason said.

Swardlick is involved in the MTA's current effort to replace the York toll plaza, the turnpike's largest, though so far its role has been limited to the press releases and notice phase. The toll plaza plan will go to public hearings later this year, and there may be more work for Swardlick then. "It all depends on what the client needs," Mason said.

While a well-designed public relations campaign can make a big difference, Mason said that, in the end, a lot depends on the competence of the agency that designs the project and the contractors who carry it out.

"We were credited with a hugely successful campaign for the widening," he said. "But it wouldn't have made any difference if the turnpike hadn't carried it out on budget and on time, and doing night work to minimize the inconvenience."

While good communications is vital, Mason said, "It's only one part of the puzzle."

that informs residents of the department's activities, in detail.

"Whenever someone called in, with a complaint or just a comment, she'd ask if they wanted to be on the list," he said. "When we have a water break, or an unexpected road closing, we'd send that right out, and it helped," he said.

Often, people just appreciate being better-informed. Snowplowing generates large volumes of complaints, chiefly of the "Why hasn't my road been plowed" variety, Johnson said.

South Portland put out a brochure describing its plowing operations, which operate on a four-hour cycle. "Usually that's fine, but if snow is piling up at an inch an hour, it can be pretty deep by the time the plow gets back," he said. Once people know the facts, and the reasons behind them, they're a lot more likely to be understanding, he said.

If road work announcements are made, however, they have to be accurate. Bob Malley said that while some towns provide notice of street sweeping, Cape Elizabeth isn't one of them. "The schedule can slip because of weather, or mechanical breakdowns," which are fairly frequent with sweepers. "If you're not there when you said you'd be, it isn't going to accomplish anything."

What happens when things go wrong, though? When projects take longer than expected, when the funding runs short, or when accidents and other unexpected occurrences take a toll?

Greg Dore, public works director in Skowhegan, had what sounds like a "perfect storm" last summer, when state crews and towns crews were all over the place.

"We suddenly got funding for things we hadn't expected, and it got crazy," he said. Not only were state crews out paving two of Skowhegan's major arteries, Route 2 and Route 150, which required local assistance, but there were also long-delayed projects that finally came up for action. One was a Maine DOT project on a state-aid road that had originally been scheduled for 1998, nine years earlier.

"We took on a sewer line project that was longer than 1,000 feet. Normally we don't do that, but there were substantial savings to doing it ourselves," he said.

So the crews were busy already when the opportunity to install new

streetlights came up, and Dore said yes. "It was part of a beautification grant we'd been waiting for, but it was a lot more work than we thought it would be."

The department didn't have as much expertise with lights as its does with dump trucks and loaders, and there also turned out to be twice as many lights – 40 in all – as had been expected. The results was that work slowed down all over, and the light poles weren't completed before the end of the season.

"We did have delays, and some of the work wasn't finished when people expected," Dore said.

Still, there were relatively few complaints. He attributes that in part to regular weekly meetings with businesses – often attended by 50 or more people – that Skowhegan has had since 2006. There was also significant news coverage of the larger projects and the public seemed understanding – and appreciative of the results.

"That was a big summer," Dore said. By contrast, this year, "There's not much of anything going on."

There are limits, though, to the amount that can be accomplished by community meetings aimed at building consensus. Skowhegan has been looking to reconfigure the "racetrack" portion of Main Street that features a one-way loop around much of the business district.

The town came up with a new traffic pattern that the engineers said would provide better access to stores and offices downtown. But the groups that viewed the plan were divided. "They didn't like what we were proposing," Dore said. "We'll have to try again later."

While roads are clearly the generator of much public interest and concern, there are other public works projects that can also benefit from public communication and input.

Steve Johnson points to Bath's recent installation of a "pay as you throw" program for trash collection, for which he acted as facilitator, as a model for defusing conflict and dealing with what he calls "thorny issues."

Bath had recently had a referendum vote to shut down its landfill, and the city council was looking for a way to reduce volume and costs. The answer, in this case, was to convene a true "citizen's committee" to come up with a plan. "There was one councilor on the committee, but it was a real community effort. They came up with a plan themselves, and the city has been able to implement it successfully," he said – in contrast with a neighboring community that instituted "pay as you throw" and then scuttled it after citizen complaints.

Johnson said that it isn't possible to satisfy everyone who objects to a particular project, but that sometimes issues can be worked out that seemed intractable.

"If you're up front and very focused, and know how to listen, you can get to the bottom line and see what the objection is all about," he said. "By being honest and making a good faith effort, you can sometimes turn around an issue you just didn't think you could resolve," he said.

In the end, early communication seems to the closest thing to a guarantee that, whatever bumps there are in a particular project, public discontent will be manageable, and that the community will be well informed. Said Bob Malley, "You have to have a plan, or it goes to heck on you real fast." MT