

## Remarks on Public Information and Public Relations

DUANE BERENTSON

WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Five-and-a-half years ago, when I became Secretary of Transportation in Washington State, I looked around and came to the conclusion that the greatest challenge facing our Department of Transportation was in our capacity to increase construction programs.

We were then—and still are—one of the high growth rate states in the nation. Particularly in the Puget Sound Basin, rapid growth continues today and congestion on our highway system—and in certain parts of our ferry system—is still building as traffic increases and exceeds the capacity of our facilities.

I've been around long enough to realize that the subject of this conference—reconstruction of major urban freeways—may well be an even greater challenge to us as time goes by.

Washington State has a newer system than many states, but it is clear that we will soon face reconstruction situations that many states have already tackled.

I am here today to talk with you about public information and public relations. I'm pleased to do that for several reasons. Since I currently serve as chairman of the AASHTO Standing Committee on Administration, public affairs falls under my purview.

Additionally, my lengthy career as a state legislator may bring to you a different perspective than some other CEO's might hold.

What I'd like to discuss here is:

- my perspective of the relationship between public information and the continuation of our programs;
- some of the techniques that have been used across the country to control construction under traffic; and
- some thoughts on future needs.

In Washington, the Department of Transportation is directed largely by the legislature. The secretary serves at the pleasure of a commission appointed by the governor and confirmed by the state senate. The Transportation Commission sets broad policies and is responsible by statute for several aspects of the agency's functions.

As secretary, I have some very broad and some very specific responsibilities under state laws.

Those laws, of course, are made by the legislature. Washington has very close legislative oversight through a bipartisan legislative transportation committee. Members of my staff and I appear before that legislative transportation committee at least once each month when the legislature is not in session and almost daily during the session.

People who serve in the legislature come from fairly small districts. They have very close contact on a day-to-day basis with their constituents—and their constituents are our constituents, too.

They are the people all transportation professionals ultimately serve. They, in my estimation, are the most important public with whom we must communicate—not the working reporter, not the editorial writer or the investigative reporter, not the special interest group, or even local government officials.

Over time, I have concluded that with enough money and enough engineers, the transportation agencies of the states in this nation can accomplish just about anything. Ultimately, they can fix virtually any problem.

But public confidence is the key to acquiring the resources needed to resolve the problems that the public itself identifies—a belief that we can respond to their needs.

The days are over of closing down miles of freeway for resurfacing and leaving citizens to fend for themselves. Today, we know we must develop traffic control measures and plans that bureaucrats call “mitigating measures.”

But all the sophisticated traffic control plans and procedures in the world will not alleviate the confusion, inconvenience, and congestion created by the mega projects that confront states today. If constituents are not informed and educated through public information and public relations activities, we waste money, create needless confusion—and are perceived to be deliberately disrupting the lives of those we are trying to serve.

That is unacceptable to the public. It is unacceptable to legislatures. It should be unacceptable to us, if only for a very selfish reason: self-preservation.

If we are to preserve and continue the great transportation agencies of this nation, which have built and still maintain the finest transportation network of any nation in the world, we must keep the confidence of those we serve.

We won't maintain that confidence if we do not communicate. We will not maintain that confidence if we do not educate. And we will not maintain that confidence if we do not instill the urgency of those endeavors in our own agencies.

If you look around the country, you will quickly be able to identify some real examples of success. I'm sure we could cite some gigantic failures as well, but the successes should be our focus and our guide.

In Washington State, over the last two years, we have been able to successfully resurface a critical portion of Interstate 5 through downtown Seattle. There are very, very few alternatives for traffic running north and south through Seattle. Thus, to avert chaos, we had to develop and carry out a massive public information program.

Our engineering and public relations staffs worked closely with:

- local government
- transit agencies
- citizens groups
- industry
- the news media
- individual citizens, in many instances

We believed it was crucial that as many people as possible understood a series of issues:

- why we were doing the work
- what we would be doing
- when it would be carried out—not just which months or weeks, but the actual days and hours
- what would be the benefit of the project
- what were the alternative routes or modes of transportation
- where the public could go for help or more information
- what the effects were on other government services, such as police, fire, and ambulance
- what kinds of ancillary effects would occur, such as the noise that certain construction operations would inflict on residents and employees

We used virtually every available public relations tool:

- news conferences
- meetings with community groups
- brochures
- telephone hot lines staffed with information clerks
- DOT employee visits to residents of affected neighborhoods to hand out fliers
- mass mailings
- pay envelope stuffers for businesses
- advertising cards in and on buses promoting the telephone hot line
- radio public service announcements
- news releases
- aggressive scheduling of speeches before service clubs
- posters in businesses and on their employee bulletin boards
- briefings for our own employees not connected with the project so that they could give informed responses to questions posed by neighbors and friends
- appearances on radio and television talk and public service programs
- inclusion of project information in routine correspondence about subjects not connected to the project
- briefings to local government public meetings where additional press coverage could be secured

We tried to do everything we could. We repeated our messages over and over, sometimes even to the point that some—including our staff—considered overkill. But because you have told and heard the same story yourself over and over and over, ad nauseam, you will still not have reached everyone you need to reach and so must continue repeating the message. The I-5 resurfacing job was small compared to many efforts elsewhere. In Pennsylvania, for example, there have been huge projects in Pittsburgh. Massachusetts completed and documented in extraordinary fashion their Southeast Expressway Project.

Here in Chicago, the city has completed work on the Edens, and the Dan Ryan Expressway is scheduled for reconstruction in 1987 or 1988.

The keys to success in Washington and other states are very simple. Transportation planners must use a multidisciplinary approach to the problem. They must also plan early and stay committed to the plan. At the same time, they must employ the expertise of planning professionals; traffic engineering, design, and construction engineers; experts in print communication; experts at targeting audiences; and public relations coordinators.

If a department lacks expertise in any of the areas critical for success, the initial planning process must recognize that deficiency and make appropriate provisions for acquiring outside help or allowing time to develop it in the organization.

If employees don't have these capabilities now, this is the time to begin developing their skills. Because, as we all clearly recognize, these projects represent a large part of the future.

There is, of course, one other aspect of the public relations and public information campaign. That is the matter of safety.

I am referring to safety for its own sake—the preservation of life and limb of citizens, contractor workers, and employees—and also safety as an economic consideration.

In this litigious era, defense against both justified and spurious lawsuits demands that we can demonstrate that preventive measures were taken. A well-thought-out and well-implemented public information program can deter accidents and lawsuits; it can also be part of a good defense of suits that occur.

By virtue of the fact that this conference is taking place, I believe the future is very clear to us all. The age of reconstruction is here. The age of improving old facilities and constructing new ones under traffic is here. No longer can we simply go out and get something built without considering the effects.

The real basis and need for public relations and public information is the same as the purpose underlying all of our work: to improve the transportation systems of the states and the nation as a service to the taxpayers.

I sincerely believe that we have a moral obligation to accomplish that end.

To anyone who would disagree on that issue, let me repeat that it is in your own best interest to practice strong and positive public relations.

When I served in the Washington State Legislature, our Department of Transportation was responsive to the needs of citizens. The department's responsiveness diminished the number of frantic and fanatic phone calls, letters, or meetings that were critical of the transportation program. That allowed me, as a legislator, to exercise strong and unswerving support for the DOT and its objectives of serving the state.

To a large extent, I realize, I am preaching to the converted. I know that the majority of you know, understand, and believe that we are obliged to be forthright and straightforward in our dealings with our many publics, whether they are citizens, legislatures, or any of the other segments of our society.

The message I want to leave you with is that there are a few transportation professionals left who don't share and understand this philosophy. We have a responsibility to convince them, to convert them to this way of thinking, and doing business. I believe the consequences of not accomplishing these goals are clear to us all.