

The Public Relations Aspects of Highway Construction Programing

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The topic of this paper concerns the public relations aspects of highway construction programing, a specific part of the over-all public relations program of the highway departments.

Much is heard these days about public relations in the highway field; the subject is discussed at length in meetings wherever and whenever highway officials congregate. Almost everybody agrees that highway officials must have and must show a positive approach to public relations.

This certainly is an excellent development. We in the highway departments now realize the tremendous value of having public good will. We are consciously embarking on a public relations campaign designed to make it easier for a highway construction program to be carried to completion.

Probably, the point that is missed in these discussions about public relations is that it is not something that is handled separately and apart from other duties. It is a part of every decision, however minor. The highway administrator makes a decision affecting his public relations when he appoints a man to a job, makes an allocation of money, or drives down the street. Public relations is implicit in every action taken by a highway administrator. And the implication of every act must be studied for its effect on a department's public relations.

Publicity cannot be substituted for public relations, which in essence are made simply by the way one acts.

There have been a lot of definitions of public relations. Many of them are ludicrous, but many others are worthy of recognition. The following is the one I prefer:

"Public relations is the continued process of keying policies, services and actions to the best interests of those individuals and groups whose confidence and good will an individual or institution covets; and secondly, it is the interpretation of these policies, services and actions to assure complete understanding and appreciation."

To satisfy this definition, highway departments must make their policies and services fit the wishes, desires and hopes of the people—not only must they fit the wishes, desires and hopes of those who use the highway, but they also must fit the wishes, desires and hopes of the vast army of citizens who depend on highway services for a growing number of uses. The highway departments must also interpret those policies to the citizen so that he will have complete understanding and will accept them and appreciate them.

It is certainly difficult to determine policies to fit the wishes of the people and to explain them and to convince the people of the justness of your decisions. Some problems are involved.

Obviously, a preliminary to a public relations program is a good organization doing a good job. You can have a plethora of public relations men and your employees can be avidly public relations minded, but your public relations are going to be bad if you attempt to build on a bad foundation. The product has to be a good one before it can be sold.

So it is a waste of time to discuss a public relations program unless we have a product we are proud of. The highway organization must be a good one.

Even assuming that the product is a good one—that the highway department is doing a good job—it does not necessarily follow that the public relations program is a good one. The policies you adopt must be the ones which will, in the long run, satisfy the people who pay the bill. A proper and effective public relations campaign calls for

interpretation of the program and the policies to obtain complete understanding and appreciation.

Therefore, there are three essentials to the public relations program: (1) a good organization doing a good job, (2) policies which satisfy the needs of the people, and (3) an educational program which supplies the facts and explanations.

We are concerned here with a rather narrow but most important aspect of public relations in the highway field, the highway construction program. How do we pursue policies which satisfy the public? How do we sell and explain those policies?

It does not necessarily follow that highway department administrators, although they are interested in gaining and keeping the good will of the people, adopt and pursue highway construction programing policies which do gain the desired end. For they may not know what the public wants.

Or it may be that traditionally the organization has conducted its affairs in a manner which was not designed to gain and to keep good will; the organization has operated in a manner which works against the success of a public relations program.

It is not enough for the administrator to realize (with the vast changes taking place in our highway program and the vast growth in the scope of the highway program) that such an attitude is no longer tenable.

The administrator must change the thinking of the employees—if need be. He must educate them to his way. He must be assiduous in devising ways and means to make every employee understand that his policy is to satisfy and educate the people on the facts of the highway program.

I think it is necessary in a discussion such as this one to prepare the groundwork, for highway construction programing certainly has a terrific impact on a highway department's public relations. Probably more than anything else, highway construction programing is the key to highway policy. And the program has to be sold if success is to be achieved.

The people (who are the taxpayers and thus the possessors of the good will we are winning) are very interested in highway construction programing. That is where you are going to spend the money. That is where the new roads are going to be built. That is what the people are looking for. They are looking for road improvements and they want to know when their road is going to be improved. So public relations and highway construction programing begin well before the program is drawn up.

It goes without saying that the highway construction program must be a balanced one—one that can be sold with confidence. That calls for a lot of thought and consideration when the program is developed.

There have been attempts to place highway construction programing on an objective basis—or rather, an allegedly objective basis. Sufficiency ratings have been suggested and benefit-cost ratio analyses have been offered. Both suffer, among other things, from lack of acknowledgment of their political implications and lack of grass-roots interest.

I might interject here an observation that in the rural areas, people for the most part are road-minded. They take a road program seriously and they make their voices felt emphatically to their elected representatives. City people often do not concern themselves or make their views on road matters felt to the same extent or with the same emphasis as do rural people.

It probably is more important than anything else to highway construction programing to get and to keep the good will of the people. Without public support of that program, there will be no construction program. It is as simple as that.

In Washington, the state highway commission submits a biennial program for review by the Legislature. And the Legislature appropriates the entire sum of money to the highway commission on the assumption that the program is going to be followed during the following two-year period. The Legislature, of course, can appropriate money for each project and earmark it for that purpose alone. But over the years a good relationship has been built up with the people and with the members of the Legislature so that the lump sum appropriation is made. The legislator trusts the administrator.

Such a system would not long exist if the highway commission were to disregard the

wishes, desires and needs of people all over the state. As a matter of fact, it would exist only as long as it took the Legislature to meet and revise the system and to specify precisely where highway construction money was to be programmed.

The California Legislature requires that a fixed percentage of construction money be spent in each county. This may be good or it may be bad, but it does demonstrate what the Legislature can do in the way of allocating funds for construction.

It might be said that there will be no highway program unless the people are satisfied. This does not say that education cannot change the wishes of the people. It can—and that's where the third essential of the public relations campaign comes in. There must be a well thought out selling campaign to educate the public on what your ideas on highway programming are. If it is a good product, it will be sold; but if it is no good, no amount of plugging will sell it. Highway departments are public agencies, subject to the legislative and administrative bodies of state government, and they're responsible to the wishes, desires and hopes of the people. They had better be responsive as well as responsible if they want to carry out their program.

If we consciously set out to get and to keep public support, we are going to have a better highway program—one which accepts the realities of life and one which is geared to gaining and keeping the good will of the people.

Certainly the time of the administrators and his aides may be saved by proper attention to public relations activities. There are going to be difficulties, but most of them can be avoided by intelligent attitudes toward selling the highway construction program. They can be avoided by creating a reservoir of good will.

How does one go about getting this public good will and selling the highway construction program? In Washington we start with a good program—one that considers the needs, desires and hopes of all the people of the state.

One of the mysteries of life is how highway programs are arranged. This should be adequately explained.

There probably is no substitute for personal contact between highway administrators and the people. Talks are an excellent means for making these contacts. Then there is the problem of money. For there are always more requests for highways than the revenue will support. Certainly the administrator and his top aides should be well versed in the revenue picture and this picture should be made clear to the public. Speeches are one way of doing this. Newspaper articles are another. Television presentation is excellent; so are annual reports.

Too, it makes the taxpayer happy to know that the people in his employ are aware of all the intricacies of highways and highway problems. And it makes him happy to meet with the men who run the highway departments.

Certainly close touch should be kept with legislators, for they reflect the opinion of the people and they can tell you whether or not a highway program will be acceptable.

Many states have interim legislative committees which investigate highway problems and other matters. These committees are a valuable tool in public relations in that they gather grass-roots opinion and help to formulate and to sell highway construction programs to their constituencies.

State highway departments indeed are fortunate when they have such a fact-gathering, opinion-sampling arm of the legislature to run interference for them.

Of course, the press is an excellent tool for gaining the good will of the people and obtaining their support for a particular highway construction program. Everybody reads the paper or listens to the radio and these media are most effective in publicizing the various aspects of the highway construction program.

It is a wise administrator who treats the press with respect, who is available to meet with them any time, who answers their queries honestly and intelligently. In short, it's a wise administrator who makes a friend of every newspaper and radio man when possible. Without newspapers and radio and television stations available to sell the construction program, a highway department is severely handicapped.

Public hearings on construction programs are another excellent device used to inform the public and to sell them on the merits of the program. Experts should be at these meetings to speak and to explain. Do not turn these assignments over to some minor functionary who does not know all the facts. If that must be done, the meeting should be cancelled.

In summation, to be effective a public relations program must be based on three fundamentals: (a) a good organization, (b) policies designed to seek and to keep the good will of the people, and (c) a publicity or educational campaign designed to present the facts.

Discussion

Wiley.—This is certainly one field in which we have been negligent to some extent, and a subject we really need to pay more attention to. The public is entitled to know what we are doing and why it is we feel we ought to do these things, and we ought to give them the opportunity, also, to tell us what they think we should do.

R. Johnson.—I would like to speak as a user representative in this whole area; in the area, if I may say so, of the educated and intelligent public, perhaps the most important public to the highway departments. And I would like to go back to what highway departments generally do, so far as demonstrating to the public their need for revenues in order to form a highway construction program.

Essentially, this is done through a needs survey that generally produces a rather large bill for the needs on the different state highway systems. This may, or may not, bear any relationship to the type of improvement that is possible with the present funds being expended by the state.

In other words, the usual needs study when presented in this way to the public represents a very sizable increase over present revenues, and perhaps it represents a sizable bonding program. The public may not be willing to take on the whole financial burden. And suppose the legislature decides that it cannot provide the entire amount, but can provide something less than the entire amount. Admittedly, all of the desirable progress toward meeting the needs cannot be made; but an important amount of progress can be made through this provision of a lesser amount of money.

The question is: How much progress can be made with these lesser amounts of money? The answer rests on how much less than complete adequacy of the whole road system the public can live with. Only the public can decide this. But in order to decide, the public has to know what comparative adequacy it can purchase for the varying expenditures. The public also needs to know how soon it can purchase this amount of adequacy for the particular expenditure that it is willing to go along with.

This is the kind of information on the long-range programing process that the highway departments have got to be prepared to supply. And then, after the highway department has provided this information, the public, the educated public, will want to know from time to time what progress is being made toward the achievement of the standards of adequacy sought in the particular period of time.

The highway departments have got to be prepared to demonstrate progress in these terms. If the highway departments are not willing to do all of these things, then they are asking the public to buy either a complete bill of goods, or nothing at all. I think this is a crucial factor in what constitutes adequate programing in a highway department.

Wiley.—This would perhaps require that in the presentation of such information we prepare not one projected needs estimate but a number of other alternates for programs that would fall somewhat short of what we might term complete adequacy. Would that be correct?

R. Johnson.—Yes. As you know, I recommend that you read Roy Jorgensen's paper, "Can the Highway Department Survive," given out at the AASHO planning conference. Copies are available through our organization.

We do not propose to know the answers by any means, but we can certainly see the problems in this particular area. I think there is a lot of food for thought and maybe some suggestions as to where the answers can be sought in that particular paper.

Granum.—I do not disagree with the objectives that Mr. Johnson and Mr. Jorgensen have outlined, but there are one or two statements I cannot agree with.

It seems to me as incorrect to assume that these needs studies have only one objective, and that is to sell somebody on a need for more money. They are designed to be as objective as possible, to determine what the needs and the goals are. I am sure that anybody who has ever had any part in making one of these studies would be most delighted if it would show the need for less money rather than more. And sometimes they come fairly close to doing that.

I think that it is up to the engineering profession to establish the economically justified requirements for the several highway systems. And I believe we have had a good exposition of that this afternoon from Mr. Babcock.

The alternatives available to the public are often presented in these needs studies in terms of time, rather than in terms of less adequacy. You have a choice, of course, to decide whether to scale down all of the standards on all of the systems; whether to scale some systems down appreciably while keeping the standards for the most important system at the level that engineering analysis, research, and judgment tell us it should be; or whether to stretch out the programs and put up with whatever we happen to have a little longer, until we can afford to pay for improvements.

We may not be very far apart, Mr. Johnson, in what we are talking about, but I believe that we should put these studies in their proper basic engineering perspective. They are not a sales document.

R. Johnson.—I am sorry that you got that impression. I meant no such implication. I realize that these needs studies are very objective, and I did not mean to criticize them on that score at all. The only thing I wanted to point up was the usual outcome of these studies. Because we do have a large backlog of highway deficiencies, it usually turns out that a lot more revenue is required.

Burnes.—I just want to add to Mr. Granum's observation that there are really two basic objectives of needs studies. As I see it, the first one concerns revenue, which entails highway policy review, perhaps. The other is internal—a needs study formula basis for not only a long-range program, but for the annual program.