

# Traffic Engineering and Community Support

## (Cities Under 100,000)

DANIEL J. HANSON

Deputy Director for Traffic Engineering  
Department of Highways and Traffic  
District of Columbia

Data in this paper are related to obtaining community-wide support for traffic engineering programs in smaller cities, including Champaign and Peoria, Ill. (population 50,000 and 125,000, respectively) and also St. Louis County, Mo. In St. Louis County, with a population of 850,000, there were some 96 cities, towns and villages ranging in size from under 100 to the largest community of University City with a population of over 50,000.

An important element very often overlooked in the traffic engineering program is direct contact with community leaders. It is one thing to prepare a commissioner's order or traffic regulation for the mayor, city council or board of aldermen. However, it is an entirely different matter to communicate to community leaders the real intent and goals of a sound traffic engineering approach, particularly in connection with improving existing street utilization.

Basically, city officials and legislators support street improvements, worthwhile traffic engineering projects and other desirable governmental changes. However, the most prominent of our constituents will often react in violent opposition to these changes if they are not well informed in advance. In this regard, it should not be intimated that we need to conduct popularity polls on contemplated traffic improvements. On the other hand, it is highly essential that a large part of the community be well advised in advance as to the program, goals, implementation plan and anticipated results.

This job is particularly difficult to accomplish in the smaller communities. Initially, it might seem that the larger the city the farther removed from the public the traffic official becomes, and he thereby has a certain layer of insulation from the public and public opinion. On the other hand, when one is involved in a smaller city situation, he must face the day-to-day direct contact with many constituents. The smaller community probably has more traffic experts per capita than the larger metropolitan areas where the majority of people have long ago given up in disgust regarding current traffic inadequacies.

Establishing a working liaison with citizen groups, service clubs, Parent-Teachers Associations and other professional organizations in the small community is initially a rather simple task. Admittedly it is time consuming, but the ratio of benefits received increases rapidly when the average citizen is well informed about the latest parking restriction proposals, one-way street plan, new traffic signal installation, change in speed limits or other similar street utilization improvement which is being contemplated.

Nobody can become more irate than a former friendly merchant when unknown to him a sign crew installs a parking restriction directly in front of his store. Likewise, the three-hour laundry, doughnut shop or gasoline station proprietor can become hostile when one-way street signs are suddenly installed on his corner without his prior knowledge.

The installation of parking meters is probably a good example in this regard. Many merchants tolerate one and two-hour parking restrictions as long as they and their sales personnel can violate these regulations "just a little bit." However, when a plan is proposed to install meters at these same locations, many merchants are opposed

on the basis of anticipated lost business. A big selling job often has to be done, well in advance, in order to make the merchants fully realize the many advantages of increased turnover, ease of enforcement and the end result of making more parking spaces available than under a non-metered arrangement.

Personal experience indicates that this selling job is almost impossible to accomplish, after the fact. Therefore, we should take the time, in advance, to advise abutting property owners and retailers what we have in mind before we start breaking up the concrete for new parking meter posts. Sometimes a sympathetic Chamber of Commerce representative, or other similar community leader, can be found to help champion the cause for better street utilization.

The traffic engineer in the small community should be, and in fact must be, a very public-spirited citizen if he is to be truly effective. This does not mean that the traffic engineer must be a politician. However, he certainly should be well informed on all of the basic community needs, well beyond the limited scope of his responsibility in improving street utilization.

The traffic engineer does not have to be a joiner, but certainly should make himself available as a member of any official governmental speakers bureau roster. If no such roster is available the traffic engineer should seek other means of letting community groups know that he is a willing participant in their gatherings. In this regard, the traffic engineer should have available at least two or three "canned" presentations which he can deliver on short notice. The monthly speeches prepared by the American Road Builders Association are good examples of this type of "ready made" material.

Often such last minute invitations are the most productive because, first of all, you usually get a program chairman or club president off the hot seat for not having another speaker available. Second, such presentations are usually well received because you can talk about your program for better street utilization and you are not on the defensive or committed to discuss some after the fact, hot issue.

The Lions Club can be used as one example. In Peoria, the Downtown International Lions Club met every Tuesday noon at a hotel one short block from the City Hall. Over 70 percent of the 100 members attended the meeting each week. In fact, if one did not show up by 12:15 p. m. the Secretary usually called your office to see if you were sick. Serving as a last minute substitute speaker on several occasions gave the author an excellent chance to "test the wind," "float a few bombs" and otherwise obtain a rather broad indication from community leaders as to their thoughts regarding the newest traffic propositions.

This case is equally true for any service club, fraternal organization or business group. In fact, a personal service club experience has been found to lead to many direct contacts with Rotarians, Optimists, Kiwanians, Sertomans and other service groups. Belonging to one such organization can open up many other doors to community leaders which otherwise would not have been available.

A brief presentation should be emphasized. It is far better to come back three times for 20-minute presentations than to give an audience a single one-hour dose once a year. Visual aids, including charts and color slides, are most helpful in presenting your traffic engineering story to community leaders.

Visual aids probably offer the best approach toward providing ready made programs before groups, especially on short notice. A collection of 2 by 2-in. colored slides can make possible a ready reference for a number of different type talks on a varied range of subjects. These slides can even be grouped according to categories such as school programs, safety organizations, and women's groups in order to provide a program of special interest to the group involved. The collection of slides in St. Louis County numbered several hundred and even made it possible to send out more than one traffic disciple, simultaneously.

Copies of annual reports of the department's activities are an excellent door opener as far as establishing community support is concerned. In this respect, a recent newspaper supplement insert by West Palm Beach, Fla., is a good example of this type of approach. This tabloid not only told what the city had done in the last year but also indicated many of the proposed accomplishments for the future. Peoria prepares a similar newspaper supplement once a year.

Another example is the Annual Report from the St. Louis County Division of Traffic. There are many more similar annual reports which are equally well received by community leaders. Many traffic officials think such a report is totally unnecessary and exclaim "I just don't have the time to prepare it," however, in this case the time is well spent.

Brief documentary evidence of a before and after one-way street operation, parking prohibition, street improvement or traffic signal project are helpful tools in keeping the citizen leaders well informed. While this takes time and effort, many engineers have encountered the situation where numerous public hearings, delays, referral back to committees and other obstacles in their paths held up a most worthwhile street utilization project for months or even years. A little better line of communication with community leaders might help turn plans into progress.

As a rule of thumb, the traffic engineer should spend somewhere between 10 and 25 percent of his time in the small city dealing with community leaders and other official groups. These contacts could take many forms, but should be of such a substantial nature that the community is well informed at all times of the latest street utilization improvement projects.

Another excellent method of telling the traffic engineering story is publication of special reports dealing with bond issue proposals, projects listed in long-range public works programs and other major arterial street utilization projects. One lesson to be learned in this respect is not to attempt to include too much or too many items in any single package.

As an example, in March 1964 a 12 proposition \$104,000,000 bond issue program was proposed in St. Louis County. Although the majority of propositions received well over a 50 percent favorable vote, a two-thirds majority was required for passage of each item.

Shortly thereafter, a special citizens emergency bond issue committee was appointed to review all of these issues before resubmittal to the voters. In their wisdom, it was agreed that only three proposals should be included at a special bond issue election which was held in June 1965. These three items totaled slightly in excess of \$40,000,000 and subsequently were all approved by well over the required two-thirds majority.

The success of this approach was obviously due to a good working relationship between community leaders and county officials. It should be pointed out that two of the three successful proposals related to improving the most heavily traveled arterial roads, bridges and intersections in St. Louis County, including some 20 separate projects and completion of an inner-belt expressway.

The citizens emergency bond issue committee, consisting of prominent community officials, was a real working group and was certainly instrumental in the successfulness of this effort. Flyers, maps, tax explanation sheets, postcards, business letter postscripts, suggested personal letter and telephone call plans, a well-prepared question and answer sheet, and other literature were most useful in this campaign.

Some of the soundest traffic engineering proposals very often gather dust on a shelf. This is many times due to a lack of understanding and appreciation of the merits of the proposal on the part of the general public. It is, therefore, essential that motorists and citizens alike be kept well informed regarding proposed traffic changes.

Any suggested improvement and alterations in street utilization, traffic regulations and control devices should be well publicized in all forms of public media. Newspaper items, radio coverage, and television appearances all form essential elements in a broad public information and education program. The traffic official needs not only financial support, but also public support in order to transform ideas into reality.

Many of the traffic proposals will be involved enough to dictate the preparation of sketches, other documents and visual aids. A short summary of pertinent statistical data is very helpful and when presented graphically can be very convincing. On the other hand, a long recitation of numbers and more numbers can turn an otherwise good story into a deadly tale. Citizens should certainly not be bored with massive presentations of statistics. However, use of a few well chosen facts and figures will always make for an improved and more interesting presentation.

The following summary is a typical list of public appearances which might be required on the part of a traffic engineer in a small community in a single year.

Meetings with municipal officials	25
Safety organizations and traffic committees	16
Improvement associations and civic groups	12
Radio and television programs	10
Religious, business and women's groups	9
School programs	8
Total	<u>80</u>

This schedule is merely an example; certainly different circumstances in any given community might dictate a variation in this list. However, if the traffic engineer in the small city is making less than one public appearance per week, he should be strongly urged to take another look at his public relations program.

#### CONCLUSION

A willingness to appear before citizen groups and community leaders can, per man-hour spent, be the best investment in time a traffic engineer can make. Annual reports, extensive use of all forms of public media, visual aids, presentations before groups and other means of contact with the community are truly essential ingredients in improving street utilization through traffic engineering techniques.