

Community Support for Traffic Engineering (Cities Over 100,000)

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Every treatise or textbook on traffic engineering stresses the importance of obtaining public understanding and support for traffic engineering activities. It seems to go without saying that this is necessary, but there appears to be a dearth of literature specifically on how this is to be accomplished.

Part of the problem seems to be that obtaining community support is more an art than a science. There are no yardsticks for measuring the success that can be made. One can only recall whether a particular project or total program has been a success or a failure and evaluate whether community support or the lack of it was a contributing factor. One may also consider what specific steps were taken to obtain support and evaluate this relative success.

Of necessity, therefore, this will be a rather personal report based on what was done and, human memory being what it is, mostly describing only the successes.

All the actions described were undertaken from 1955 to 1963 in New Haven, Conn. New Haven is a city of 150,000 population, the center of the metropolitan area of about 350,000. Subsequently, the author moved to Boston, an area more than 5 times as large. My present position offers little opportunity to become involved with direct operational traffic engineering activities, but the general observation can be made that the larger the city, the more formalized the relationships with community support groups and the more difficult they are to establish.

In New Haven, the institution of widespread traffic engineering techniques began with the creation of a Department of Traffic and Parking in 1955. This event occurred during the tenure of Mayor Richard C. Lee, who came from a public relations background and understood the need for community support of all successful public actions. With this kind of leadership, it was possible to learn the techniques of deriving support for traffic engineering endeavors.

Before describing some of the activities undertaken, it might be well to state the basic conclusions as to what are the ingredients of achieving community support. Four areas of activity can be identified, any one of which may be essential and certainly helpful. All of them together can help guarantee success.

1. Provide specific groups and the general public with sufficient information in advance of major traffic activities so that they will understand what is happening and what is expected of them in the operation of the system.
2. Provide sufficient information to specific groups and the general public as to why certain traffic changes are being made so that they will understand and support the changes.
3. Consult in advance with specific groups on specific improvements to seek their views and knowledge and to gain their support by virtue of their participation.
4. Use the services available from specific groups in collecting and analyzing data and results and in otherwise participating in such direct fashion that they are part of the program from inception to execution.

As one looks about a city to find specific groups which can lend community support one finds they exist in a great variety of size, strength, objective, interest and formality of organization. No one group is the same as another and each must be approached in terms of its individuality. The discussion which follows identifies the kinds of groups and the kinds of interplay undertaken with them in New Haven.

CITIZEN'S ACTION COMMISSION

Early in his administration, Mr. Lee saw the need for a specific organization of community leaders who could be rallied to support his programs. He sought to find the leaders who could organize a large group of 300 persons involved in banking, retailing, industry, law, education and civic organizations. This group was organized in a highly formalized structure with an executive director and with various committees, one of which was to deal with traffic and transportation. The Commission was given no legal powers or authority as such, but through its executive committee and its several working committees it was to give the Mayor and administrative staff its guidance, views, and public support where justified. For several years, it was frequently consulted in respect to the overall plans for improvement of the city. Major plans for freeway location, revisions to the city street system, traffic directional and operational control changes, and solutions to the off-street parking problem were reviewed in detail. The net result was their overall support of the program and the good will engendered with them personally and with other organizations with which they were associated.

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

New Haven had an active Chamber of Commerce which was interested in all things affecting business activity and the development of the city. Its members had their own major points of desired improvements, of which traffic and parking were far from the least. A continuing series of meetings was conducted to review in detail the street changes to be made in the central business area and the off-street parking program. Wherever possible, their ideas and plans were integrated into the plans of the city. Their own media of expression through their house organ and formal meetings were used to disseminate information on plans and projects. Certain very specific activities were undertaken.

1. Before 1955, the Chamber had instituted a stamp validation plan for retail subsidization of off-street parking. The city participated in this activity. The Chamber was the clearinghouse for validated stamps and provided its own staff services in clearing payments and in checking trends and use of the program. Cooperation with the Chamber virtually guaranteed support of the off-street parking program and, due to the members' knowledge of this program, engendered their support of necessary curb parking restrictions which they might otherwise have found objectionable.

2. A major effort conducted with the Chamber was a complete revision of the one-way traffic operations of the central area streets in conjunction with the opening of the new central freeway distributor. This plan was worked out carefully block by block. There was one meeting at which one retail merchant insisted that a certain street scheduled to be operated one-way must be kept two-way for convenience of access and must have curb parking on both sides for the convenience of customers. The width of the street and the traffic volumes made these requirements practically impossible. When he was asked directly how he proposed the traffic engineer make the system work under those conditions, he threw up his hands and said, "How should I know, that's your problem. You're the traffic engineer around here." It almost goes without saying that this disclosure of his attitude and the members' knowledge of the problem prevented this specific objector from having an adverse influence on the plan. As a further illustration of how far detailed work of this nature can go, at the last minute it was agreed that a street which the traffic engineer had scheduled for reconversion from one-way to two-way movement would be left one-way because it was the opinion of the Chamber officials that it could not operate as a two-way street.

3. As a followup to the Chamber's participation in planning the major one-way street change, the traffic engineer carried out a difficult promise and assignment which further showed the cooperative nature of the enterprise. He undertook to obtain access to state sales tax data of the merchants throughout the central area affected by the one-way plan. A before-and-after study of sales tax receipts related to general business activity was prepared and presented to the Chamber. Its findings were sufficient proof to justify continued support of the plan as it had been installed.

PARENT TEACHERS ASSOCIATION

The Parent Teachers Associations of any city can be a help or a hindrance to good traffic engineering in the residential areas. They vary in scope and ability from school district to school district, but there is no question of their deep concern for traffic safety activities in the vicinity of the schools. To establish proper contact with each group, the traffic engineer undertook a series of appearances at PTA meetings as a scheduled speaker. These appearances provided the opportunity to describe the objectives of the traffic engineer's program. They also resulted in receipt of any number of complaints and suggestions on the spot during question and answer periods. After a clear picture of the interests of these groups was achieved, a project was conceived in which they could participate. It had become evident to the traffic engineer that he had inadequate knowledge of the placement of signs and markings which already existed throughout the residential areas. It was equally obvious that it would take quite some time to gather this information with a limited staff. Accordingly, it was proposed that the entire PTA structure organize itself into a data collection force for the inventory of signs and markings throughout the residential areas of the city. The traffic engineer's office prepared all necessary documents, maps and forms, conducted several instructional and organizational meetings, and then turned it over to the PTA groups which employed well over 200 members on the project. Within one week, the entire endeavor was completed and returned to the traffic engineer's office for analysis and recording. It was found that due to the inexperience of the recorders, many data were inaccurate and unusable, although major parts of it could be and were salvaged. It was admitted in the traffic engineer's office and among the PTA leadership it had not been as successful as hoped as a data gathering procedure, but nevertheless, it had succeeded in demonstrating to the membership the areas in which they could participate and demonstrated their willingness to do so.

A search was made for further participation, frankly aimed at the purpose of minimizing unwarranted complaints and requests for increasing numbers of protective devices in the form of crosswalks, school-crossing guards and school signs. The traffic engineer's office established a more formal process with the aid of the Education Department. Under the new process, the traffic engineer prepared specific maps and a write-up of the safety devices and provisions to be maintained and in full operation prior to the beginning of every school year. These were distributed to special PTA meetings held a month before school opening. With these in hand, parents had the opportunity to understand the overall school safety program and to respond wherever they felt it could be bettered, but in any event, they were assured their problems were not being overlooked.

BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA

The Boy Scouts had established in New Haven a participation in government activity. This took the form of troopers occupying various public seats for a full day, one day each year, in a quasi-execution of the governmental functions. This program was entered into enthusiastically by the traffic engineer's department and led to discussions of possible further participation. There came a time when it had been decided to install a major program of towing illegally parked vehicles in the peak traffic hours. While a number of devices to inform the public of the program and its purposes were employed, one of the most significant and useful was a courtesy tag operation conducted under the auspices of the Boy Scouts. For a full week, prior to the commencement of enforcement, Boy Scouts from all troops of the city, totaling over 100, patrolled peak-hour restricted areas and tagged all vehicles with a special courtesy ticket prepared for the purpose. The ticket resembled a parking ticket in all respects, except it bore no fine and no towing liability but instead, courteously explained its purpose and the purpose of the regulation. It is felt that this undertaking was a major factor in general public acceptance of what can often be one of the most difficult traffic improvements to institute in a city. It went further in that it won the interest of a sizable number of boys for the traffic improvement program, which interest and enthusiasm they could communicate to their fellows and their parents.

YALE UNIVERSITY

Yale University is a very large and very critically located institution. Its proximity to the central business area makes all of its traffic and all of the general city traffic intermingle in such a way that they are a problem to each other. Relationships in regard to traffic were not the only problems, however, therefore, the Mayor established a strong and continuing relationship with the University. In the traffic field, this in turn took the form of continuous conferences on the plans and programs of the city. It was a formal relationship which enabled both parties to find mutual solutions to their problems. A specific matter of great importance was University agreement to refuse release from University obligations of any students with outstanding unpaid parking violation tickets. This one action alone helped keep parking spaces cleared as required by regulation and helped minimize animosity between residents of the city and students of the University.

TRANSIT COMPANY

Mass transit is provided by a private company. Under these circumstances, they are somewhat at the mercy of public actions by the public agencies. However, in 1951, they had shown their strength by joining forces with the Chamber of Commerce and the local newspaper to completely destroy a one-way traffic operation system which had been installed and which, in their opinion, was detrimental to their transit operations. To avoid any recurrence of this, all plans for street changes which would affect the transit company were reviewed thoroughly with company personnel. Changes in plans were made when it was clear that they would in fact be detrimental to transit operations. Their desires for the location of bus stops, based on their own knowledge of their own operation, were accepted wherever possible. They were treated, rightfully, as an integral portion of the city's traffic and transportation system.

TAXI CAB ASSOCIATION

It has been said that taxi cab drivers are the best ambassadors of good or ill will that a city may have. Certainly, they have attitudes toward all things happening in the city and very often express them quite freely to passengers. In acknowledgment of this, a series of meetings was set up with the Taxi Cab Association for full disclosure to the drivers of the plans of the city in general and specifically in traffic improvements. Drivers were invited to express views on the adequacy of traffic routings and specifically, on the location of taxi loading zones in relation to the city's activities. In return, although not all agreed in some of the actions of the city, they were well informed both for the benefit of their own operation and in answering the queries of passengers.

FILLING STATION OPERATORS

No organization of filling station operators was found or created. It was noted, however, that they are considered major information sources by drivers. Accordingly, a program was instituted of making available, on request, a large-scale map of the basic one-way street patterns which could be used for easy reference in answering questions of drivers. This was found to eliminate caustic or derogatory remarks concerning the system by persons whose only real problem was a lack of understanding.

THE PARKING PUBLIC

An important segment of the traveling public which needs to know and understand the parking program is the driver when he is about to park his vehicle. Drivers are a very difficult public to reach in respect to curb parking and generally, except for the tow zone activity, little can be done with them in respect to street parking. However, it is feasible to establish contact and to inform them of off-street program developments. One of the methods devised was the institution of planned opening ceremonies and procedures whenever a new major public facility was created. All forms of media were utilized to inform the public of a new facility and the entire public was invited to

use the facility free for some limited time period after opening. In addition, specific maps showing approach routes to the facility were distributed to all users, and going further, in publicly owned facilities which became crowded, leaflets were distributed directing those who were turned away to the best routes to reach other facilities. By these means the public came to understand the parking layout and to appreciate the efforts being made to cover their parking needs.

NEIGHBORHOOD GROUPS

Whenever specific actions which will affect a defined neighborhood are to be undertaken, it is possible to establish direct contact. One example involved a short street, one block in length, which was customarily used by through traffic to switch from one artery to another because it enabled drivers to avoid a signalized intersection. There was no traffic capacity or movement hindrance at the signalized intersection that required this movement. It was nothing more than a hazard and a nuisance to the residents of the street. Studies demonstrated that installation of one-way movement on the residential street opposing the flow of the short-cut traffic would solve the problem. It was evident, however, that such one-way operation would provide some inconvenience to the residents of the street. It was quite possible they would fail to understand its purpose and react against it. Accordingly, before installation of the system, notification leaflets were distributed to all residents in the affected area describing the purpose, when it was to go into effect and the alternate routes they could use to and from their places of residence. In addition, an opportunity to express opinion on the plan was given. While all did not agree with the plan, the great majority did, and it was instituted and was successful.

USE OF THE MEDIA

The possibility always exists that news media, especially newspapers, may be antagonistic to any action a particular political administration may take. To preclude this, the stories sent New Haven's local media were well-documented "straight news" announcements. As a result, coverage was achieved that was without bias or prejudice.

In addition, from time to time, the television stations furnished public service time in which major programs were conducted. One such contribution was an attempt to conduct an inexpensive origin-destination survey by television appearance. In this attempt, questionnaire postcards are mailed to all dwelling units in the metropolitan area with a request that they tune in to a particular television program which would describe the purpose of the survey, the use of the forms and how to fill them out. The television program itself came off well and it was evidently successful. Unfortunately, poor timing in the distribution of the postcards resulted in some persons receiving them too long prior to the TV appearance and some did not receive them until after the TV appearance. This fact largely negated the basic purpose.

GENERAL PUBLIC

All traffic improvements, after all, in the long run affect the traveling public as a general group. There is no opportunity to achieve reciprocal contact as such. It did seem to be an obligation, however, to provide the public with the most information possible. Accordingly, all major traffic changes which affected the flow on the street were accompanied immediately prior to and during the change with major distribution of leaflets describing the change and the new pattern. These were distributed to drivers traversing the streets to be affected. Depending on the size of change, the quantity of leaflets varied from 5000 to 50,000. On occasion, as a further effort, necessary major changes in patterns were accompanied by placing oversize temporary signs to supplement standard signing and signaling. These signs gave instructions indicating the direction of new one-way streets, best routes to well-known destinations and otherwise were used as an assist in becoming acquainted with the system during the initial period after installation. Generally, all of the above might be summarized in the slogan which was adopted and appeared on all printed information used in this regard "HELP US

HELP YOU"; a little corny perhaps but it describes the spirit and seemed to be accepted in the spirit it was offered.

CONCLUSIONS

It might be said that obtaining community support for traffic engineering lies in multitude of endeavors all intended to humanize the effort and bring it into proper focus for the affected groups and persons. Too often decisions which come out of local government appear arbitrary and bureaucratic to one that has not studied the problems and devised solutions that sometimes appear to make no sense at all. Lack of information is perhaps the greatest generator of opposition to many public actions.

Addendum

EXAMPLE OF PUBLIC TRAFFIC NOTICE TO RESIDENTS



CITY AND COUNTY OF DENVER

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS

July 10, 1964

TRAFFIC ENGINEERING
CITY AND COUNTY
BUILDING
DENVER 1, COLORADO

Dear Broadway Residents and Businessmen:

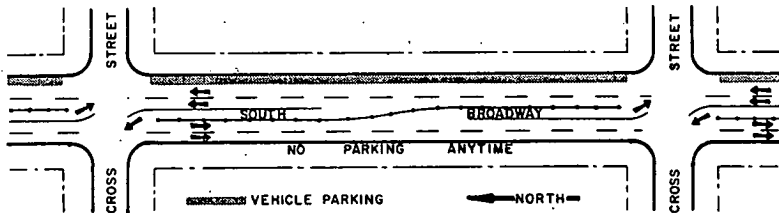
Traffic volumes on Broadway between Mississippi Avenue and Bayaud Avenue have continued to increase, and are now well over 20,000 vehicles per day. Among these 20,000 vehicles are many which will be making left turn maneuvers. Under the present traffic design on Broadway in this area, these left turn maneuvers are either prohibited at signalized intersections or must be made from through traffic lanes. The congestion and accident hazard involved in maneuvers of this type are such that we must seek a remedy.

It is therefore planned to prohibit parking on the west side of Broadway between Cedar Avenue and Virginia Avenue. This will provide the necessary space to install left turn lanes on Broadway at all of the intersections between Eyers Place and Virginia.

Also included in this project is a re-design of the channelization as it now exists between Virginia Avenue and Mississippi Avenue. Some additional "no parking" regulations may be required, but this will not be extensive.

We believe you will find that this makes Broadway a safer and easier street on which to drive as it provides both a refuge for left turning vehicles and for pedestrians who might find themselves caught between platoons of traffic in the middle of the street.

The sketch below shows a typical block of Broadway as it will look under the new design. If you have any questions concerning this project, please contact me or Assistant Traffic Engineer Dick Thomas at 297-2763.



Sincerely,
John A. Bruce
John A. Bruce
Traffic Engineer