

Improving Roads by Improving Communication:

How to “Sell” A Road Improvement Program to the Voters

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INTRODUCTION

Townpeople sometimes turn down bond issues, budgets, and larger projects because, they say, “it’s more than the town can afford.” Chances are, however, that the taxpayers simply were not “sold” on the importance of the project to them and to the town. No one really explained the full story.

To “sell” voters on the need for the program, selectmen and road commissioners have to use better communication techniques. This paper outlines steps local leaders can take to improve their communication from the beginning of a road improvement plan to the time of budget making and voter approval. The same principles can be applied to other projects as well. Better communication is the key to public works and community progress.

OVERCOMING MISUNDERSTANDING

Most people do not understand the techniques of road building and maintenance. Let’s face it, even many selectmen don’t understand the road commissioner’s job. Local expenditures for roads are second only to those for education in most Vermont towns, yet most people don’t give roads a second look.

“If you don’t speak for yourself someone else will speak for you.”

—Anonymous

The key to overcoming this lack of understanding is first to collect complete and reliable information and then present it persuasively. If local officials have reliable, quality informa-

tion about town roads and present that information in a way that “hits home;” people would better understand the need for the money to do the job.

KNOW THE SUBJECT

If local officials are uncertain about the benefits of a road improvement plan to the town and how it works, they will not be able to convince others of its importance. If they are uncertain of facts and figures about town roads, they will not be able to argue for needed funds. It is important to know the subject.

Road foremen, public works directors and others do know a lot about town roads, some like the back of their hands. They know the history of their roads and they know the problem spots. But all that information can’t be told to everyone in a short time so that they understand it. The road improvement plan displays all the facts and figures for everyone to see. With that information, selectmen can make informed decisions and recommendations. The townspeople can then see the whole project. The road improvement plan shows that local officials have done their homework. As a result, what they propose is more believable.

THE ROAD IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The goal of a road improvement plan is to improve town roads and to keep costs down by using good management practices. The plan calls for inventorying the deficiencies in the road system, documenting the information, and translating it into the dollars, people and equipment needed. The information is written in a form that is understandable to others. The final report includes a plan for correcting the road problems in a reasonable time.

There are many road improvement

systems, from sophisticated computer models to simple inventories using index cards. The important thing is to use a system that suits the town and one which collects the information needed to make good decisions about managing roads more efficiently. A town cannot make good decisions without good information.

What Do We Have?

The first step is to inventory the road system. At a minimum, a town should know the length and width of its roads, their type (paved, sealed, gravel) and their class (1, 2, 3 or 4), and the location and size of culverts.

The inventory includes notations about the condition of each item. For example, is a road failing or near failure? What’s causing the failure? Where are the recurring mud problems? Do the ditches need cleaning? Are culverts open? Have they failed? Are they large enough? Is the pavement cracking, rutting, shoving, or the like?

It is helpful to take pictures of road conditions and particular problem areas. These will be useful when explaining the problems to others.

Other items to consider are width of right of way, depth of pavement, depth and type of base, history of resurfacing, adequacy of shoulders, curbs and sidewalks, riding quality, signs, bridges, catch basins, brush, trees, slopes, grades, erosion factors, problem areas, the locations of rock walls, streams, ponds, and wells and more. It is also helpful to know the type and volume of traffic on each road. More information means better decisions. It is best to start out slowly the first year and build up information each year thereafter. Keeping good records is important throughout.

How Can It Be Fixed?

Once a town knows what it has, its condition, and some idea of what is causing the problems, local officials can

decide how to correct them. There are many alternatives. The road management plan helps in making the best decisions and in explaining the decisions to others. Local officials could anticipate such questions as:

- Why not retreatment instead of tearing up an entire section, recycling the material and returning it to gravel?
- Will this proposed road improvement support the volume and weight of traffic using this road?
- Why is the town working only on ditches and culverts?

How Much Will It Cost?

To devise a budget that is understandable to others, it is important to consider:

- the costs of the various alternatives,
- how each alternative would be expected to perform, and
- the anticipated costs of an ongoing maintenance schedule.

The problems identified earlier help to justify figures. It will make sense to others that the identified needs are real and cannot be ignored. Local officials have done their homework. They can explain to others that:

- overlaying a road having poor base material or poor drainage is a waste of money. Correcting the underlying problem first and resurfacing at a later time is cost effective in the long run.
- the cost of delaying a road improvement may be doubled in two years if nothing is done now.
- pavement recycling, base stabilization, ditch and culvert cleaning are often more cost efficient than sealing or paving under most conditions.

under certain traffic conditions, a doubly expensive paved road may last three times longer than a sealed road.

What Should We Do First?

Knowing the problems and deciding on alternative remedies and their costs leads to prioritizing determining when to make the improvements. Most plans call for a program of from six to ten years. Projecting project-by-project costs over that period tells everyone when certain roads will be improved. With this information, local officials can explain:

- Why Elm Street was improved before Maple Avenue. It may be that if Elm Street is not repaved this year, it will degenerate quickly thereafter, while Maple Avenue can wait one more year.
- If a paved road has failed, it may be wiser to ignore it while other streets are "saved." After all, the road requires complete rehabilitation anyway.

Other Information

Additional information would be helpful in developing the road improvement plan and in anticipating questions from others:

- How does this road improvement plan fit into the larger plan for the town?
- Have I tried to keep the planning commission informed of this project? police? schools? others?
- What is the experience of other towns which have gone through this process?
- What is my own town's history of budgets and improvement costs?
- What does gravel cost now, compared to 5 or 10 years ago? Other materials?
- What is the growth trend of our community? Are we experiencing slow growth or fast growth? Does it mean increased traffic? Heavier trucks on our roads?

"With public opinion on its side, nothing can fail. With public opinion against it, nothing can succeed."

-- Abraham Lincoln

Benefits Of A Road Improvement Plan
People will wonder why the town went to the trouble of inventorying, rating, prioritizing and budgeting over a seven year period. Local officials might tell them that the program:

- is useful in planning budgets;
- lets us communicate more knowledgeably with the public;
- helps to defend budget needs and priorities;
- helps point out the importance of adequate funding for roads;
- increases everyone's knowledge of present road conditions and future conditions;
- helps to explain why one road was selected over another for improvement;
- means money savings because a town gets the most for its dollar;
- helps to avoid crisis activity because a town can anticipate needs;
- gives the town greater confidence it is doing the right thing.
- Besides, the roads will be in better overall condition.

"If you're caught lying you have had it and so has your project."

-- Anonymous

BELIEVE IN WHAT YOU'RE DOING

If a spokesperson believes in the importance of his project, he is more likely to have people believe in him. If they believe in him, they will listen to what he has to say. Giving out facts and figures alone may not be convincing. A spokesperson for a road improvement program should become convinced himself about the importance of the plan. When talking to others, he may then want to emphasize:

- the importance of roads to the economy and to the general public;
- that roads are an expensive investment that need constant care;
- that new techniques for building and maintaining roads help us to do the job better and more cheaply;
- that the budget for training local road people is money well spent because a knowledgeable employee is more productive;
- how the road improvement plan fits into the overall goals and objectives of the town.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Generally, people will not become involved until something affects them. To get them interested, town officials may have to appeal to a person's self interest. They should use words and symbols they understand, targeting specific messages to particular audiences. For example:

- to business people, stress the importance of good roads to area commerce;
- to parents and teachers, highlight safety aspects;
- to car owners, mention reduced auto maintenance costs;
- to taxpayers, emphasize long-term dollar benefits.

"Whether the stone hits the

pitcher or the pitcher hits the stone, it's going to be bad for the pitcher."

—Man of LaMancha

OVERLOOKED OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNICATION

The goal of communicating is to convince voters that the road improvement plan is needed and makes good sense for the town. When communicating, four opportunities are often overlooked by towns:

Internal Communications

Sometimes we overlook the people closest to us — our colleagues in local government. If all town officers and employees could give complete, accurate answers or refer friends, neighbors and others to the right source, the job would be much easier. Town officials should consider asking the following people for their input, keeping them informed of decisions and explaining the final proposal:

- planning board members
- zoning board members
- school board members
- school bus drivers
- public works personnel
- police
- firemen
- rescue squad personnel
- other town employees and elected officials
- candidates for local office
- newly elected officials

"The natural thing is competition; the unnatural thing is cooperation."

-- A public works official

Intergovernmental Communication

It would be a courtesy, if nothing else, to notify neighboring towns about the road improvement plan. It may be important where certain connecting roads are concerned. In addition, the Regional Planning Commission and the District Transportation Administrators should at least be informed that a plan is underway.

Everyday Public Relations

All elected and appointed town

employees are representatives for the entire town whenever they deal with a citizen or out-of-town visitor. It means that they can influence people's opinions about the entire government. The impressions they make should be good impressions — the kind that win friends and create public support for what town government is trying to accomplish. The following checklist may be helpful:

- Small, simple courtesies to citizens can have longlasting positive effects.
- Be alert to policies that are difficult to enforce or that create additional problems.
- Maintain equipment, grounds and buildings in good condition.
- Schedule work at times that will inconvenience the smallest number of persons.
- Warn people before service is to be interrupted or delayed.
- Provide the best service possible.
- Look constantly for ways to improve service and to reduce costs.
- Be sure employees take advantage of training and know how to do their jobs.
- Employees should know the

procedure for handling complaints and conflicts.

- Respond to taxpayers' questions promptly, courteously, clearly and accurately.
- Caution employees not to take criticism from citizens personally.
- Train employees in proper telephone procedures and other public relations skills.
- See that employees avoid taking authorized breaks in public areas.
- Remind town personnel of the importance of a smile and saying "thank you."

Listening

Listening is an important skill for anyone who must be responsive to the public. Picking up street talk or "keeping your ear to the ground" is helpful. Citizen surveys can be effective. Truly hearing what others have to say is hard work and requires a concerted effort. Town officials should ask themselves: Do I honestly believe that listening to what citizens are saying is as important as what I am telling them?

"To catch a mouse make a noise like a cheese."

—Lewis Kornberg

COMMUNICATION METHODS

There are three ways to cause others to do things: pressure them to do it, pay them to do it, or persuade them to do it. Public relations is about persuasion — planned efforts to influence opinions. In this case, town officials want taxpayers to support the road improvement plan.

There are many ways to get the message across. Some are more effective than others. Those listed here may not be feasible for a smaller community but might work well in a larger city. Each method has worked for

communities at one time or another.

The Visual

Talk is necessary but visual aids help to tell the story. They give a feeling for what's there better than words do.

- Take some good photographs and make them into prints and slides.
- Create a good town map and a relief model.
- Graphs and illustrations can be effective to emphasize certain points.
- Display photos on poster boards around town.
- Films tell of other communities' experiences.
- Arrange for a school bus for selectmen, school board members and others to tour town roads, bridges and problem areas.
- Photo stories in newspapers.
- Have exhibits on display at special events or in lobbies of the bank, school or other place where there is people traffic.

"People retain 70% of what they see and 10% of what they hear." — Anonymous

The Spoken Word

- Make all presentations brief, visual and exciting.
- Create a 20minute presentation using color slides and be prepared to answer questions.
- Service clubs and groups often actively look for speakers.
- Don't forget the schools.
- Hold neighborhood meetings in people's homes.
- Spice up public hearings with good visual aids.

- Hold a press conference the press likes to be kept informed. If you want to advance a project, stir it up. Those who are successful get lots of ink.
- Have face-to-face, one-on-one discussions, especially with community opinion leaders.
- Create a "canned" slide-tape presentation which could be shown by anyone.
- Selected telephone calls during the project and a get-out-the-vote effort near meeting time.

"Have something to say and say it well."

— A Speech Professor

The Written Word

- Paid advertisements.
- Feature stories in newspapers.
- Brochures can sell facts consistently.
- Endorsements by individuals or groups.
- Direct mailing can be expensive but effective.
- Letters to the editor from supporters.
- Annual reports.
- Progress reports.
- Inserts in utility bills or tax bills.

Other Opportunities

- Radio/television appearances.
- Newspaper feature story.
- Notices in public places, bulletin boards.
- Public "thank you" message.
- Don't be afraid to let others take the credit. It helps goodwill. The important thing is to get the job done.

CONCLUSION

Townpeople will support a special project such as a road improvement plan if they know the facts and if the facts are presented persuasively. The spokespeople have to know the subject, know the audience, and use a variety of communication techniques.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

"Better Communication: The Key to Public Works Progress." American Public Works Association, 1984.

'tocal Public Relations in Transportation Matters.' Institute of Transportation Engineers.

"Public Relations in Local Government." International City Management Association.

"Public Support," National Association of County Engineers, Action Guide Series, Volume IX, 1972.

"Plans get you into things but you got to work your way out." Will Rogers