

## Chapter 5 – Communication Plan

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It is important to the success of any new preservation program that the county engineer develop an effective sound communication plan prior to embarking on the effort. The communication plan's primary goal should be to assist the county engineer by providing them with the tools, methods, and information they need so that they can present and discuss technical and non-technical information with the County Board, key stakeholders and members of the public.

Communication lessons learned from work by the five pilot counties included:

- Establish a solid database of credible information concerning existing conditions and future needs;
- Use analysis and gap tools to present a clear, concise picture of current conditions;
- Be rigorous with respect to data analysis assumptions and accuracy of findings;
- Work with elected officials and key stakeholders early in the process to connect their interests and concerns with preservation needs;
- Provide information that is tailored to the audience, in measured amounts, and at a pace that permits data to be understood;
- For elected leaders, key stakeholders and the public, present preservation needs and solutions in non-engineering terms; and generously use local pictures, and understandable graphics “to tell the story.”
- Gain trust by using a transparent process that demonstrates responsiveness to public concerns; and
- Leave no questions unanswered.

### Identifying Communications Needs

Before developing a communications plan, the county engineer should first consider the communications needs and protocols of their County Board. The following set of questions is proposed to help define Board expectations so the county engineer can plan the appropriate process for the new preservation program.

- Step 1: Consider the range of potential outcomes and impacts to determine the approvals that may be required to implement the preservation program.
  - Who could be impacted by the preservation program?

- Does the preservation program represent a significant shift in County policy or practices?
- Consider both positive and negative impacts.
- Consider both direct and indirect impacts.
- Step 2: Determine who should be consulted regarding the decision-making process for developing and/or approving the preservation program?
  - Elected or appointed officials
  - Key managers: County Administrator, Public Works Director, etc.
  - County experts: technical, legal, communications, etc.
- Step 3: Consider following the expectations identified in Step 2, whether an internal or external decision-making process should be followed.
  - *Internal Decision-Making Process:* Preservation program can be approved following internal County protocols, including staff, Highway Committee and Board approvals, as necessary.
  - *External Decision-Making Process:* County Board members or staff will seek public input to shape the development of the preservation program. Public input could involve a range of activities from invitation-only discussions with key stakeholders, to public meetings that seek to gain input from a broad variety of community members.
- Step 4: Develop a communications plan to support both the decision-making process and the preservation program.

## **Developing a Communications Plan**

The section below provides guidance on preparing a communications plan to support the preservation program. The communications plan can be as simple or as complex as needed, from a few pages to a multi-chapter document, developed with support from County departments.

The communications plan should consider and address the following critical components:

- What are elected officials understanding of the issues?
- What factors are important to them in resource allocation and prioritization?
- What are the known or anticipated concerns of your elected officials?
- What are the known or anticipated concerns of your community members?
- Which preservation strategies will the Board be willing to consider?

- What key elements of the preservation program need to be communicated?
- Who should receive information about the preservation program? (i.e., audiences)
- What questions would a key stakeholder or audience have about the preservation program?
- How should you respond to anticipated questions about the preservation program? (i.e., key messages)
- How to tell the county's preservation story with technical data?

### Outline of Key Communication Plan Components

The following outline identifies key components of a communications plan that the county engineer should consider prior to establishing his or her communication process.

1. **Project Background:** Provide background and context for the preservation program. Identify key facts about the preservation program that will need to be communicated.
2. **Communications Plan Context:** Identify any broader goals or plans approved by the Board that should shape the communications plan for the preservation program.
3. **Communication Plan Goals:** Identify one to three specific communications goals. Communications goals should be narrowly selected to provide structure for future decisions about key audiences, messages and selected communications tools.

*Example of Communications Goals:*

- i. Create a transparent decision-making process;
  - ii. Proactively solicit input from stakeholders;
  - iii. Actively listen and be responsive to public input about the project;
  - iv. Engage residents, businesses, and members of the public at their convenience;
  - v. Involve any other affected or interested parties;
  - vi. Provide meaningful, reliable and timely information early and continuously to share project progress;
  - vii. Make project information easily accessible and understandable for stakeholders;
  - viii. Coordinate communications among project team members and other county and city staff, as appropriate to enable everyone to “speak with one voice.”
4. **Key Messages:** Define key messages and provide important information about the preservation program and answer anticipated questions. Messages should be succinct and easily remembered.

*Components of a Preservation Program that May Require a Message:*

- i. Pavement Preservation: What is it, what are the benefits?
  - ii. Existence of a Funding Gap
    - a. Current road conditions and maintenance policies
    - b. Current funding available for maintenance
    - c. Industry standards
    - d. County's funding gap and long term needs
  - iii. Options to Address the Funding Gap
    - a. Recommended options and why
    - b. Potential benefits
    - c. Potential impacts
    - d. How recommended options strike a balance between new investment and preservation of existing pavement
  - iv. Next Steps
- 5. Audiences:** Identify key audiences (re organizations or individuals) who the engineer believes should receive information about the preservation program directly. Secondary audiences are those organizations or individuals that are not targeted to receive information directly, but that are likely to hear your messages second-hand. Secondary audiences need to be considered in the communications plan as well, to ensure messages are respectful and appealing to those audiences as well.

*Potential Key Audiences:*

- a. County Board and staff
  - b. City and township officials and staff
  - c. Residents
  - d. Businesses, economic development groups, shippers
  - e. Chambers of Commerce and other civic organizations
  - f. Local legislators
  - g. Local media
- 6. Communications and Public Engagement Tools:** Identify specific actions, activities and communications tools to use to communicate directly with key audiences. The most effective communications plan will use multiple communications approaches in order to increase the number of times key audiences hear your messages.

*Example of Communication and Public Engagement Tools:*

- i. Print Communications
  - a. Fact sheets
  - b. Briefing memorandums
  - c. Comment cards

- d. Mailed invitations to events
  - ii. Electronic Communications
    - a. Website
    - b. Social media
    - c. E-newsletters
    - d. Email updates
    - e. Text alerts
  - iii. Meetings and Events
    - a. Open houses
    - b. Public hearings
    - c. Presentations to civic groups, Chambers of Commerce, township boards, city councils and other civic organizations
    - d. Input meetings with key stakeholders
  - iv. Public Relations
    - a. Press releases,
    - b. Commentaries, op-eds, or letters to the editor
    - c. Media interviews or background briefings (newspaper or local radio)
    - d. Paid media, such as newspaper ads
  - v. County Communication Outlets
    - a. County newsletters
    - b. Board packets
    - c. Display boards
- 7. Plan Implementation:** Develop a timeline and budget for identified communications and public engagement tools. Consider when each communications tool will be useful during different points of time in the overall decision-making process.

## Planning Matrix

Using a planning matrix (see Figure 5.1), such as the example matrix below, will help county staff organize and follow through on the implementation of the communications plan.

**Figure 5.1. Planning Matrix**

Stakeholder Group	Issues / Concerns	Strategies & Tactics to Engage	Staff Responsible	Timeline	Outcomes
	<i>To be completed by project team</i>				

## Developing Communication Tools and Messages

Educating key stakeholders and communicating information related to road maintenance and repair is challenging, partly because the information is highly technical, but also because it frequently involves the need for additional funding. The general public’s and businesses’ perceptions are that they already pay taxes and some of this should be used for good road maintenance. People sometimes do not understand why rough pavement conditions or pot holes seem to be prevalent, given current levels of spending on roads. But even more importantly, they do not want their daily lives or business activities disrupted due to poor roads.

It is crucial to remember that the technical information, developed as part of the earlier preservation analysis, can serve to inform audiences during the education and communication process, if it is organized and presented appropriately. The first audience for technical information is typically the county commissioners. Information needs to be complete and accurate, while remaining understandable. Such information forms the basis for policy decisions and also represents additional information available to interested stakeholders.

However, good Board understanding does not replace the communications approach recommended for other key audiences. That is because successful communications requires tailoring information and materials to the unique interests and needs of each audience type.

## Identifying Project Goals and Key Audiences

Prior to educating key stakeholders or communicating an enhanced system preservation program, it is important to clearly define the county’s goals and objectives. Critical to goal setting will be gathering information on existing conditions and critical needs. Those involved in educating or communication planning need to consider the enhanced preservation program’s goals in terms of audiences (primarily the general public, businesses, local governments). For instance, although the county’s need may be increased maintenance and the long term funding to address such needs; goals of interest to the public most likely involve: smooth pavements, increased mobility, less wear and tear on their vehicles, better

business connections/competitiveness, increased safety, applying new technologies, appropriate spending levels, or more job creation.

### **Think about Your Audience and Listen to What Matters to Them**

One of the purposes of the strategic education/communications plan is to help identify important audiences. This can be accomplished by first, breaking the message down into the issues it is meant to address, and then seeking out the various audiences with such an interest.

For example, if the proposed preservation program includes a safety component, communicating with public safety personnel, schools and advocacy groups for their early input and support will be important. Listening to their concerns will assure that program goals are properly aligned with the critical needs previously identified.

If the purpose for the enhanced preservation program is primarily to foster long-term economic development in the county, early outreach to key businesses in the community or development corporations, or trucking associations or chambers of commerce will be important in defining the projects goals, as they relate to the interests impacted.

Other likely stakeholders or audiences might include:

- Civic organizations
- Cities and townships officials and staffs
- Residents
- Environmental or other advocacy, advisory organizations
- Local legislators
- Media

After engaging and listening to key audiences, it is time to express the preservation program's goals in terms important to these same audiences. Project goals that recognize what is important to key audiences will set the parameters for critical messages, tools and the timelines for communicating the program. Although focused and expressed using the interests of key audiences, elected officials and staff also benefit by having a common language and understanding, as they develop and share technical and financial information.

When developing project information, it is important that it be accurate and understandable to the public and available in multiple formats. Although internet and social media options are increasingly popular, older populations or diverse populations may not all use computers for obtaining information. Individuals who are impacted personally, such as homeowners along a stretch of county road facing reconstruction impacts or detours may need personal contact. This could include describing the system benefits of the improvement over a cup of

coffee, or by a personal call from staff or an elected leader. Once key messages are developed, all communicators (including elected officials) need to consistently use these messages as part of the information they share.

## **Developing Key Messages and Educating Audiences**

Understanding key audiences' concerns is the first step in developing key messages. Typically, key messages should then be prepared to provide the necessary information to engage these audiences in additional discussion or fact sharing. From this dialog the audience can be educated on the preservation program, using context that is important to them.

## **Anticipating Likely Issues of Concern**

While listening to audiences, "issues of concern" will be identified. By selecting key messages to respond to the issues of concern, the enhanced preservation program will make the needed "personal connections" and elected officials can learn what actually matters to their constituents.

## **How a Personal Connection is Created**

Key messages that create a personal connection to identified audiences assure more involvement and ultimate acceptance by those audiences in the discussion and project.

## **Research has found that the following issues, related to roads, engage audiences:<sup>1</sup>**

- Increased mobility
- Decreased travel time
- Access to jobs, home or schools
- Future growth
- Not what is needed this year, but for our kids 20 to 40 years from now
- Innovation: being smarter

## **Educating Your Audiences**

Often times a key message needs to focus on educating the audience. For example, "pavement preservation" is a term that many stakeholders may think they understand, but in reality, are probably not clear about what it entails.

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<sup>1</sup> *Communicating the Value of Preservation: A Playbook* (2012). Published by the National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP Report 742).

Key elements of pavement preservation should be expressed using terms that will make a difference to the individual. For example, typical goals of the driving public are that a preservation program should offer a long-term plan to ensure good road surface conditions; because when roads deteriorate due to traffic and weather over time, drivers experience safety issues, vehicle maintenance problems, and business impacts. Therefore, the message to this audience may be a good preservation program extends the life of a road, which can reduce crashes, minimize vehicle repairs, and increase economic competitiveness.

Another example of a key message for educating stakeholders and the public might be that an effective pavement preservation plan will increase mobility, resulting in actual cost savings to businesses due to reduced travel time and product damage, as well as actual time savings to the traveling public.

The facts of a given situation may require rethinking how to describe pavement preservation for a given project. For example, if a county will soon need to fully reconstruct significant miles of roads, less emphasis may need to be placed on the ability to maintain and extend the life of a road and minimizing traffic delays, while more emphasis should be on what the long term plan or vision is for the county highway corridor.

**Figure 5.2. Images Used to Describe Pavement Preservation**



### **How to Address the Cost of the Preservation Program**

Costs should never be the starting point for communication of the preservation program. The key to explaining costs is to offer this information in personal terms, which can be measured by the listener's income or annual living expenses, not the full costs of the program. At a minimum, costs should be calculated in terms of the average cost per household per year.

Other information on costs that may be appropriate to share includes the percentage of overall costs that have been covered by other resources (like federal or State highway matching funds). In some instances, sharing what the investment will generate in terms of

additional business and investment can be important to key elements of the general audience.

Finally, based on priorities established by key audiences and included in key messages, such issues may be translated into a benefit a person is willing to pay for. Example: “If we can reduce your shipping time 30 minutes a day per load, by better roads, would that be worth \$100/year to your business? Thus, any increased preservation costs should be presented in terms of an individual’s level of contribution, and their benefit.

## **Communication Materials and Presentation Strategies**

The following section explains how a county engineer, using the previous guidance, can develop communications materials to support the preservation program.

A measurement of success for any preservation program’s communications plan is if the messages are delivered in a way that results in conversation and input from key audiences. There are many methods available to communicate an enhanced preservation program to various audiences. When selecting which tools to use, consideration should be given to the tool’s accessibility for the audience in question. Special audience needs may dictate a tool preference.

It is also important to remember that the selection of education and communication materials may need to be modified because of financial or time constraints. Sometimes to address these limitations, existing county communication materials can be expanded to include preservation information (e.g., monthly utility bill inserts, quarterly newsletters, online e-news, etc.).

## **Visual Tools: Photographs, Maps and Graphic Design**

Sharing information using visuals is very helpful. For instance, using images to demonstrate the method county engineers use to evaluate road conditions (a scale from very good, good, fair, and poor to very poor) helps stakeholders understand priorities, project scope and benefits.

Interactive maps for websites can also be helpful, so an individual can find their farm or business and know when and where preservation projects will occur in relative to their daily needs or need to travel for groceries, school, work, or business. Pictures of current road conditions followed by pictures of anticipated post-project conditions may be helpful as well (see

Figure 5.2).

**Figure 5.2: Roadway Conditions (Now/Improved)**



Visually define current condition



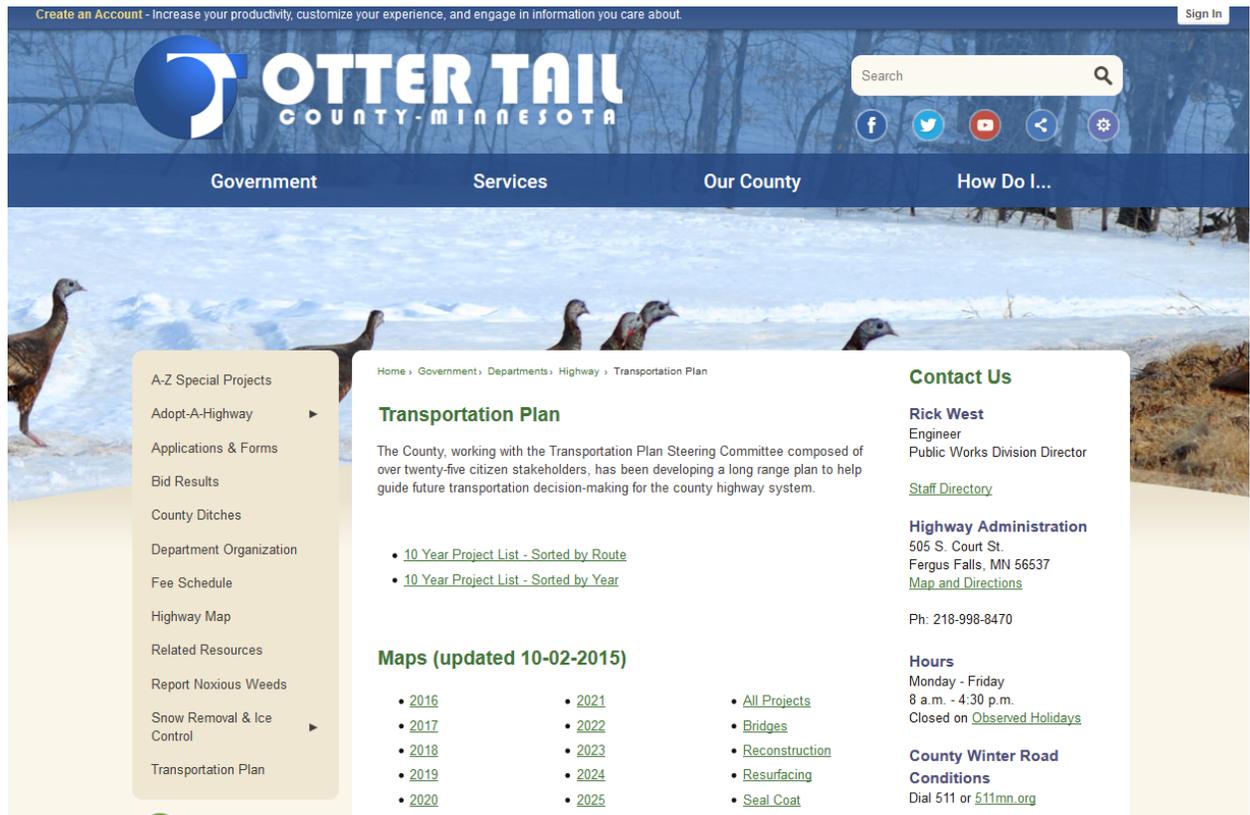
Use examples to visualize project improvement

### **Online Tools: Project Websites and Online Communications Services**

Websites can provide excellent program information, pictures, definitions and translations of technical data. Such tools also offer the ability to frequently update information and notify “followers” of such updates. A successful preservation program’s website should be easily located (if it does not have its own website address, links on county websites should be easy to find—on home pages) (see Figure 5.3).

The web can also help county staff better understand audience’s views by using a free survey services such a Survey Monkey. This survey tool can also be used periodically to measure how the public is reacting to program information and progress. Adjustments in the program’s communications plan can then occur, as needed.

Figure 5.3: Otter Tail County Transportation Plan - Website



## The Importance of Branding a Project

Because of the immense amount of information shared daily with individuals via television and radio, other printed media, social media, online and texting, “branding” a preservation program helps to focus attention. Branding also assists local media when covering the program. Branding can include a logo, but it is not required. The primary goal for branding a preservation program is to provide clarity. Branding does not need to be complex, nor require expensive graphic design.

In considering a brand for an enhanced preservation program, remember to select words that connect to what people value (ex., “Better Roads”). A county should select a brand that people can relate to, for example: a value—“trusted” or a “vision” for the future. Be sure it is credible, distinct and clear.

One technique for branding includes the use of alliteration –adding rhythm to word choices or using the same letter or sound like “Better Roads for a Better Otter Tail County.”

## **Strategies for County Board Presentations**

Regarding presentations to the County Board, such as at key project milestones (the presentation of the State of the County Highway Report or before the Board's approval of preservation strategies), it is suggested that such important issues be addressed during a Board work session, when more time for thoughtful discussion as possible. The county engineer should plan on at least 30 minutes for the presentation of key findings and question and answers from the Commissioners. It is helpful to provide a briefing paper to members prior to the presentation. The handouts should provide some background information to give context of the issues, and define some key terminology, as well as present specific county information (i.e., current system characteristics and conditions, local preservation needs, performance and financial gap analysis results, implications of no action, possible solutions and strategies for discussion, and benefits of the well-maintained system).

After productive discussions with the County Board regarding key preservation findings or strategies, some pilot county engineers, with Board support, then expanded their preservation education program to a wider audience.

## **Case Study**

Otter Tail County implemented an innovative public outreach effort to inform, educate and seek citizen involvement in the development of preservation strategies needed to address the County's performance and financial gap. As noted earlier, this effort was completed as part of the County's first ever Transportation Plan. The campaign was comprehensive, extensive, and effective. Please review various elements of the campaign and preservation methods and materials in Appendix H of this document.

## **Summary**

Ultimately, implementing a strategic communications plan by using the framework provided in this chapter will help county staff and county commissioners make the case for increased investment or implementation of other preservation strategies to address the transportation needs of the county.