

CTTTP Group Project

COML 595

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Introduction

Transportation is a social problem that directly impacts Americans on a more consistent basis than most issues. People rely heavily on transportation as a means to get to work and complete most daily errands. According to the Washington State Office of Financial Management (2016), \$6.9 billion, or 7.4 percent of the current state budget, will be spent on transportation services and construction. In 2015, our nationwide transportation initiatives accounted for about 5 percent of overall state spending, making it the fourth-largest area of spending behind K-12 education, Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, and Higher education (CBPP, 2017).

Due to the impact that transportation has on the public, our group decided to focus on how cities and municipalities communicate with their citizens about important transportation issues. Cities and towns of all sizes face many challenges regarding how to manage competing transportation-related priorities while operating under a limited budget. The agencies' ability to effectively communicate their activities to the public is an important part of their success as a government agency, and the feedback they receive from citizens and interest groups helps them decide which projects and initiatives to prioritize.

Within the scope of this project, we decided to concentrate on three organizations--Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT), and the City of Omak Public Works department. We set out to examine:

1. How the agencies manage competing interests

2. How the agencies communicate with the public
3. What problems the agencies can solve by communicating effectively

These three agencies are a representative example of the transportation-related communication outreach done by states, cities, and rural towns.

Competing Priorities

Each transportation department decides and prioritizes the projects and initiatives that they will fund and execute. These are often tough decisions that include the consideration of various factors. Hundreds of interest groups that represent a myriad of public and private interests regularly engage with government officials, in an attempt to prioritize their policy goals. Examples of transportation-related interest groups in Washington state include:

- Sierra Club
- Port of Seattle
- Cascade Bicycle Club
- Associated General Contractors of Washington
- Washington State Labor Council
- Boeing
- Weyerhaeuser
- Washington Farm Bureau
- Washington Trucking Associations
- Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust
- Washington State Auto Dealers Association
- AAA Washington

Members of these interest groups, and many others, are directly and indirectly impacted by transportation policy. Boeing's airplane manufacturing business, for example, requires that many of its parts and finished products be transported by truck between facilities in Western Washington. Timeliness is a top priority for Boeing and in the event that a truck is stuck in traffic, it directly affects

the company's bottom line. Agriculture trucks are an example of a method of transportation that drives along rural highways from orchards to processing facilities. These agriculture companies rely on roads to get their products to market, which is directly impacted by statewide transportation policy.

How does a city transportation department navigate through all the competing priorities of interest groups? It is not easy. Every city and municipality has its own strategy for managing competing priorities and communicating with the public. The communications department of any local government agency is a busy place, considering many dynamics, from policy and political to geographic, when deciding what to share with the public and in what manner. Agency leaders decide to prioritize, based on the general interest of the constituents that are directly affected by their decisions.

WSDOT focuses on major highway construction projects and maintenance of the ferry fleet, as many Washingtonians use ferries and roads over other modes of transportation. WSDOT does, however, work to ensure that its projects are completed in an environmentally-friendly manner. This includes complete environmental impact evaluations, ensuring air and water quality protection in its strategies to create sustainable transportation in Washington.

Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) places a high priority on bus service and bike lanes due to the fact that many Seattle residents utilize the bus system or ride their bikes around the city. Building roads is not a priority because influential interest groups do not want more cars driving on more roads. The influence and priorities of interest groups has created a hostile political dynamic

between drivers and those who oppose an increased reliance on cars. This argument is often framed as a social issue because many people in cities cannot afford to have a car and must rely on other forms of transportation. SDOT works to ensure its robust bus system reaches those who rely on it most, but others argue that priority comes at the expense of drivers who are stuck in traffic.

In Omak, roads are the top priority, including but not limited to when to re-pave roads and what new roads to build. Transportation is viewed as a social issue in Omak since people are completely reliant on cars to get around. Recognizing that all residents should have access to reliable, affordable transportation options, in 2015 Okanogan County, including Omak, created a transit service connecting Omak to other small towns throughout the area.

Communicating with the Public

WSDOT has a very robust communications department and they leverage it to communicate with the public in a variety of ways. Since it oversees the state's highways, railways and ferry systems, much of the information desired by the public focuses on construction projects and traffic delays. Keeping the public informed of the status of major construction projects is a significant part of WSDOT's outreach efforts. This is classically managed by posting updates to the WSDOT website, but officials also regularly send out tweets, post updates on Facebook, and produce videos for the WSDOT YouTube channel. Additionally, communication to constituents about traffic and transportation delays serves as a top priority. Typically, WSDOT sends tweets, text messages and posts on the official website.

Since WSDOT relies on the state legislature for funding, other types of communication with the public include budget requests and informing legislators and interest groups of projects that will be funded. Political considerations play a substantial role and WSDOT is keenly aware of the need for public support as well as support among legislators as its budget request is developed.

SDOT is one of the largest city agencies in Seattle, employing almost 900 people and managing a budget of \$491 million (City of Seattle, 2017). SDOT manages large construction projects, maintains roads, issues parking tickets and construction permits, creates bicycle lanes, collects revenue, regulates waterway passages, cleans roads, and engages in a variety of other duties that impacts residents. SDOT's communication outreach is vital to keep the public informed of these issues that affect them every day.

Like WSDOT, SDOT has a large team that creatively communicates construction and traffic updates to the public. Real-time traffic and construction alerts are effectively communicated via Twitter and the team has developed a smart phone app to keep people informed and out of traffic jams. Major construction projects are also directly communicated to the public and updated as construction is completed. In addition to traffic and construction alerts, assistance with finding open parking spots in real-time has proven helpful for frustrated drivers trying to navigate downtown Seattle. These initiatives assure the public that SDOT is working efficiently to alleviate traffic and other transportation issues.

The city of Omak has a public works department responsible for the maintenance of Omak's 33 miles of roadways and 5.2 miles of alleyways (City of

Omak, 2017). Omak's population of 4,835 limits the need for a robust communications team; however, citizens do want updates on topics such as when the snow will be cleared from their road and what standards the city uses to evaluate and complete construction projects, items which are featured on the city's web site. Omak's transit system utilizes the latest technology, including a web site and smart phone app which displaying real-time bus schedules and status updates.

Solving Problems Through Effective Communication

All municipalities manage their transportation infrastructure and communicate their efforts to their constituents. Clear communication can help to alleviate transportation issues by explaining efforts taken to solve existing problems and focusing on what will be done to mitigate future issues.

Anyone who has survived Mercer Street by the Amazon headquarters, waited in their car while a paving crew finished their work on US-97, traveled I-5 through Seattle or south to Portland, or waited hours for a ferry to Bainbridge Island or the San Juan Islands, is well aware that transportation departments in Washington have many problems left to solve. The major construction projects currently underway and new ferries put into service indicate that agency leaders are working toward improving our statewide transportation infrastructure.

Communicating those improvements to the public is a major part of the mission of these municipal agencies. Support among the public and management of competing interests is essential to the success of any transportation. A continual focus on protecting the environment also helps state and local transportation

agencies earn support among legislators and the environmentally conscious residents of Washington state. All government agencies may have their challenges and shortcomings, but their leaders clearly prioritize effective communication and outreach efforts.

Conclusion

When asked to identify and examine a contemporary social problem, we were struck by the fact that transportation, as a social issue, was hidden in plain sight. If we asked ourselves how often the subject of traffic comes up in conversation, especially in a metropolitan city, the answer would be 'daily'. This section, in fact, was written on a Sound Transit bus en route to downtown Seattle. A bus whose schedule can be pulled up on any smart phone or computer and whose paper schedule is accessible at nearly every stop or depot. By providing simple communication services, entities such as WSDOT, SDOT and the City of Omak allow for people from all walks of life to get around.

We made the decision to focus on three questions:

1. How the agencies manage competing interests
2. How the agencies communicate with the public
3. What problems the agencies can solve by communicating effectively

These questions focus around two basic problems that are commonly faced by many organizations: prioritization and communication of that priority. In a typical organization, this is done from the top-down. Executives or senior leadership will determine the strategic goals and then instruct employees to execute on those strategic goals. Operating a government agency, at the macro-level, can be similar.

Generally, senior leadership, be it a Mayor, agency director or Governor, will determine those goals and the mid-level employees will execute their strategic goals.

When asked to theorize how communication can add possible new insights into solving this problem, it would be worth noting that the problem we should be solving isn't the day-to-day communication to those who are commuting, but rather how the strategic priorities are set, and then communicated. As students of communication, it is easy to critically look at any organization and think critically of their communication strategy. The key, however, is understanding the nuances. Who are their constituents; what information is critical to be communicated; what is the appetite in the senior ranks for transparency? These questions, among others, provide the framework for clear communication within any organization. By taking the time to answer these questions, the ability to effectively communicate grows significantly.

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