Engaging the Public in Local Road Funding Decisions

What Was the Need?
Members of the public are often presented with news about the deteriorating state of the nation’s infrastructure, but in general they are unaware of the efforts and costs required to maintain and operate the transportation systems they rely on every day.

Managing a large local road network involves complex funding challenges, and long periods of insufficient funding can result in suspended projects, deferred maintenance and other delayed actions that result in further deteriorating roads. Communicating these circumstances is an ongoing challenge that public works managers face when engaging stakeholders, policymakers and the public.

What Was Our Goal?
In this study, researchers sought to better understand stakeholder attitudes, knowledge and engagement about financing for local road system management. This insight would then be used to improve the policy environment by providing practical guidance that identifies and addresses gaps in understanding and conflicts, and improves stakeholder engagement methods.

What Did We Do?
The research team collected and analyzed data about the general climate of stakeholder knowledge and attitudes toward road financing from the viewpoint of public works leaders. Data was collected through media analysis, observations of the Minnesota Legislature and a survey of county government leaders.

Survey responses indicated that the public generally agrees on the importance of well-maintained local roads but lacks an understanding of funding and financing mechanisms. There is limited public engagement on these issues despite the use of a variety of outreach methods, and public attendance at hearings is often motivated by opposition to a project rather than a desire to learn about it.

The survey results were also used to examine public engagement efforts in four local jurisdictions: Chanhassen, Brooklyn Park, Mille Lacs County and Beltrami County. The research team collaborated with public works leaders from these jurisdictions on the design, implementation and evaluation of methods used to engage stakeholders about local road system needs. Each case study reviewed the jurisdiction’s transportation system project, outreach methods used to engage the public, policy outcomes and relevant features of the area.

What Did We Learn?
Analysis of the survey responses and case studies resulted in several recommendations for improving resources and practices to encourage public participation in local transportation challenges:

• **Provide good quality information** to support increasing public attention to local transportation system issues. While the public agrees that good roads are needed,
there are gaps in understanding funding and policy mechanisms. To close these gaps, community dialogues should be based on high-quality data, impartial analysis and thoughtful explanations of policy options.

- Use multiple communication channels, including new technologies, for targeted outreach. Traditional methods of public outreach such as public notices, newspaper announcements, newsletters and even direct contact are no longer sufficient to reach a broad cross section of stakeholders. New approaches such as geotargeted communications, social media and smartphone-compatible messaging formats are needed.

- Build resources to support stakeholder participation, including high-quality, accessible information and staff capacity to conduct outreach and communications. Researchers recommended using current resources from state agencies and organizations to provide basic training and public outreach materials. Investing in the high short-term costs of proactive, good quality engagement will provide substantial benefits over the longer term. Making general information about road systems readily available in easily produced infographics will also improve public awareness and understanding.

- Employ an inclusive process and thoughtful, timely explanations from public managers to improve stakeholder satisfaction with project outcomes and the engagement process. Public works leaders can build trust among stakeholders by providing comprehensive answers to their questions about transportation issues, proposed projects and policies. They can also involve stakeholders early in the planning process by asking for public participation in defining the problem, developing a decision-making process and selecting alternative solutions. Finally, communicating expectations about the engagement effort and the amount of influence that stakeholders can expect to have will significantly impact their buy-in.

What’s Next?
Keeping the public informed about the efforts and costs related to maintaining transportation systems is an ongoing challenge for local public works managers. To improve the public’s understanding and involvement, transportation professionals should have access to training resources that address substantial forms of engagement and go beyond general guidance about making a good presentation. A toolbox of communication and engagement techniques and resources could be useful, especially for smaller cities and counties that do not have staff specialists for public engagement.