

Hwy 53 Virginia: Coffee and Conversation

Project Background

- [Highway 53 realignment and new bridge near Virginia, MN](#)
- The original roadway was built on land owned by iron mining interests, who signed an agreement with MnDOT that the roadway would be moved if the mining company needed to get to the ore under the roadway. In 2010 the mining interests notified MnDOT that the road would need to be moved and agreed to 2017 for that to happen. There were many challenges with this project: budget, timeline, route, and landscape.

Public Engagement Challenge

- Rampant misinformation and rumors about route alignment cropped up repeatedly between formal project update meetings, thereby undermining progress in communicating project details and progress reports.

Public Engagement Tool

- MnDOT created a monthly forum (Coffee and Conversation) for the public to ask questions and for MnDOT staff to share project updates, even if there were none. At each Coffee and Conversation meeting, MnDOT addressed rumors head-on while providing participants with up-to-date information about the project. These get-togethers also provided a forum for MnDOT staff to build relationships with community members.
- If there were not significant project updates, Coffee and Conversation was used to discuss other MnDOT issues, including topics such as construction programs and snow and ice.
- Monthly updates were held through the project development (2010 - November 2015; Coffee Conversation began in 2013) and construction phases; both were high value, but the highest value was during project development.
- Construction updates were given jointly and collaboratively with both the MnDOT and Contractor Project Managers – this was valued by stake holders because it enhanced stakeholder knowledge by also being able to directly ask the contractor detailed questions.

Key Takeaways

- MnDOT earned credibility and trust by committing to and following through with monthly meetings.
- Through Coffee and Conversation MnDOT created a customer focus group in the community.
- Coffee and Conversation continued after the project ended because the core group of participants valued their direct access to MnDOT staff.
- Surveys of the Virginia-area public indicate:

- Coffee and Conversation is particularly effective engagement tool with older age groups.
- Feedback in-person (or face to face) in and of itself can be a positive experience for the public.
- In this case, those surveyed as most satisfied with MnDOT are more likely to have attended one or more an in-person engagement sessions like Coffee and Conversation.

Level of Engagement: Consult

- “We wanted to keep them informed and provide feedback during project development, but made no promises because we were so constrained in our alternatives from an engineering and environmental perspective. We always tried to provide feedback on how the input was or was not used and why. We continued this through construction. It’s like anything else – there are so many details behind the decisions, they are not apparent to the casual observer. A suggestion may seem simple or a no brainer to a public participant, but as a subject matter expert, we tried to explain impacts that were not obvious to those not directly involved in the project.” – Pat Huston

Caveat

- Some survey respondents indicated a preference for more convenient meeting times (rather than the weekday mornings of Coffee and Conversation) and alternate ways to provide input.

Quote

- “The big thing that came out of Coffee and Conversation was creating a group of community advocates.” – Duane Hill, District Engineer, District 1

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Tags

- Bridge, Major Project, Misinformation, Realignment, Building Trust, Recurring Meetings, Consult

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