

THINK

● INFRASTRUCTURE SOLUTIONS

HNTB



Building support for tolling

How to create an effective communications plan that will promote public acceptance and minimize opposition to toll implementation

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This white paper dives into the communication component of a toll implementation plan, providing best practices for engaging a variety of stakeholders and understanding their needs.

In this white paper:

- Why implementing a communications plan early is essential
- Three things that a communications plan must address
- Best practices in getting the word out and making it stick

The importance of having the first word

Public acceptance is essential to successful toll implementation. Early implementation of a strategic, ongoing communications plan helps lay the groundwork for a positive campaign and projects an image of transparency.

An effective communications plan addresses key items head-on by explaining:

1. What tolling is, why it is needed and the benefits it can provide.
2. The amount of revenue expected to be generated and how it will be spent.
3. What a toll system will look like, how it will operate and the implementation schedule.

One of the biggest mistakes is to assume the public understands the reason for tolling, what a roadway with tolling will look like, how tolling will operate and how citizens will benefit from it. That is why it is essential to proactively communicate these messages in a timely, effective manner so everyone understands tolling and keeps you ahead of misinformation.

Best practices in communicating with citizens

Below are best practices in getting the word out and making it stick:

- **Do not confuse public involvement plans with communications plans.** Public involvement plans and communications plans share certain commonalities, such as key messaging, but they are separate efforts with different goals.

Public involvement is a formal, legal process, implemented to gain a regulatory need, such as environmental clearance. Communications plans are strategic, ongoing campaigns designed to transmit messages for such purposes as minimizing opposition and generating public acceptance. This includes a marketing strategy to help generate support for the project or program.

- **Develop simultaneously with the implementation plan.** It's instinctive to want to wait until the implementation plan is completed before beginning the communications plan. In the world of tolling, waiting is a risk.

Implementation plans typically take six to nine months to complete. The program's success depends on getting in front of the public with information and details much earlier than that. To minimize risk, the best approach is to develop the communications plan in tandem with the implementation plan.

- **Seek the help of an experienced consultant.** A skilled program management consultant can assist in creating a strategic and effective

communications plan informed by understanding and addressing stakeholders' needs and concerns.

- **Assemble an inclusive team.** A comprehensive communications team approaches the subject of tolling from all angles. Team members should include an agency's communications department, data experts who can help vet the plan and the PMC's communications team, including local firms that are familiar with and involved in those communities likely to be affected most by tolling. This can be especially useful when introducing a statewide tolling program. Grassroots intelligence can help pinpoint pockets of opposition as well as those who may be in favor of tolling and could serve as advocates.
- **Survey citizens.** Conducting a survey or opinion poll will help the owner identify areas of support and resistance, both geographically and in terms of socio-economics. Survey findings can then be used to address these issues by testing and shaping key messages.
- **Rely on facts.** The decision to implement tolling should be data driven with accurate information. Having factual data pairing the costs of repairing and/or replacing infrastructure along with the potential ramifications of not doing so, as well as the costs of implementing and collecting tolls are a few examples of the critical data points that need to be communicated to gain public acceptance.
- **Have a single point of contact.** Appoint someone to lead the communications effort. This will help ensure control and consistency of messaging.
- **Draft clear, convincing and memorable key messages.** Effective communications plans will use messaging officials can remember, communicate and repeat, and that the public can understand.

Key messages should be tailored to each agency's situation. Some examples include:

- Gas taxes alone can't fund our infrastructure needs.
- There are no "free" roads.
- Tolls are not taxes. They are user fees, and every dollar will go toward transportation.
- No toll booths. No stopping. No cash.
- Tolls fund much needed infrastructure projects.
- **Consider constituents in rural areas.** Rural communities need to understand how they might benefit from tolling, too. To gain their support, explain how tolls will provide a new revenue source for much-needed transportation infrastructure investment in their areas.
- **Practice transparency.** Agencies need to be available and responsive.

Effective communications plans will use multiple communications channels to enable citizens to connect with your agency. Platforms should include social media, local news media outlets, a dedicated phone number and email address, website and public meetings giving citizens a chance to engage directly with officials.

- **Be repetitive.** Repetition of key messages through multiple outlets (e.g. interviews, news releases, newsletters, social media feeds, videos, etc.) is necessary to educate the public. An effective communications plan will ensure every tactic is focused on communicating the “why” of tolling.
- **Identify champions.** Engaging elected officials as well as business, nonprofit and community leaders to help support a tolling program is essential. After identifying these champions, it’s important to educate them about what tolling looks like, why tolling is needed and the economic benefits it creates.

One chance

Toll program implementation is a high-profile venture. A well-thought out strategic communications campaign can help ensure it happens by promoting acceptance and minimizing opposition.

Resources

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Kevin Hoeflich has 33 years of diverse industry leadership experience. As toll market sector leader for HNTB, Hoeflich focuses on toll client service, strategic planning, recruiting and growing the firm’s overall toll practice. He provides counsel to HNTB clients nationwide, including the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, the North Carolina Turnpike Authority, Central Florida Expressway Authority and the Richmond Metropolitan Transportation Authority. His expertise includes program management, price managed lanes, all-electronic tolling and technology applications. He also develops and executes strategy and partners with the firm’s national transportation practice to develop toll opportunities for state departments of transportation.

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Rick Herrington has been integrally involved with many of the technological and operational advances that make tolling a fast, effective and efficient choice for funding America’s roads. Herrington’s 32 years of experience encompasses a variety of complex projects for clients across the U.S., including serving as tolling advisor to the Indiana Department of Transportation, the Illinois Department of Transportation’s P3 Adviser Services contract, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation’s Interstate Tolling Study, the North Texas Tollway Authority Program Management Consultant contract and many others. Herrington is a past deputy executive director for the North Texas Tollway Authority, where he was responsible for the implementation of the agency’s toll collection system and more.

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