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A Working Community Relations Program

RAYMOND B. DASCH, Supervisor of Public Information,
New Jersey Department of Transportation

There are 567 municipalities in New Jersey. At any given moment, the Transportation Department and its contractors may be working in a hundred or more of these communities surveying alignments, boring test holes, buying right-of-way, demolishing buildings, excavating roadbeds, hauling dirt, rock and concrete, and raising dust in general.

Years before the construction work began, nearby residents probably read newspaper reports that a new highway had been legislated and money appropriated to plan and build it. They later saw an announcement that a public hearing would be held regarding the proposed path for the new highway. They may even have gone to the hearing and located their homes on the aerial photograph display. But all this was on paper—"still in the planning stage."

Then, months or years later, these same residents read in the local newspaper that bids for the contract for actual construction would be submitted to the Department of Transportation in three weeks, and construction would start the following month!

Immediately questions come to mind:

- | | |
|------------------------------|--|
| <u>The new Mayor:</u> | "I don't know anything about this." |
| <u>The Police Chief:</u> | "I wonder if the design engineers drew the detour routes we discussed last year?" |
| <u>The Fire Chief:</u> | "I don't remember the fire routes we agreed on." |
| <u>The Town Engineer:</u> | "I wonder if I can coordinate my new sewer project with the state work and save some money." |
| <u>The Traffic Engineer:</u> | "How will this affect my new traffic plan?" |
| <u>The Housewife:</u> | "How will my children get to school? Will they be safe?" |
| | "Will truck drivers be able to look in my windows?" |
| | "My rose bush!" |
| | "Will traffic noise keep my baby awake?" |
| <u>The Husband:</u> | "Will I be able to get in my driveway?" |
| | "Will there be detours? How much time will it add to my work trips?" |
| <u>All:</u> | "WHO CAN I ASK?" |

Too many times the questioner never can find WHO. Design engineers have moved on to other plans, construction engineers are looking over the work site, and the public information people are completely involved in writing news releases about other highways being legislated, funds being appropriated, public hearings, contract bids, and answering mail and telephone questions about other construction projects well under way.

The lack of answers leads to frustration, and frustration turns to anger, which reaches a peak when the first bulldozer lumbers onto the job site. Then, when the highway resident engineer opens his field office he really gets it.

To avoid all this, the Department looked for some means to bring the questions and answers together. Personal contact—at the "customers' convenience"—seemed to be the most effective way. Hence a "Community Relations" program.

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Such a program brings about an understanding of the construction project through face-to-face explanations and illustrations of the plans to the local officials and to the affected residents and businesses. Such understanding establishes a basis for good will and harmonious relations between the contractors, the Department, local residents and their public officials.

The following guidelines form a working base for a good program:

- Determine your "communities" as being county and municipal officials; the local residents; and the nearby businesses that will be affected by the project.
- Recognize that these "communities" will help—or at least not hinder—the project if they are given the courtesy of an explanation they can understand.
- Accept the fact that problems caused by the work will come up sooner or later, and that it is best to meet them all at once and ahead of time.
- Bring to these "communities" at a place and time most convenient to them the plans, exhibits and people best qualified to answer their questions and explain the problems in layman's language.

Since 1964, various community relations techniques have been developed to implement these guidelines and answer questions raised by the "communities."

For County and Municipal Officials:

The first Community Relations contact on a construction project is a Pre-View Meeting held immediately after a contract is advertised. The meetings are usually held in a municipal room and are always informal. Our objective: to make completely certain that all the officials are fully aware of the extent of construction about to take place and particularly the effect it will have on the normal movement of traffic. (New officials unfamiliar with the project may be in office. To these men some things can turn out to be a complete surprise. This we want to avoid.)



This "coordinating committee" includes police chiefs, officials of the New Jersey Turnpike Authority, Port Authority of New York, New Jersey Trucking Association, and local industry representatives as well as highway engineers who gathered to review plans for diverting traffic around a bridge soon to be repaired. (This meeting was the precursor of the Pre-View Meeting which now is standard for most construction projects.)

To this end the Community Relations representative and the traffic engineer review the staging plans to be certain that the plans and specifications cover all contingencies (e. g., when a local roadway is to be closed that alternate traffic routes are provided) and are thoroughly understood.

Next these plans are photographically reduced to 8 by 10 inches and then reproduced to transparencies. These transparencies of the staging plans are projected onto a large screen or wall surface in sequence, explaining the details of traffic detours or diversions, signs, temporary lights, etc.

Questions are fielded by our Community Relations man and traffic team and answered on the spot. Any questions or suggestions considered valid but not within their scope of authority or knowledge are noted and subsequently taken up with higher echelon supervisors. The answers are obtained and transmitted to the questioner.

The results of these Pre-View Meetings are finally presented and discussed at our Departmental Pre-Construction Conference. This conference is held by our Construction Division after award of a contract, and is used as the platform for discussing the entire project with the construction contractor and others prior to the start of work.

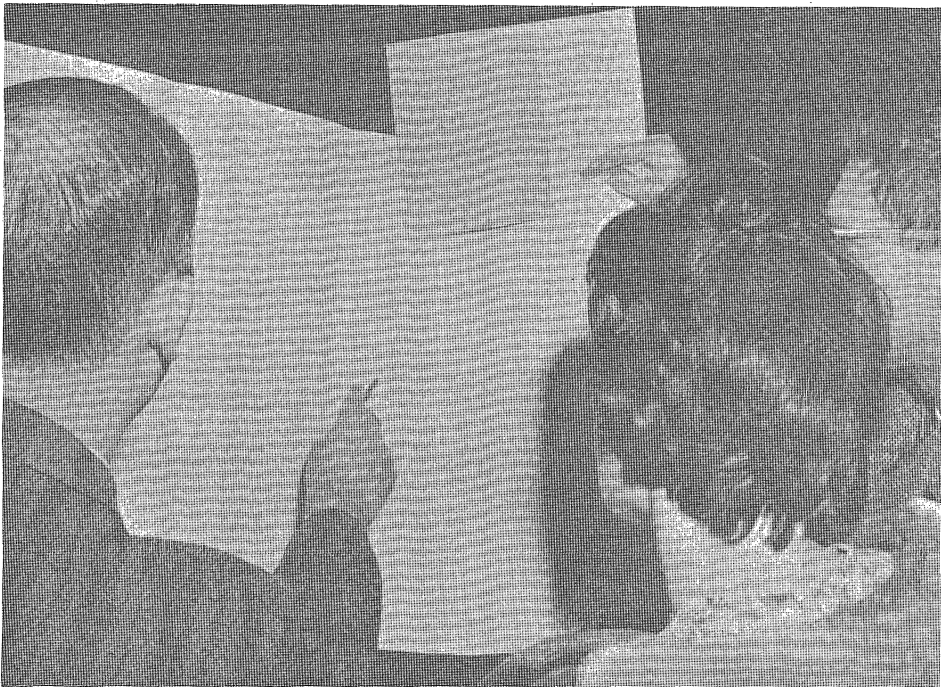


The municipality most affected by a construction project invariably will provide a public room suitable for a public information center at no cost. Visitors usually surge in during the lunch hour, trickle in until 7 p.m. Then the rush starts.

FEATURE ARTICLES

For Housewives and Husbands:

A "Public Information Center." These are informal, one-day affairs located at a place most convenient to the greatest number of local residents. They usually are held in a municipal building or school from 10 a. m. to 10 p. m., or 12 noon to 8 p. m., depending on the size of the town and commuting habits of the husbands. A set of construction plans, pasted together and colored to delineate roadways, shoulders, embankments and bridges, is thumbtacked on fiber boards placed on easels in the public room. Attendants usually include the highway resident engineer, a right-of-way representative and the contractor. When the doors are opened, the staff greets each visitor individually, fields the question, takes the visitor to the map board and shows him the answer. It's as simple as that. No program, no agenda, no speakers, no podium. Just the answers.

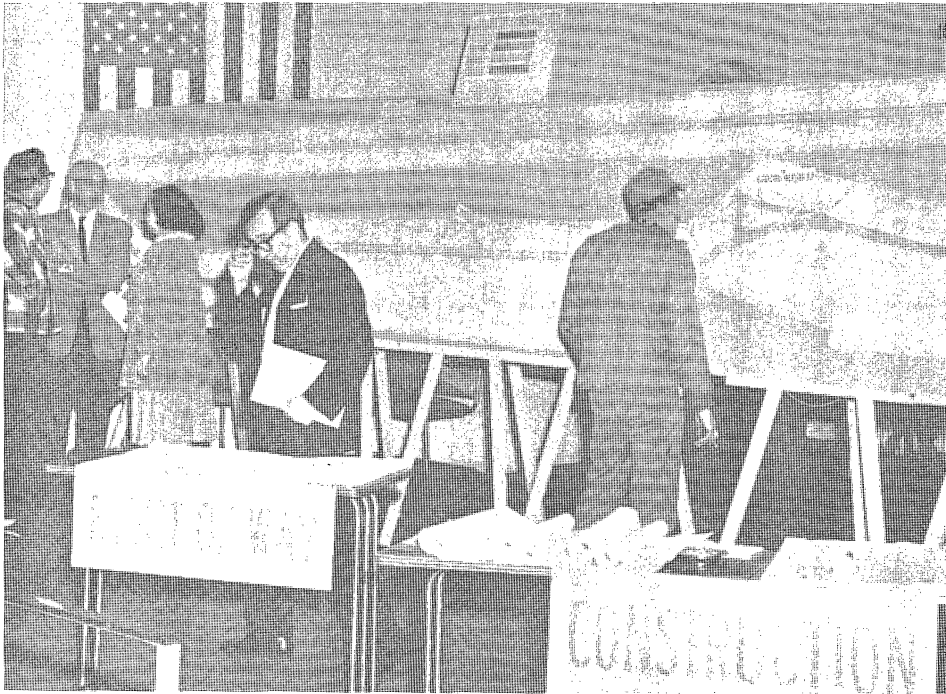


Local couple whose property is affected by construction work received first-hand information on right-of-way acquisition procedures and amount of property needed to enlarge a nearby intersection. By bringing together right-of-way negotiators and their "clients," information centers have accelerated acquisition in many cases.

More than 50 such centers have drawn as few as 25 visitors and as many as 500. (A news release to the press and radio is issued to publicize each center in advance.)

For Business Concentrations:

A businessmen's information center is organized solely for the proprietors. Here is an example. A resurfacing project on one of New Jersey's most heavily traveled and commercialized highways would restrict some business driveways for short, few-hour periods. To forewarn the proprietors, the local



Simplicity and informality is the keynote to setting up an information center. Construction plans are colored and mounted on wall boards and set on easels. Complete sets of plans are placed on tables, handy for individual conferences. No visitors record book is kept because it creates psychological resistance, and is impossible to keep when the evening rush starts.

Chamber of Commerce was asked to invite affected businessmen to an information center which would be open after business hours—from 8 p. m. to midnight. The construction-plan display was augmented by a schematic diagram showing what type of work would be done at exact locations during precise periods of time.

For Extraordinary Situations:

Organize a coordinating committee. Here is an example. Working on the theory that the more officials who know about construction projects that will create massive traffic problems the less delay and confusion there will be, an extensive publicity campaign and coordination effort was mounted for a redecking job on a key bridge carrying transcontinental truck traffic to the Holland Tunnel and New York City.

News releases with maps showing the project area and detour routes, plus hourly volume tables, were sent on four occasions to the regional press and radio, and once to dominant newspapers across the nation. The national news releases were aimed at industries and trucking companies in the papers' areas that might be scheduling shipments through the Holland Tunnel so they could retime or reroute their shipments.

A special meeting was called to assemble representatives of every activity that would be affected—four towns and the county, the New Jersey Turnpike, the Port Authority of New York, large manufacturing plants, and the New Jersey

FEATURE ARTICLES



Department engineers discuss effects of construction with owners of a business located at an intersection. Such conferences, including work schedules and timetables, have proved invaluable for advance planning by commercial establishments.

Trucking Association (the American Trucking Association in Washington also was kept informed). Result? Coordination was so effective between all officials, especially the police and contractor, that no major tie-up occurred and traffic volumes actually decreased slightly during certain periods.

During the meeting an informal coordinating committee was formed with the Public Information Bureau as the "chairman." No further meetings were necessary because all members communicated with each other, and through the chairman, by telephone. The spirit of cooperation and the efficiency of this arrangement were exemplary.

As part of the Information Center program, contractors are urged to launch community relations programs of their own, including "open letters" published in local newspapers. Here is one such letter.

AN OPEN LETTER

TO THE RESIDENTS OF THE TOWNSHIP OF JEFFERSON

Geo. M. Brewster & Son, Inc. of 275 Fort Lee Road, Bogota, New Jersey, has been awarded the New Jersey State Highway contract for the construction of two and one-half miles of Route 15 from the vicinity of Longwood Drive to the vicinity of Lake Forest Drive. This section will have two traffic lanes, north and south bound, and will be completely landscaped.

Through this letter we wish to assure you that we will do everything possible to minimize the inconveniences that may come up as construction progresses.

We can further assure you that we will fully cooperate with you Township Officials and Police and Fire Department Officers so that the construction of the project can be brought to a successful and mutually beneficial conclusion.

Very truly yours,

GEO. M. BREWSTER & SONS, INC.

Thomas J. Carney
Project Manager and
Superintendent
Box 69, R. D. 3
Wharton, New Jersey

The following is an example of a letter announcing a Businessmen's Information Center.

UNION TOWNSHIP

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

2165 Morris Ave.
Union, New Jersey
MURdock 8-2777

Suite 7

January 20, 1965

TO: Route 22 businessmen in Union, Springfield and Mountainside, New Jersey

At the request of Mr. Raymond B. Dasch, Chief of the Community Relations Section of the State Highway Department, the Union Township Chamber of Commerce is issuing the following invitation in cooperation with the Springfield Chamber of Commerce and the Borough of Mountainside.

"You are invited to visit an Information Center which will be held Monday evening, February 1, 1965 to present to you the plans and construction schedules for the Route 22 modernization project just beginning.

"The Information Center will be open from 8:00 P.M. until Midnight to give you, and your fellow businessmen who may be affected by the construction work, an opportunity to evaluate and anticipate effects on your business.

"The Center will be located in the Springfield House, Route 22, East-bound Lane, Springfield, N. J.

Construction plans and schedules will be on display, and construction engineers will be on hand to answer any questions."

Mr. Dasch says that this is the first such meeting to be held in the State, and hopes it will bring to you the information you may need to accommodate your business to the construction operations.

Very truly yours,

F. Ross Kelland,
Executive Director

FRK:ht



