

CROSSROADS

<http://tic.engr.wisc.edu>

WISCONSIN TRANSPORTATION INFORMATION CENTER – LTAP



A well thought-out communication plan anticipates what the public needs to know and creates a consistent process for getting the word out in a timely way.

INSIDE

- 2 **IDEA EXCHANGE**
Sidewalks made of rubber
- 3 Additional scholarships for EPD courses
- 4 Worker-visibility rule in effect November 24
- 4 Work zone training program marks 10 years
- 5 After the storm: emergency cost-recovery
- 7 Defining the 100-year rain
- 10 Standards for traffic control devices
- 11 **RESOURCES**
- 12 **CALENDAR**

Add communication plan to pre-winter checklist

LOCAL OFFICIALS are busy right now reviewing pre-winter checklists, making sure orders are in for deicers and abrasives, plows are ready, spreaders calibrated and crews trained. Highway commissioners and public works directors should add one more thing to the list: Develop and implement an effective plan for communicating with the public.

It is easier to explain a winter maintenance operation to the public *before* the cold winds blow. Having to present the rationale behind an operation while fighting a storm, and fielding a blizzard of questions and complaints from frustrated members of the public, only makes a hard job harder.

A well thought-out communication plan anticipates what the public needs to know and creates a consistent process for getting the word out in a timely way. This proactive approach also intercepts potential problems and improves public relations for the department.

Compile frequently asked questions

Start by listing topics and issues residents frequently raise during the winter season. A short list should cover 80 percent or more of the usual queries and concerns. Some examples are:

- When will my street be plowed?
- Why did you pile snow at the end of my driveway?
Will you come out to remove it?
- Where can I park during a snowstorm?
- Do I have to shovel/salt/sand my sidewalks?
Or . . . my neighbor hasn't shoveled/salted/sanded his sidewalk!
- What will you do about my damaged mailbox?

Records from past seasons and input from staff members who field calls can help with compiling a good list. The next step is to think about the information, policies and resources available to provide answers.

Update policies, develop message

Prepare to communicate winter maintenance plans to the public. Provide general information and specific

Continues on page 8



Order deicers and abrasives.



Conduct crew training.



Maintain plows.



Review snow-and-ice policy.



AND

Develop and implement a plan to communicate with the public.

"We want you to know!"

Add communication plan to pre-winter checklist

continued from page 1

A sound communication plan uses a variety of media and methods to get the message out.

answers to the recurring questions. In the process, identify any policies that are out-of-date or ambiguous.

Begin with the list of typical questions and develop information that explains winter-storm priorities and service levels for different types of streets. Describe the time it takes once a storm ends to restore each street type to normal winter driving conditions. Define the **normal** conditions service level for each type.

Outline the agency's snow-removal policy. Does it call for providing bare pavement curb-to-curb, bare pavement in wheel paths or plowed curb-to-curb with packed snow that is sanded? Let people know what road conditions to expect during and after a storm.

Avoid shorthand and acronyms in public-information materials and policy descriptions. Using unfamiliar terminology like

Average Daily Traffic (ADT), arterial and collector can confuse. Instead, refer to streets as major, neighborhood, residential, two-lane, four-lane or in other recognizable terms.

Write or speak about the levels of service and time-to-completion after a storm as "goals." Explain that long-lasting storms, multiple storms close together and extreme cold can increase the time it takes to restore roads to normal winter driving conditions.

For issues like parking and sidewalk shoveling, translate relevant ordinances into simple language and make clear why they exist. Give people reasons behind the rules—so that snow-removal crews can do their jobs efficiently and effectively, and get safe streets open sooner—to help them appreciate how important it is to comply. Direct people to a source where they can read the complete ordinance if interested.



OSHA/ALBANY COUNTY HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT

Communicate information about snow-removal operations early so the public knows what to expect.

Use multiple outlets

A sound communication plan uses a variety of media and methods to get the message out. Combining multiple outlets is the best way to reach local residents who depend on the community's winter maintenance services. It improves the

After the storm . . .

continued from page 7



Sauk County highway crews responding to disaster sites in June photographed the damage they found. The photos are an important element of the record used in cost recovery.

"With FEMA, having good records is the key to everything. Nothing gets done without it."

Emmitsburg, MD, with courses on public assistance, and disaster response and recovery topics. Training options include distance learning and independent study.

Closer to home, Wisconsin Emergency Management provides exercise and training programs that address the skills first responders, volunteers, elected officials, emergency managers and others need to protect lives and property. LaWall says the department works closely with county emergency management directors to organize and present on-site courses on disaster recovery and damage assessment for local municipalities. The programs range from three-day courses and four-hour sessions to applicant briefings for a specific storm event.

During and after a declaration period, LaWall travels to affected areas doing assessments for FEMA and sees first-hand what kind of information and training is helpful. He echoes Fasick's advice, saying the key lesson is to develop a bulletproof approach to document-

ing costs. "When everything is happening, it's hard to track things closely. It's even harder to recreate it days or weeks later," LaWall says. "With FEMA, having good records is the key to everything. Nothing gets done without it."

Gather resources, apply lessons

Many local officials in Wisconsin know from experience, dealing with a disaster that disrupts normal use of roadways and puts lives and property in peril is easier with an organized plan in place. Sauk County stands as proof.

"Anytime we have damage to roads or bridges and think a declaration is possible, we use the system that's in place because otherwise, it would be hard to reconstruct the circumstances and relate them to costs," Muchow says, adding that being prepared to document everything all the time has gotten the County and its municipalities through many disasters.

He credits tight coordination between staff members in the office and in the field for the recent successful response. Debriefing everyone on staff after a storm or other disaster event has, over time, helped them identify ways to enhance operations.

Along with an effective system for documenting all work to improve cost-recovery, Sauk County relies on mutual aid agreements with neighboring communities and regularly discusses ways to share resources in an emergency. Juneau County came to their aid in June under such an agreement.

Finally, besides being in touch with county highway officials, local officials should connect with county emergency management directors to guarantee good communications during future storms or other disaster events.

Before and after the storm, local governments are wise to gather resources and apply lessons that help them prepare for the unexpected and recover the exceptional costs of disaster response. ■

odds of reaching everyone in the target audience and gives them repeat exposure to the message. Effective options include:

- Run an article in agency brochure or newsletter distributed to the public.
- Do a separate mailing about winter maintenance operations.
- Send a press release to local media—including daily or weekly newspapers, TV and radio outlets, shoppers and neighborhood newsletters.
- Hold a press conference to kick off the winter season.
- Create TV video and news photo opportunities by holding a media day at the maintenance yard to showcase seasonal equipment, introduce staff members and talk about the winter maintenance operation.
- Invite media contacts, elected officials or members of the public to ride along on a dry-run of snow routes or during an actual storm event.
- Add or update information about winter operations on the local government's website and refresh the information frequently.
- Explore opportunities to air information on a community-access cable station.
- Make presentations on the topic at meetings of service or community groups, like Rotary, Kiwanis, Chamber of Commerce.

- Tailor a presentation for school groups to give children a hands-on experience that gets them excited about snow plowing and eager to share what they learn with parents.
- Exchange key contact information with media outlets so they have direct link to department during a storm and the department knows whom to reach with critical information for immediate broadcast or publication.
- Provide news about winter operations via a prerecorded telephone hotline, webpage or email message as a subscription service for residents. (Make updating this information integral to routine procedures.)
- Add a staffed phone line to take questions and complaints during the winter season.

Keep it positive

Much of the time, the contact highway and public works agencies have with the public emphasizes prohibitions, what *not* to do. Warnings and alerts are important for public safety, but proactive communication about upcoming winter maintenance offers a chance to be in touch with a positive message that invites interest and cooperation from customers.

A good plan covers the operation's practical details and answers the top questions. It also informs the public which streets constitute the department's territory. Let

them know about the people, equipment and materials available to fight winter storms. Describe anything innovative or different about the operation and how it improves outcomes for the public.

Let the public know what they can do to help make it a safe winter season. Highlight important issues or problems that hamper the maintenance operation, like residents shoveling, blowing or plowing snow into cleared streets, causing a safety hazard and requiring crews to plow the street again.

Include information about resources for staying safe on the roads in winter. The WisDOT website offers basic tips on safe winter driving. Promote this link and incorporate tips into agency communications.

Worth the investment

An organized communication plan is a good addition to any road maintenance operation. It is worth the investment because it reaches both the media and the public with the message that the local agency is serious about running a professional, effective operation. Reinforce that message with ongoing communication as the season progresses. Educating these important audiences improves the relationship with customers and limits complaints and controversies during the snow season. ■

Attend October Winter Road Maintenance Workshops

Local officials can review and update their winter maintenance plans with practical information on topics from driving skills for plow operators and how to improve the effects of salt and sand to information on new equipment and procedures. Choose from seven locations and dates.

Tomahawk	Oct 13
Hayward	Oct 14
Eau Claire	Oct 15
De Pere	Oct 20
Pewaukee	Oct 21
Barneveld	Oct 22
Tomah	Oct 23

Contact TIC at 800-442-4615 or go to <http://tic.engr.wisc.edu/Workshops/Listing.Iasso> for more information and to register.

Resources

http://www.apwa.net/Publications/Reporter/ReporterOnline/index.asp?DISPLAY=ISSUE&ISSUE_DATE=102006&ARTICLE_NUMBER=1379

Link to October 2006 APWA Reporter article "Never Underestimate the Power of PR—Public Relations for Winter Operations."

http://americacityandcounty.com/features/government_getting_drift/

Online source for September 2006 article "Getting the Drift" from *American City and County*.

www.dot.wisconsin.gov/safety/motorist/winterdriving/driving-tips.htm

WisDOT web page featuring winter driving tips.

Pre-Winter PR



- Run article in agency newsletter/website
- Send info flyer to customers' homes
- Hold media day and/or press conference
- Schedule ride-alongs for media/public
- Speak at service club meetings
- Create program for school groups
- Set up phone hotline or email alert
- Establish key media contacts

Proactive communication about upcoming winter maintenance offers a chance to be in touch with a positive message that invites interest and cooperation from customers.