

# Full road closure may be safer, faster

Full road closure is worth considering when planning a maintenance or construction project, says a recent FHWA report. Full closure has the potential to cut total construction time, improve safety for workers and travelers, and produce a smoother roadway. With adequate alternate routes, solid traffic management planning, and effective public outreach, a full closure can even improve public sentiment about the project. On the other hand, affected residents and businesses are often vigorously opposed, sometimes making it a difficult choice.

The publication, **Full Road Closure for Work Zone Operations**, reviews the benefits and considerations involved. Case studies of six projects around the country showed that full closure cut project duration by 63% to 95%. Closures were as short as two weekends and as long as 18 months.

Experience in three Wisconsin communities offers a local perspective based on recent major projects. All agree that careful project planning and thorough discussions with stakeholders are critical.

**Whitewater** Sometimes full closure is the only option. "The street was only 28 feet wide. There was no room to work on one half of the road at a time," says Dean Fischer, City of Whitewater Director of Public Works, about a downtown street totally reconstructed in 2001. During the project they also replaced water mains,

sanitary and storm sewers, widened the road, and moved the sidewalks.

"We had to make sure the public was aware of the situation," says Fischer. The city held public meetings early to explain the project and the need, maintained communications, and worked hard to give residents access and alternate parking. "We always tried to get them into their houses at night," says Fischer.

**Manitowoc County** In Manitowoc County Highway Commissioner Gary Kennedy's mind, keeping half the road open is a better option. "If it's at all possible to leave the road open, it's very beneficial in the public's eye and especially to businesses," he says. "If you detour the road, the businesses really suffer. Sometimes the extra couple days you save are not worth it."

You can only speed a project up so much, Kennedy points out. You can't hurry things like the curing time for concrete. Also, you still have to restore adequate access for emergency vehicles at the end of the work day.

He agrees that communication is critical. On a recent project to rebuild an urban section of CTH P, they kept half the road open with all traffic going one way. "We had two public hearings before the project, then met with all the businesses every Friday during the course of the project," Kennedy says.

**Madison** Closure decisions depend on many factors. The City of Madison has done both recently: closing Johnson St. all season in 2003, but leaving half of E. Washington Ave. open in 2004.

"Total closing is one tool. I think you have to look at each situation individually," says Deputy City Engineer Rob Phillips. "We look at public inconvenience, whether the street is a major collector or local, the type of construction, traffic volumes, project duration, and the availability of alternate routes." Keeping the public informed helps, Phillips says. In addition to press releases and media reports, Phillips uses signs extensively.

Drivers find their own solutions if alternate routes are available and publicized, the report notes. Projected congestion typically did not develop, demand was less than expected, and traffic redistributed itself in a couple of weeks.

The report concludes that full road closure requires significant lead time for planning and outreach, and that a solid traffic management plan is vital.

As you plan for reconstruction and maintenance projects, give full closure some thought. Whether for a single night or a full construction season, there are considerable benefits. The FHWA booklet is a helpful summary.

*Copies of Full Road Closure for Work Zone Operations: A Cross-Cutting Study. Reducing Congestion and Crashes through Full Road Closure for Maintenance and Construction, are available from FHWA. See Resources on page 6 for how to get a copy.*

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