

Best Practices on Major Projects Example from Woodrow Wilson Bridge Project

1. *Issue or Need Identified/Addressed.* Proactive Community Relations and Public Relations Programs

The community in the immediate vicinity of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge replacement construction was not enthused at the prospect of living through eight years of heavy construction. The project is close to historic Old Town Alexandria, whose economic vitality depends in large part on tourist visits. From a larger perspective, the Washington, D.C., metropolitan region was concerned about delays and disruptions to Beltway traffic during construction. The existing bridge is a chronic daily chokepoint, with a traffic count of 200,000 vehicles per day, and the prospect of construction making it worse was not welcome. Negative community and public perception had the potential early-on to stop the project and later to make it more difficult or costly to execute.

2. *Strategy or Best Practice developed/implemented to address the issue or need*

With support from the project sponsors, the general engineering consultant organized stakeholder panels, met with [often-aggrieved] neighborhood task forces, maintained an open portal project website, and responded to a telephone hot-line. The community coordination staff always responded with accuracy, clarity, and sensitivity. Lead managers from the project sponsors engaged the community regularly in small group settings and larger community meetings, responding to questions of every sort. Nearby residents were offered short-term hotel accommodations when noise from pile-driving was expected to be a significant annoyance.

The general engineering consultant cultivated an open dialogue with local and national news media and reaped its rewards. A specialty public relations firm was included on the GEC team as a subconsultant. The GEC team cultivated opportunities for its key engineers and project sponsors to meet with press representatives often, and eased the way for photo and video opportunities. Press releases announced each significant lane closure, with information available for ready reference on the project website.

3. *Results*

The best reflection of community relations success comes through the public's elected representatives. On the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Project, dealings with the Alexandria mayor and council, the Fairfax County supervisors, and local and national politicians in Prince George's County have been constructive and usually cordial. Boat tours for elected officials helped, and fast and accurate answers to the politicians' questions were important. Surely the most important factor in this success is that the elected officials' constituents recognize the extraordinary care being taken in accommodating their concerns, and consequently they are relatively quiescent.

Proactive efforts to tell the project's story through the news media generated exceptionally positive coverage, both in quantity and tone. Earned-media initiatives included an event setting the initial bridge steel, the launch and subsequent success of *Bridge Bucks* and other traffic management efforts, an eaglets naming contest, a special briefing for the *Washington Post's* Dr. Gridlock, and a media event with U.S. Transportation Secretary Mineta and Maryland Transportation Secretary Flanagan. The project was the cover story in the Jan. 31, 2005, edition of *ENR* and was featured on the *Discovery Channel* series "Extreme Engineering" in fall 2005. Should a potentially negative news story arise, the local and national media representatives know where to call to get the straight story from the project's perspective.

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