

NORTH MAIN STREET IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

Introduction

In 2001, Blacksburg's Downtown Master plan was completed. The master plan called for downtown improvements that would create pedestrian friendly travel, public gathering spaces, and improved streetscapes. Two years later, the Main Street Improvement Project was added to the road priority list by Town Council resolution. In 2007 and 2008, the Town held public meetings to gather input on the project. Nine years later, on June 14, 2010, construction began on the North Main Street Improvement Project. Construction is expected to last until the end of 2011. Due to the disruptive nature of the project, a clear, concise, and strategic communications plan would be necessary for communicating all aspects of the project to the affected public. [Appendix 11 – Communications Plan]

The Challenge

Even though the Downtown Master Plan had been voted on years earlier, citizens and business owners had concerns about the project. How was it funded? How will it affect business? Why is a roundabout needed? Construction began after most of the Virginia Tech students, nearly half of the Town's population, had left for the summer. Somehow the Town had to reach these students before they came back, get information about detours and construction to residents and visitors before and during the football season, and work with downtown business owners directly affected by the construction. In addition to communicating with the businesses and citizens, there was the challenge of gathering information, not just from Town engineers, but construction project

managers, contractors and more. The goal was to be proactive in getting information out in advance, without down- playing the fact that construction would simply be messy and intrusive.

The Solution

The Town of Blacksburg devised a Communications Plan that went beyond the one way push of information. First, a web page was created specifically for the project - www.blacksburg.gov/mainstreet [Appendix 1 - Web]. This page includes the history of the project, funding information, construction notices, maps, details about roundabouts and a link to the next essential part of the communications process – the project blog.

The Main Street Improvement Project blog, found at <http://blacksburg.bev.net/mainstreet> is updated at least once a week with information on road closures, a two week outlook schedule, informational videos and pictures [Appendix 2 – Blog]. Unlike other local government blogs, this site allows for user comments without moderation. It was essential that communication on the project be two-way.

Once these sites were established, the Town created a Blacksburg Alert, (the Town’s email notification system) category called “Main Street Improvement Project” [Appendix 3 – Blacksburg Alert]. This category would be used to send emails to the public with information relevant to the project. An Alert was sent to subscribers letting them know of the new category and social media was also used to encourage people to subscribe to the new category.

Social media was a big part of the communication strategy. By linking to the project blog on Facebook and Twitter , the Town was able to engage in two-way conversations with citizens about the project. Not all the comments were positive, but when the Town responded to negative comments on Twitter, almost all the time, the individual would be pleasantly surprised that the Town wanted to engage in conversation and seek common ground [Appendix 4 – Twitter]. Using

the Twitter search feature in Tweetdeck, the Town could see every Tweet that mentioned “Blacksburg” or “Bburg” and could respond to complaints about the project or dispel rumors.

Not every form of communication was executed behind the walls of technology. The Town held an open house for the project a couple of weeks before construction was to begin. The event was promoted in the local paper [Appendix 5 – Ads], via Blacksburg Alert, the website, Facebook, Twitter and in the *About Town* quarterly publication. At the open house, the project manager, engineer and Community Relations Office were there to answer questions, show plans, maps and hand out informational flyers. The project manager and engineer also met with community groups, including but not limited to Downtown Blacksburg, Inc. (a non-profit supporting downtown Blacksburg businesses), Town/Gown (a community group designed to improve relations between Virginia Tech students and Town citizens), public safety officials and individual businesses [Appendix 6 – Flyers]. The Community Relations Office also worked with Virginia Tech to get the information about the project and detours to incoming students, faculty, staff, and football fans [Appendix 7 – Football].

There was also a need to reach people who were just driving through downtown. On each end of the project were project signs showing the final product. Since businesses were affected, banners were printed and hung on several businesses. The banners said “Please Come In. We’re Open. Pardon the Work in Progress,” and then directed people to the website for additional information. Clings were placed on Blacksburg Transit buses that said “Downtown is OPEN for Business. Pardon the Work in Progress!” [Appendix 8 – Banners/Signs]

So far, the communications plan has focused on the first three phases of construction in the downtown area. The last two phases, involve the construction of a roundabout just north of downtown. The Town is continuing the same communications plan – alerting the news media

[Appendix 9 – News] meeting with businesses, posting signs, showing the detours, updating the blog and using social media.

Conclusion

The Main Street Improvement Project has indeed been very intrusive to some downtown businesses and for those traveling in the downtown area of Blacksburg. However, by taking a proactive approach to communicating with citizens, students and visitors, the inconvenience of road construction has not been as bad as anticipated. Citizens have been pleased with the outcome of the project and one business owner has already started taking advantage of outdoor dining on the new sidewalks. [Appendix 10 – Photos] The strategies implemented in the North Main Street Improvement Project’s communications plan continue to prove that the Town of Blacksburg is a leader in open government.