CASE STUDY

# COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA MANAGEMENT

I-66, VA

**PROJECTS PRESENTED:** I-66, POMT, CENTRAL 70

**GOALS:** MAXIMIZE PROJECT OPPORTUNITY AND MINIMIZE PROJECT RISK

**STAGE:** THROUGHOUT LIFE OF PROJECT

**METHODOLOGY:** 8 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

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# TRANSPARENT AND PROACTIVE: GOOD COMMUNICATION IS KEY TO PROJECT SUCCESS

**Three major highway schemes in the US have highlighted the importance of effective communication and outreach activity for project success, and resulted in a set of key recommendations. Communication and outreach activity should be proactive and adopted early, to a well structured, budgeted and transparent approach.**

West of Washington, DC, construction work is underway on the I-66 freeway, close to Manassas National Battlefield Park– the site of two of the bloodiest battles of the US Civil War. The first and second battles of Manassas – or Bull Run to those more closely attached to the Union side of the conflict – are of **huge historical significance locally and nationally**. But skirting Manassas National Battlefield Park to the south, is **I-66, which is also vital as a local and regional transportation artery**.

The Washington DC metropolitan area is rated as the second worst area for traffic congestion throughout the US, and I-66 in Virginia is one of the most congested roadways in the region, with 8-10 hours of heavy traffic experienced each day by motorists. **The route needs an answer to its acute problem of insufficient capacity**. A lot of people, particularly those living to the west and relying on the freeway for daily commuter trips and other journeys, desperately want to see it improved.

Others are concerned about the **possible impacts that the road expansion project could have on the local area**, including adjacent residential communities and the Manassas National Battlefield Park.

The improvement on I-66 has been developing for some years, as a Public Private Partnership (P3) between Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and I-66 Express Mobility Partners (EMP) – a consortium including Meridiam and partners Cintra, APG and John Laing.

Now that the project has reached its construction phase – to the relief of many observers – **numerous elements of the design can be seen to have changed in response to the concerns of local communities and stakeholders**. A pedestrian-cycle path has been realigned in several areas, an elevated ramp has been eliminated from the project, and several stormwater management ponds have been relocated. And arguably of greatest importance, road lighting has been reduced on road ramps close to Manassas to lessen intrusion on Battlefield Park.

There is a wider observation to all this: that **proactive engagement and communication with the public and all stakeholders are vital aspects of infrastructure projects**. Particularly so, it seems, with regard to major road or highway schemes, that potentially impact a great number of people, public opinion is as strong as it is divided.

Meridiamhasdrawnupa**comprehensive set of recommendations for how P3 projects should approach public communication and outreach activity**, partly from its recent experience with developing major highway projects in the US. (see box: Communications and Outreach Key Recommendations).

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High up in the list, a **vital recommendation is for projects to set out a clear and structured approach from the start** – establishing **responsibilities for the concessionaire and the client**. Getting an early and well informed picture of public opinions and concerns is also right up there as a vital engagement activity.

"With regard to I-66, the Commonwealth of Virginia had already gathered a significant amount of public input when it was evaluating how best to improve the route. We then conducted more public outreach by contacting and meeting more than 200 homeowner and property associations in communities along the corridor, a process that is still ongoing now that construction is underway," says Chris Doherty, I-66 EMP's Director for Corporate Affairs.

Meridiam's recommended approach represents a collection of lessons learned in public communication and stakeholder outreach, from things that have gone well and from some experience of where things could have been done better.

**Research and gathering of data gave the I-66 project team a very good overall picture of public views,** however, when the contract was awarded there were still several areas of public opposition that needed to be addressed.

As a result, perceptions existed and opposition in certain areas was still strong, as negative stories were being published locally, specifically on the subject of levels of compensation paid to people relocating to make way for the widened road.

"Despite being awarded close to twice the market rate for their homes, a small number of residents still complained to the media," Chris says. "Our response was to demonstrate to elected officials' satisfaction that the whole system of property purchase and compensation had been carried out fairly.

The important lesson learned, Chris says, is that **negative media reports can be prevented and relations with local communities strengthened, if an open, regular, and transparent approach to providing information is adopted** from the start of projects.

Further evidence of this comes from the fact that the I-66 project team, including I-66 Express Mobility Partners, the Virginia Department of Transportation, the National Park Service and several historic preservation groups were able to meet regularly to address aesthetic concerns about the project, resulting in a final design that will meet the needs of the I-66 toll facility while addressing the needs of the Park.

"If we were to start again from scratch on the I-66 project, we would negotiate gaining full responsibility for communications with the public and media. Indeed, on future projects, we will seek to take on the lead role with outreach activity. **We believe that more information and greater transparency brings better results**. There is much more chance of success if communities are engaged effectively from the start."

To emphasise the point, there is more to the importance of early engagement than making projects run smoothly without bad press, Chris says: "Public opinion can have a great impact on the success of a project, and proactive engagement with community leaders, residents, businesses and elected officials is the most effective way to overcome lingering areas of project opposition.

"In Virginia, we are building a Managed Lanes project, adding dynamically priced toll lanes to increase the capacity of the I-66 corridor. We have not experienced much opposition to the P3 and its addition of tolled highway. There is a general acceptance among the public,

## COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Proactively** establishing and investing in a **coordinated approach** to these activities **during the bid** and negotiation phases **can maximise project opportunity and minimise project risk**

2. Early adoption of proactive and ongoing communication provides multiple benefits, of risk mitigation, **minimising or preventing project delays and establishing a positive reputation and project brand**

3. **Preliminary research** on political, media, community, and stakeholders views is necessary to **define the required scale and scope of communications resources**

4. Communications must be regarded as an **integral element of management**, not a "bolt on"

5. Engage in **Corporate Social Responsibility** as a **strategic initiative** early in process

6. A **realistic and comprehensive Phase One budget for communications** and support should be established **from the outset of projects**. Closer to project completion, budgets should reflect ongoing communication

7. **Establish in contract documents clear roles and protocols for communications coordination** between the project Client, Concessionaire, Client's Consultant and Contractor

8. Concessionaire, in liaison with the project Client, should be the primary organisation for **coordinating engagement with elected officials and the media** ■

providing it can be seen that the funds generated are being invested in better infrastructure, but the same is not expected everywhere, especially in markets that have not previously experienced managed lanes or P3 projects."

One project that initially suffered opposition due to a poor public image, was the Port of Miami Tunnel (POMT) in Florida. This was another P3 scheme, developed with Meridiam as a key partner of the project company, Miami Access Tunnel (MAT) Concessionaire LLC.
The aim of the POMT project was to build a new dedicated access road to Miami's port on Dodge Island, by driving a 1.5km long, twin-bore road tunnel to connect with the MacArthur Causeway on Watson Island. The Causeway bridge would also be widened and a new road system built to connect with the port through the $900m infrastructure project.

**Prior to 2009, however, when MAT reached financial closure on the P3 deal, the POMT project was rated very poorly with the Miami public**. The new access road would link port traffic directly with the Interstate Highway network, so diverting a lot of heavy trucks, traffic congestion and air pollution away from Miami's waterfront and central business district. But to the public, the main beneficiaries appeared to be the port and its customers; and the project's standing was not helped by the fact that all major state sponsored schemes were unpopular at the time, after the city authorities had helped to buy the Miami Marlins their new baseball stadium.

"A public poll, by the Washington Economics Group from the Saint Thomas University in Florida, had found that 68% of the Miami public were against the POMT project. National and local economies were going through a lot of difficulty at the time and virtually nobody, it seemed, was in favour of the project, until we explained that **80-90% of the new jobs to be created, would be filled by people from local communities**," says MAT Chief Executive Officer, Chris Hodgkins.
A concerted publicity and outreach campaign was devised and then launched by MAT as it prepared to begin work on site in 2010, initially with a series of meetings **and activities in local communities. Operation 305 was launched – an initiative aimed at recruiting and training as many workers as possible from the local area** (the main area dialing ZIP code for Miami is 305).

Then as work progressed on site, MAT kept the momentum going with more community outreach activity: a summer college internship program was developed, site visits were held for local school children, a Florida Girl Scouts troop named the project's massive Tunnel Boring Machine (Harriet after equal rights campaigner Harriet Tubman), and proactive efforts established good relations with local print, radio and television media.
"We did this by providing

POMT, FL

supervised access to elements of the project relevant to stories they were interested in," Chris says. "For instance, we showed them convoys of trucks removing spoil from the tunnelling site, not spilling material all over the road and we allowed them to see the TBM at work; **it was a process of being transparent with information, that we controlled and which helped to secure a level of trust and understanding from the media**."

The result of all this was partially very little negative press coverage and a total turnaround in how the project was perceived. Barack Obama visited and held a press conference from the site to highlight the importance of infrastructure and Public Private Partnerships for jobs and prosperity, when he was still President in 2013.

**The biggest measure of success, however, is client satisfaction**, says Chris: "All good communications and outreach validates people. Throughout, it was all about ensuring the city and state authorities got the credit for the project and all it was doing for local communities. And when a deep **reservoir of goodwill** is created, it's seen reflected in project cost, performance and an absence of lawsuits."

The good work continues. With the POMT open to traffic since August 2014 and the MAT concession five years into its 30-year operational phase, the Concessionaire's recent outreach activity has included meetings with Smart Cities and Climate Action groups. The POMT, which incorporates flood gates and an array of technology for guarding against hurricane flooding, has become integral to discussions on the need for greater resilience to extreme weather.

MAT still has a very active role in the Miami community. "We're still telling people all about the project and why not?" says Chris. "There's no point in doing this job, in providing a major asset for a city or region, if you're not telling people and creating a positive vibe."

**It is not always possible to convince everyone of the merits of infrastructure projects**, or that the teams building them are doing things the right way. Major schemes often have to compromise or provide solutions which may not be the ideal outcome for all, but are the best of the options available on the table (see box: Denver's Central 70 project).

But what is vital, is that **all of the options and reasons behind decisions are explained to those affected**. "Construction flaws can be catastrophic, but so too can bad communications, which too often are conducted reactively rather than proactively. **Projects must be transparent to ensure goodwill and to build trust**," Chris says.

Engagement with the public and all stakeholders affected by infrastructure projects should be initiated early – to a communications plan that clearly sets out project partners' roles and responsibilities for delivering information and outreach activity throughout the duration of project concessions. ■

POMT, FL

C70, CO

# DELIVERING THE CENTRAL 70 MESSAGE

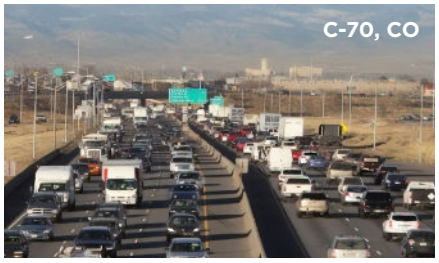
**Colorado's Central 70 project is a very big deal for a lot of people**: the City of Denver, the State of Colorado, and surrounding states, due to the importance of the I-70 freeway as an arterial route, connecting Kansas with Utah via Colorado.

It is predominantly with local people in mind that this major scheme is being managed, however. The I-70 crosses east-west through Central Denver, dissecting densely populated, largely working-class neighbourhoods, partly on an elevated viaduct, which is now over 50 years old and has become very difficult and costly to maintain. The I-70 through Central Denver is characterised by heavy congestion on the viaduct and environments made less appealing in its shadow beneath.

The $1.2bn Central 70 project has been **launched to bring relief to this restricted corridor**, through a Design, Build, Finance and Operate contract being delivered by concessionaire Kiewit Meridiam Partners (KMP).

Essentially, KMP, which started on site in September 2018, will reconstruct a 10-mile stretch of the I-70, adding new lanes including tolled Express Lanes to add greater traffic capacity (KMP will receive an availability payment. The Colorado Department of Transportation will collect the tolls). The viaduct will be demolished and the whole road will be lowered and built in a new subterranean trench. Where the viaduct stood, the trench will become a cut and cover tunnel and **urban areas will be reunited by new parkland and community amenity** and sports facilities built on top.

There is still a very vocal group of people opposed to the project, however. "This is a scheme that has been some 15 to 17 years in the making, **developed to find a traffic solution that will work for the whole area**," says KMP Communications Lead, Matt Sanman.


C-70, CO

"The Colorado DOT initiated public outreach via public meetings locally and with information distributed. But a small but exceptionally vocal part of the community does not want the road to be here at all. They would prefer the highway to be removed and bypass their area entirely."

Colorado DOT did investigate the feasibility of removing I-70 from Central Denver and rerouting it to the north, but this would mean constructing a massive new highway in areas already busy with existing roads; and the C-70 corridor is the location for a large number of local businesses, warehouses and distribution centres. As CDOT's video explains, **downgrading the C-70 would not help planned development of the wider communities it serves**.

Instead, the C-70 project has been launched with local community support fore and centre of the plans. "The client and project consortium have gone above and beyond to help the community," Matt says.

"During environmental study stages, we agreed to do a lot of work to protect local communities from traffic noise and air pollution, including fitting new doors, windows and air conditioning. We're also treating a park near a local elementary school with improvements and we're spending a $1m Community Development fund on projects including that of a non-profit organisation distributing fresh food among the community."

One year into the construction project, **community engagement remains a crucial element**. Matt says: "We're plugging away at this, attending as any local meetings and making ourselves as available as we can to listen to the concerns of people locally. **We want to convey the message that we're here, we're listening and will help as much as we can**." ■

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