

**STRATEGIES FOR GENERATING PUBLIC COOPERATION AND  
SUPPORT FOR FREEWAY CONGESTION MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS**

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## SUMMARY

This paper presents a discussion on the importance of public cooperation and support for freeway congestion management programs. Initially, the impact of public cooperation and support on a project's success is examined. The typical facility or device utilized for freeway congestion management purposes has very little effectiveness if the public is not utilizing them correctly. Basic considerations with regard to generating public cooperation and support for programs are also presented in order to gain a preliminary perspective on the topic. In subsequent chapters, the paper provides examples of potential strategies and some associated actions that can be utilized for generating the necessary cooperation and support that was previously discussed. The paper points out, however, that these example strategies and actions may not necessarily be the ideal solutions for each program's circumstances. All types of programs are unique in some form, and each will need to have individual strategies formulated for specific purposes if broad public cooperation and support is to be gained. Finally, a nationwide sample of actual freeway congestion management programs is presented and discussed with regard to the actions and strategies that are used in each of these programs.

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## INTRODUCTION

Freeway congestion management programs are becoming increasingly utilized by transportation agencies seeking to address growing traffic problems on urban freeways. In the past, congestion problems were typically alleviated through new construction. If traffic demand was exceeding the available freeway capacity, more lanes were added or another freeway was built. These types of actions allowed for more traffic, that often generated increased problems, that in turn required additional actions. Recent federal legislation, however, may signal an end to this circular pattern of addressing congestion problems.

With the enactment of the 1990 Clean Air Act, mandating decreases in VMTs in many urban areas and pending federal highway legislation that may reduce federal funding for new freeway facilities, freeway construction and reconstruction projects may no longer be viable alternatives for addressing congestion problems. Transportation initiatives that seek to provide better utilization of the existing transportation system, through reducing demand and encouraging more efficient modes of transportation, must be developed.

Freeway congestion management programs are examples of these types of initiatives and may offer potential solutions to various urban transportation problems. Examples of some specific programs that may be considered as freeway congestion management programs are included in Table 1. As with all types of transportation projects, congestion management programs require the cooperation and support of the general public during their initial planning, design, and construction. However, for these congestion management programs to be successful and provide the service for which they are intended, they must maintain the cooperation and support generated during the planning, design, and construction stages throughout their operational duration. In other words, providing the system is one thing, getting motorist to effectively use it is another.

If motorists are unable to understand a freeway congestion management program, what services are provided, how to utilize these services, and what the benefits of are, it is unlikely that they will cooperate or support the initiative. From this point, the program may not be able to provide the function for which it was intended and could possibly be disbanded as a result. It is, therefore, vital that freeway congestion management programs include strategies, within their design and operation, that can ensure the public's cooperation and support throughout the duration of the project. This paper will present some initial considerations along with basic strategies and specific actions through which public cooperation and support can be gained. Actual case studies of programs in which specific techniques were implemented to generate public cooperation and support will also be presented along with resulting benefits to the program.

Table 1. Examples of Freeway Congestion Management Programs.

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Accident Investigation Sites
Call Boxes
Transportation Demand Management
High Occupancy Vehicle Lanes
Incident Management Techniques
Motorist Assistance Patrols
Ramp Metering
Special Event Planning
Traffic Management and Surveillance
Work-Zone Management

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## BACKGROUND CONSIDERATIONS

Getting the public's cooperation and support for a freeway congestion management program, or any type of program that aims to control or direct public behavior, requires the incorporation of some fundamental considerations. This paper identifies and discusses three key considerations: the constituency of the program, marketing actions, and the overall quality of the program. By addressing these considerations, effective strategies and actions can be developed to generate public cooperation and support for the respective programs.

### The Program's Constituency

Knowing what group a program is aimed at serving and having an understanding of their needs is a vital necessity for planning the program's implementation. Additionally, those groups and individuals who may seek to influence or oversee the program, or who may be affected by it, are also of importance. Generally, the constituents for a freeway congestion management program can be categorized into the following groups:

1. *Motorists*--individuals whose travel will be influenced by the program.
2. *Elected Officials*--local, regional, state, and national officials who can often exert oversight and regulate funding.
3. *Agency Staff*--the staff working for the agency (or agencies) under which the program is being implemented.
4. *Additional Public Agencies*--law enforcement, fire departments, municipal governments, public works or other transportation agencies, etc.
5. *Business and Community Groups*--employers, commercial businesses, neighborhood, special interest groups, road-user groups, etc.
6. *Media*--television, radio, and newspapers.
7. *General Public*--individuals such as home and property owners who may not be included in the previous six groups but are still effected by the program.

### Marketing Actions

Individuals involved in the planning, design, and operation of freeway congestion management programs do not often recognize the need for marketing in their programs. "Marketing aims to influence mass behavior"(1). Transportation officials should not skeptically look at marketing as an avoidable nuisance but rather view it as an effective tool for generating a positive public attitude and compliance with their program.

There are a number of potential advantages that can be gained through effective marketing actions:

1. Heightening public awareness of the organizational mission;
2. Building constituencies, creating partnerships, and fostering support;
3. Increasing public confidence;
4. Facilitating immediate use of the facility; and
5. Providing information which enhances future project planning activities (2).

Marketing, however, is not without its limitations and should not be readily accepted as a final solution to a program's problems. Marketing is inherently inefficient at bringing about change and cannot guarantee that peoples' habits and biases will be overcome. Additionally, marketing programs almost always entail added cost and are not guaranteed to reach everyone to whom they are intended (1).

### **The Program's Quality**

The United States is a free market country. People have the freedom to choose and will exercise their right to do so. Through marketing, the prospective constituents of a program are introduced to its benefits and can be encouraged to realize these benefits by accepting the program. It is important to realize, however, that marketing will not keep the public involved with a program. Once the public initially tries a program, it can make its decision as to whether or not the service is beneficial. If a quality program is being delivered, the public's acceptance and support will be maintained. If the program fails to meet the public's need, no amount of marketing and public relations work is going to get people to accept the program. No company has failed from dedication to product quality and customer service (3).

## STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

There are numerous ways to identify and discuss strategies and the related actions that are associated with each. This section identifies several key strategies for generating public support for congestion management programs and corresponding actions for accomplishing each strategy. For certain instances, similar actions can be applied to different strategies and as a result, these actions may be presented more than once.

### Providing Information

Assimilating and distributing information about a particular program is likely to be the most important requirement for ensuring the public's cooperation and support for that program. Information should consist of two types of information: *benefits* and *operations*. The public should know what type of improvements the program is expected to provide; however, it is important to not overstate the anticipated benefits. The public should also be aware of how the program and its related facilities will operate in order for the program to be successful.

To effectively provide information for the public, the following four questions should be addressed.

#### *What information needs to be provided?*

1. *Warrants for the program*--The public should understand the reasons for implementing the programs and what type of problems the program will attempt to solve.
2. *Facility details*--Motorists need to know what type of facilities are available and how to use them.
3. *Where to go for additional information*--Citizens will likely have questions regarding a program. A telephone "hotline" can be a useful means for providing more information.

#### *Who should receive the information?*

1. *Motorists*--These are, obviously, the principal individuals to notify regarding an upcoming program. Origin/destination studies could be helpful in identifying travelers to target concerning a particular program.
2. *Media*--Television, radio, and newspapers effective means of distributing information over a broad spectrum. Unless transportation officials make an effort to provide these media sources with correct information, the public may receive inaccurate or misleading information.



3. *Business and Community Leaders*--Leaders in the community can be useful in distributing information within their particular organizations.
4. *Other Public Agencies*--The help and cooperation of multiple public agencies are often necessary for a major program to be successfully implemented.

*When should the information be distributed?*

1. *Prior to the project, tell what is going to happen*--When the public is unaware of or misinformed about upcoming programs, problems and general frustration can result.
2. *During the project, tell what is currently happening*--Update the public on how the project is progressing.
3. *After the project, tell what happened*--For programs with set time frames, updating the public on the program's results can be useful when the time comes to implement similar programs.

*How should the information be provided?*

1. *Signing*--Temporary signs erected at key locations, changeable message signs, and commercial billboards are ways of distributing information to travelers within the area of a program's implementation.
2. *Mailouts*--Specific information can often be directly distributed to specific target groups through mass mailings.
3. *Information Booths*--Primary activity centers and major public events offer good opportunities for distributing information. In addition to allowing the public to have a chance to ask questions and receive pamphlets, information booths can be used for publicity purposes.
4. *Public Meetings*--Specific groups can be targeted for direct interaction with public meetings, workshops, or forums. Formal presentations can be made on a program and suggestions and questions can be accurately addressed.

The answers to these questions are, of course, dependent upon the specific program under consideration. Once these questions have been answered, however, specific actions can be taken to implement the strategy. These actions can include the following.

*ACTION: Use a variety of techniques*

Developing a comprehensive approach to distributing information often requires the utilization of different techniques to disseminate it. A large portion of the target group to receive information may elude a single technique for distributing it. Efficiency is important, but any and all techniques for distributing information are worth evaluating.

*ACTION: Contact the media*

If a major transportation program is of public concern, the media will attempt to report information on it. It is up to the agency involved with the program to initially contact the media and insure that its information is accurate and sufficiently describes the project. There are numerous techniques available to glean valuable media coverage. One possibility is to offer tours of the facilities associated with a given project. This will allow the media to have an informed, first-hand exposure to the program. Additionally, convincing the media about the necessity of a program is a major step toward convincing the public.

*ACTION: Appoint a "traffic spokesperson"*

It can often be beneficial to have one person who is ready and willing to field public inquiries and media requests. The individual will become familiar to key groups of constituents. This can be very important for major incidents when someone who is knowledgeable is in demand for immediate and widespread availability.

## **Early Planning**

Most people realize that planning ahead is important to effectively implement any type of plan. It is particularly important for implementing public support actions. If these actions are not formulated at the initiation of a program, attempting to implement them once the program has started is often too little too late.

*ACTION: Multi-agency task force*

During the initial planning stage of a program, a task force should be formulated that involves personnel from all of the different agencies that could be affected by the program. A task force could deal with issues such as trouble shooting and contingency planning and designing solutions to the problems that are mutually acceptable among all of the agencies involved. The task force can be an effective measure for avoiding potential inter-agency conflicts that may occur once the program is implemented.

*ACTION: Establish specific goals and objectives*

Clearly stating and establishing the goals and objectives of a program during the early stages of the design process can help to lend credibility and a sense of direction to the program. The public is better able to understand and accept a program if they understand its purpose. It is important, however, that the goals are not overstated. For example, a program's goal should not be "to eliminate congestion". It is very unlikely that one single

program will be able to effectively and permanently remove congestion. Instead, the goal should be "to help reduce congestion". This way, if congestion returns or is not entirely eliminated, the program can still be a success if some type of reduction can be established.

Additionally, established goals and objectives provide organization to the program's planning and design. If the program does not have a clear mission from the onset, it will be easy for individuals, inside and outside of the implementing agency, to attempt to redirect a program once it has been initiated. Multiple changes during a program's design stages can cause delays and complications.

### **Fostering Public Interaction**

Providing a means through which the public can lend support for a program is half the battle in gaining that support. If the public does not have a way to express its appreciation and its approval for a program, the potential for this support may be lost.

Importantly, public support should be initiated during the early stages of planning. The public should be able to provide input regarding a program at a time when its concerns can be effectively addressed. If the public becomes involved after basic design features have been established, its resulting frustration is manifested in dissatisfaction with the program and a lasting mistrust of the implementing agency (2).

A dilemma that agencies are faced with, however, is the fact that the public does not become involved with programs until they feel that their personal interests are at stake. Freeway motorists may notice signs advising them of a potential ramp metering program, but they may not voice their concerns over the project until it is actually implemented and they are delayed on their way to work. Advising the concerned motorists that they had the opportunity to speak out in advance of the project will not be an acceptable response. Agencies must anticipate and take steps to avoid these circumstances by using every possible means to acquire citizen input prior to the program's enactment. The solution to this problem may require that the implementing agency go to the public rather than expecting the public to come to them.

#### ***ACTION: Distribute questionnaires***

During the implementation of the program, agencies should take the time to ask the public "How are we doing?" Public responses to questionnaires are almost always favorable, particularly if the respondents have recently benefited from the program's service. Once the responses are received, they should be formulated into a summary that can be used as public testimony for the program.

### **Program Monitoring**

Agencies implementing freeway congestion management programs typically will spend a great deal of time designing a good project. Likewise, agencies should allocate time and resources toward ensuring that the program is implemented and operates as it was intended.

To accomplish this goal, various aspects of the program should be monitored to validate its operations.

Monitoring the operations of a program should serve to evaluate the effectiveness of a program from the following two perspectives.

*Is the program a technical success?*

When a program is implemented, certain benefits are expected to be gained from it. Typically, these benefits correspond to the warrants under which the program was directed toward alleviating. Agencies implementing a program should maintain an operational data base in order to evaluate the performance of the program and document any of the resulting technical benefits.

*Is the program perceived to be success?*

Simply because a program is a technical success does not necessarily mean that its constituents will perceive it as being such. Political groups, other agencies, and the general public do not readily accept the technical merits of a program if they do not feel their interests are being addressed. Agencies should take steps to gauge the reaction of constituents pertaining to congestion management programs so that negative perceptions can be immediately addressed.

*ACTION: Conduct before-and-after studies*

Depending on the type of freeway congestion management program implemented and the desired data to be collected, there are a number of methods in which to go about conducting a before-and-after study. Manual or automatic vehicle counts, postcard surveys, travel time runs, and delay studies are basic examples of measures that can be used to collect data. A before and after perspective is important, so plans must be incorporated to collect data prior to, as well as after, the program is established. For this reason, the data collection procedure should be included in the overall design of the program. Additionally, the results of the data counts should be documented and used to validate the program from a technical standpoint.

*ACTION: Enforce regulations for the program*

This action is an important reason for having interagency cooperation when implementing a new freeway congestion management strategy. Law enforcement agencies must often be utilized to enforce the regulations of newly implemented programs such as HOV lanes and ramp metering. Enforcement is necessary from a monitoring standpoint because it provides the implementing agency with information on how well the program is being accepted by the motorists. High violation rates can indicate that the program is not being positively perceived. Additionally, enforcement of programs help to lend credibility to them. Despite being initially accepted by motorist programs will lose their effectiveness if their regulations are not enforced.

## **PROGRAMS AND TECHNIQUES**

There are a number of successful freeway congestion management programs under operation throughout the country. A key element with many of these is the inclusion of specific techniques that correspond to particular strategies for generating public cooperation and support for the programs. A few examples of successful programs are presented in this section along with the techniques and resulting benefits for each.

### **"Minuteman" Patrol--*Illinois DOT***

The Illinois DOTs "Minuteman" Emergency Traffic Patrol is a freeway motorist assistance program that has been in existence for more than 30 years. Due to the program's \$3.5 million yearly operating budget, it is frequently the target of politicians and bureaucrats seeking to cut budgets and save money. Recognizing the importance of the program, and seeking to shield the program's vulnerability to budgeting cutting measures, IDOT adopted a strategy aimed at developing public support for the program. To accomplish this, a mechanism was devised through which public support could be readily solicited. Each time a motorist was assisted by the patrol, a "business card" was given to them which identified the program and the program's sponsor. Additionally, the card provided an address to which comments could be made regarding the service. As a result, more than 600 letters are received each year from motorists who were assisted by the minuteman program.

The principal benefit derived from this strategy and the corresponding technique is that a large portion of budget cutting initiatives are fended off by the multitude of support letters received for the program. Additionally, IDOT is able to directly interact with its constituents, promote the purpose and mission of the program and foster positive public interaction. Without this program, the full degree of these benefits would not be realized.

### **"North Central Expressions" Newsletter--*Texas SDHPT***

The Texas State Department of Highways and Public Transportation is currently in the process of reconstructing the North Central Expressway in Dallas, Texas. This program is a major undertaking by the SDHPT and will involve years of planning, design, and construction.

Additionally, a number of congestion management programs will be initiated with the program, in order to alleviate some of the traffic congestion associated with work zones along the corridor. To increase the effectiveness of the congestion management program, the SDHPT pursued a strategy aimed at fostering interaction with the numerous constituent groups associated with the project. To accomplish this, a quarterly newsletter, entitled "North Central Expressions" was developed to relate information to constituents.

This technique provided a mechanism that enabled the SDHPT to inform constituents about pending congestion management programs and update them on how these programs could be utilized. The paper conveyed a clear statement of objectives

related to the progress of the project and gave constituents a consistent source of information about the program in general.

#### **"Help-394" Information Number--*Minnesota DOT***

The HELP-394 information number has been an integral part of the marketing and information strategy implement by the MnDOT in association with the construction of the I-394 highway system in Minneapolis/St Paul, Minnesota. The hotline was a technique for providing current information regarding congestion management programs associated with construction areas, lane closings, detours, and various transit services.

Upon implementation of the HELP-394 project, a number of benefits became evident. First, the program helped to foster interaction between MnDOT and its public constituents. Second, it promoted the utilization of HOV lanes associated with work zone and/or lane closings. The program also helped to improve ridesharing and transit programs as well as distribute information about these programs. Finally, the number enabled the constituency to be directly involved with the process and feel that their concerns were being considered (4).

#### **SR 520 Postcard Survey--*Washington State DOT***

In coordination with the implementation of a ramp metering program on SR 520 in Seattle, Washington, WSDOT conducted a postcard survey at two freeway entrance ramps where metering was installed. The purpose of the survey was to serve as a before-and-after, origin destination (OD) study to investigate the effects of the ramp metering system. The survey included questions regarding the zones of origin and destination for travellers, as well as travel time and vehicle occupancy information. Of the 4000 surveys distributed at the on-ramps, 55% of them were returned.(5)

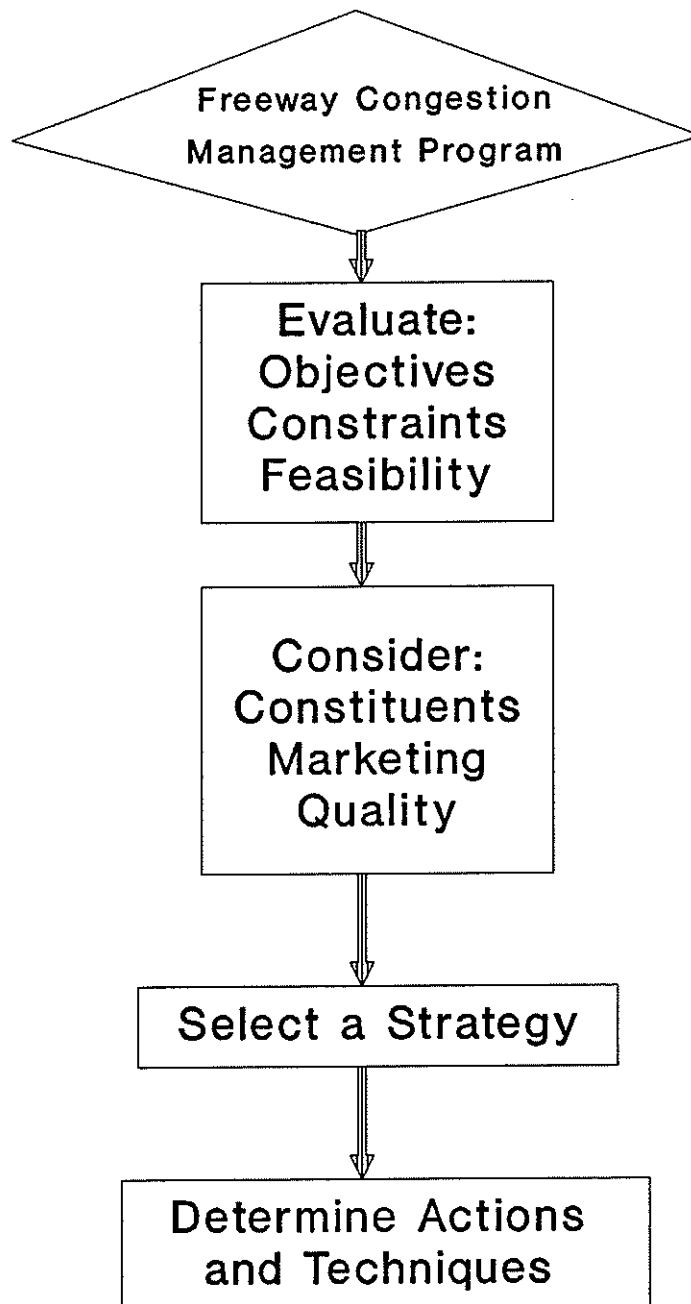
The survey enabled WSDOT to assess the technical improvements generated from the program as well as evaluate the public's perception of the program. Additionally, the survey allowed the agency to interact with the public and initially gauge the public's opinion of the project prior to its implementation.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has sought to demonstrate the importance of getting cooperation and support from motorists and other constituents for freeway congestion management strategies. Basic considerations for formulating these strategies have been presented, along with examples of specific strategies and actions to correspond to each of them. Finally, some sample projects were presented that demonstrated the implementation and effectiveness of techniques aimed at accomplishing certain strategies.

The purpose of this paper was not to provide solutions to problems associated with public cooperation and support. The intent was to provide a discussion of the issues associated with generating public cooperation and support and a mechanism to use in developing strategies and the associated actions for specific programs. Each program aimed at managing freeway congestion problems is unique. Different types of facilities, project constraints, constituent expectations, and other factors combine to create a variety of challenges for individuals and agencies working in this area. Most of the challenges are similar to those faced by any type of agency dealing with a transportation program. The unique challenge though for freeway congestion management programs is in maintaining the cooperation and support of the constituents to a program throughout its implementation and operation.

When an individual or agency sets out to develop some strategies to help generate cooperation and support for their program, the model depicted in Figure 1 could be a helpful procedure to follow. Basically, the strategy development model is an outline of the format of this report. The components of the project must be understood, certain considerations should be made, and the goals and objectives of the strategy should be determined. Once the strategy has been determined specific actions and techniques can be applied in order to accomplish it.



**Figure 1. Developmental Model for Generating Public Cooperation and Support.**



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