

Promoting the Importance of Road Safety to Local Elected Officials

Introduction

Promoting road safety should come first and can be incorporated into projects focused on maintenance, mobility and infrastructure condition improvement. Local elected and appointed officials play an important role in supporting highway safety programs through leadership, funding, and political support. Officials participate in identifying and selecting projects, developing safety plans, and establishing priorities. However, in addition to road safety, local officials have many competing priorities. Therefore, promoting the importance of local and rural road safety to decision-makers requires an appreciation of the role these officials play in advancing safety priorities along with an understanding of how to reach these officials with the safety message. This document describes how local and rural road owners can engage local leadership to address road safety issues and provides resources where additional guidance and information can be found.

Elected officials at the local level make decisions on funding measures, support programs to educate drivers, and enact legislation enforcing traffic laws. Regular communication with elected officials will help secure policies that benefit safety programs and will establish a relationship with decision makers as partners in successful safety initiatives. Relationships with elected officials should be seen as a two-way street. By cultivating these relationships, local and rural road safety professionals know they have an ally in a decision-making position, and, conversely, safety advocates can be a helpful resource to public officials by providing updates and information about what is happening in the community. Being able to communicate to elected officials the importance of roadway safety improvements to the safe travel of the community is an important step. The best way to convince officials of the importance of safety investments is to highlight the needs of your community and show that the issue has the support of the public. Elected officials will care about improving safety if they know their constituents care about it.

Communicating with Local Officials

There are a variety of ways to communicate with local officials including emails, phone calls, letters, and formal or informal visits. Local officials are often part-time and have a number of competing responsibilities. In communicating, it is important to remember to:

- Keep the communication simple, clear, concise and to the point;
- Use facts to back up your conclusions or recommendations;
- Be straightforward and do not assume they understand what you do;



- Summarize your conclusions, recommendations, and requests on a one-page handout that you can distribute or leave behind;
- Be a good listener, even if the official disagrees with your position; and
- Follow up with answers to any questions or requests for additional information.

Invite elected officials to become involved with safety programs to build relationships and facilitate a feeling of ownership. Keep officials informed regarding programs and program progress. On a periodic basis invite their attendance at meetings.

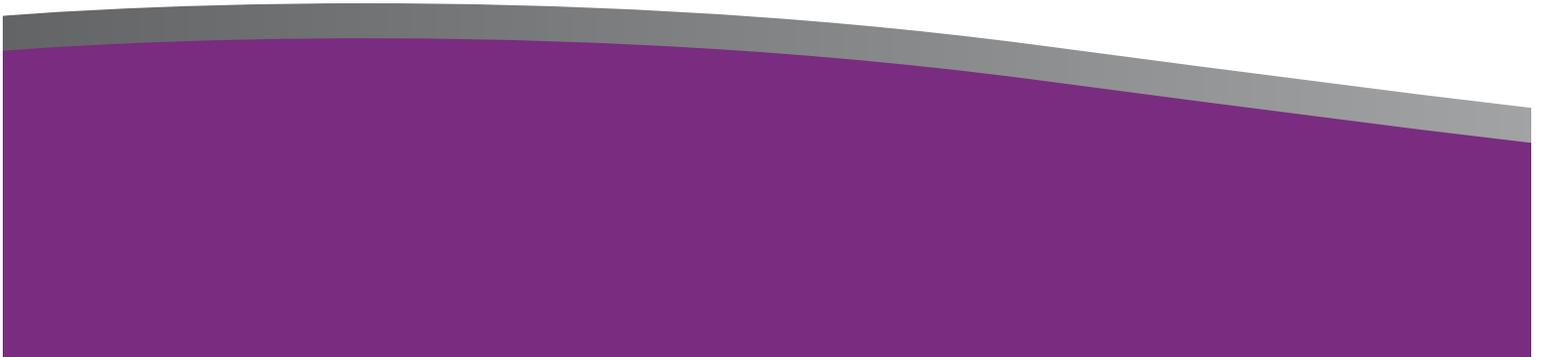
In dealing with emergent (or crisis) situations such as when a serious crash occurs in a community, provide briefings to elected officials on situations and allow them to take the lead as appropriate. Cultivating working relationships helps in dealing with crisis situations and instills public confidence.

Case Study

The Michigan Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP) engaged the attention of local elected officials by offering a half-day workshop entitled: “Elected Officials: What YOU Need to Know About Traffic Safety (And What YOUR Constituents Expect YOU to Know!)” The intent of the workshop was to educate local officials on the importance of leveraging professional expertise in making informed decisions regarding safety programs.¹ The course provided real-world examples of commonly misunderstood traffic safety concepts. For example, public officials learned that installing unwarranted stop signs can increase mid-block speeds. Many officials who attended walked away with a better appreciation of the need to consult safety professionals to make informed decisions about safety programs. Technical staff attending the workshop also learned techniques for how to improve communications with local elected officials.

Resources

There are a variety of educational resources available to keep local officials updated with current information and announcements regarding safety needs and issues for the community. Information that can be helpful includes general background on local and rural road safety needs, reports on projects and countermeasures, and information describing funding sources as well as the benefits of safety improvements.



Federal Sources of Information



The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Office of Safety provides national highway safety leadership. More information is available at: www.safety.fhwa.dot.gov/



Local and Rural Safety Program with the FHWA Office of Safety is responsible for developing and delivering products and programs focused on local and rural road safety. For more information, visit: www.safety.fhwa.dot.gov/local_rural



The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is dedicated to achieving the highest standards of excellence in motor vehicle and highway safety. To learn more, go to: <http://www.nhtsa.gov/>

States Sources of Information

The State Department of Transportation (DOT) is responsible for operating the State-owned highway systems and administers the Federal-Aid Highway Program.

The State Governor's Highway Safety Program Office provides resources to promote highway safety in each State.



The Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP) and Tribal Technical Assistance Program (TTAP) serve the needs of local counties, parishes, townships, cities, towns, and Tribal reservations to improve their roads and bridges by supplying them with a variety of training programs, an information clearinghouse, new and existing technology updates, personalized technical assistance and newsletters. For more information, visit: <http://www.ltap.org/>

Rural Highway Safety Clearinghouse



The Center for Excellence in Rural Safety (CERS) at the University of Minnesota maintains a Web site with news, webinars, and publications located at: www.ruralsafety.umn.edu

Industry Associations and Groups

Various industry and trade groups conduct research and prepare reports addressing highway safety needs. These groups and their web pages include:



American Public Works Association website: <http://www.apwa.net/>



National Association of County Engineers website:
<http://www.countyengineers.org/Pages/default.aspx>



National Association of Development Organizations Rural Transportation website:
<http://www.nado.org/>



National Association of Towns and Townships (NATaT) website: <http://www.natat.org/>



Roadway Safety Foundation website: <http://www.roadwaysafety.org/>

¹ Federal Highway Administration, "Traffic Safety Education for Nonengineers," *Public Roads*, May/June 2009.