Staffing and Developing A Long Term Public Relations Program

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In his president’s message at the International Public Works Congress in 1982, Joe Casazza announced that the APWA Board of Directors had approved his recommendation to establish a task force devoted to improving communication about Public Works. This is a tremendous idea. We desperately need to learn how to improve the public’s perception of our profession so we can attract the support so badly needed to rehabilitate our deteriorating public works facilities.

Somehow, sometime in the past several decades, the cheers for public works changed to boos. Many of our grandparents and parents remember houses without running water and electricity. When they had to manage without all-weather access to work, schools and markets if they lived in small towns. They hailed the construction of the first ugly, erector-set water tower because it informed everyone that theirs was indeed a progressive community with its own water system and no more unreliable individual wells. When the sewers followed, the hated privies also disappeared. And when the streets were paved, someone probably cut a ribbon and everyone celebrated. Caught up in the euphoria, the local newspaper surely editorialized about the intimate correlation between progress and public works.

Then the news turned dark. Instead of reporting about the herculean task of providing sewer, water, sanitation, and streets to the people streaming to the suburbs after World War II, the media decried the number of trees cut down to accommodate them and the number of acres of farmland removed from production. The environmentalists arose and castigated governmental officials for building sewers without treatment plants and later, for allowing hazardous wastes to be disposed of indiscriminately. We could have done a lot more than we did to prevent some of these ills. Maybe that’s why we stood mutely by and absorbed more than our share of growing attacks.

In the late 1950’s, two huge public works projects got underway with appropriate fanfare. The massive water-pollution-control program started first, with the goal of cleaning up United States waterways. A
few years later, the interstate highway program cranked up. However, recent publicity on water-pollution control has focused on excessive costs and poor results, while the hugely successful interstate program is now being second-guessed as to why we ever accepted it without provision for maintenance to keep it operating.

In the past several years, the Public Works News has consisted of reports of the many unsafe bridges and roads. And in the past several months, we have witnessed articles in Time, Newsweek, Wall Street Journal, and other respected, well-read publications that describe the billions and trillions of dollars worth of public works needs of all types, frequently called infrastructure. It still sounds like bad news. But it’s a necessary first step toward gaining support for rehabilitation.

Our challenge now is to find better, more economical methods of reconstruction and to communicate this news to the media. We have little doubt about finding better rehabilitation methods because our engineers are inventive people, but we’ll have to learn a lot more about communication—and quickly. No matter how well we do the job, if the public perception of it is bad or even nonexistent, we’ll fail.

A good example of this was the Hobson Road Renovation in Fort Wayne. Our Street Engineering Department designed the four lane thoroughfare in house. It consists of a four lane facility with curbs, sidewalks, streetlights, and interconnected computerized traffic signals. It was constructed by Brooks Construction Co., Inc., Fort Wayne, a very reputable and cooperative contractor. Several times during its construction the news media published articles and letters to the editors criticizing the detour, inconvenience, etc. Our mayor Win Moses, Jr. almost wished we hadn’t started the project. However, it is completed now, and I am happy to inform you that the Indiana Concrete Council has selected it as the Outstanding Public Thoroughfare of 1982 in Indiana. Appropriate plaques for the City of Fort Wayne as owner/designer and Brooks Construction Co. will be presented to them at the annual awards meeting on March 4, 1983.

I mentioned this particular project for two reasons:
1. I am honored that our engineers and the City of Fort Wayne received this award.
2. That the City of Fort Wayne has a Public Information Department that issues perhaps ten news releases and meeting announcements per day, in addition to scheduling frequent news conferences for the mayor. Those efforts are coordinated by two public information officers, Cheryl A. Kunberger and David Perlini. They are the key to our Public Works Awareness Program and they are doing an excellent professional job.

A good example is the national publicity we received during and after the great flood of 82. All of the national news networks carried
the flood worldwide. In addition to that Mayor Moses and I appeared on national network programs such as: Good Morning America, Night Line, and That's Incredible. Readers Digest featured an article in the December 1982 issue entitled "The Kids Who Saved Fort Wayne." The article did not only give the kids the credit they deserved but also made the public aware of the damages to the public work facilities the flood caused. Not in a technical way that you or I as engineers would do it, but in a way that the public could understand with statements like: "Floodwaters backed through the sewer system, blowing manhole covers into the air." "Earthen dikes built to contain the rivers were saturated and would soon be useless." "From the City's east side came an especially dismal report: The Pemberton Dike was as soggy as toothpaste."

The national coverage was great. However it is the local media coverage that the Public Information Office gets us that does the most towards public works awareness in Fort Wayne. A good example of that is the series of seven articles on the deterioration of public works in Fort Wayne and Allen County written by Journal-Gazette staff reporters.

The articles have been entered in a news media contest and I am confident that they will win. I have xerox copies of them for any of you that would like one. So I will not elaborate too long on their content. However, I would like to quote a line or two from each. The first of seven articles was entitled "The Crumbling County:—Hidden Cost of Neglect". The very first paragraph reads: "Allen County's backbone—its network of streets, bridges, sewers, water lines, railroads and other public works—is cracking."

"Years of neglect, too little money for needed replacements, old age, public apathy and politics have chipped away at the skeleton, leaving it brittle, bruised and, in many places, broken."

"The signs of decay are showing up everywhere: worn roads riddled with potholes, rusting bridges in eastern Allen County, collapsed sewers downtown, crumbling curbs in city neighborhoods and ruptured water mains."

Does that sound familiar? Yes, because Allen County and Fort Wayne aren't alone with their public works woes. A similar—and often more serious—malady is eating away at the skeletons of cities throughout the nation, especially those older, industrial communities of the Northeast and Midwest. And because the disease has advanced so rapidly during the last decade, we engineers, urban planners, technical experts and even politicians—here and elsewhere—have to start to give it urgent attention and scramble to find a cure. That's why we are here today at Road School.

The second article was entitled: "Aging Water System Faces Hefty Repair Bill". It pointed out the following:
1. Miles of water lines: 735
3. Repair cost over 10 years: $25 million.
4. Lost Water: 16 percent.
5. Main breaks: 250 yearly.

I wonder how many citizens in Fort Wayne knew this before they were made aware by the article? Not many. As long as drinking water pours from the taps and toilets flush properly, residents haven’t worried about water and sewer lines buried deep underground. But, OH how they can complain when they are out of water or have to detour around a mainbreak while a maintenance crew is repairing it.

And as unglamorous as repairs and replacements are, the article acknowledged that a day of reckoning is near: if Fort Wayne’s backbone is to be healed, deferred maintenance can no longer be put off until tomorrow. The public must be aware that funding has to be found.

The third article was entitled: “Sewer Cave-In Reminder of Badly Needed Repairs.” It stated the following:
1. Miles of sewer lines: about 800
2. Need repairs: about 260 miles
3. Need constant maintenance: about 260 miles
4. Repair cost over 10 years: $25 million
5. Complaints: 350 a month

Again this problem isn’t just Fort Wayne’s. However, cities throughout the country are plagued with dilapidated, strained and inadequate sewer systems, victims of maintenance deferred far too long. In a National-League of Cities Survey conducted in late 1980, 48 percent of nearly 700 public works officials who responded reported that their sewage and drainage facilities needed major rehabilitation or replacement.

In Fort Wayne most of the central-city sewers are 50 years or older, and some date to the 1860s when the sewer system began operation. With time, gases, acids and other contaminants have caused them to erode.

Floods also have taken their toll. The 1978 flood and the near-record flooding in March of 1982 exerted undue pressure on the lines, leaving them weakened and vulnerable to collapse. So far this year we have attributed five major sewer cave-ins to the March flood. We have documented roughly three million in sewer damage wrought by the high waters.

The fourth article was entitled: “Some Railways Hold Own; Neglect
Victimizes Others”. I won’t spend much time with the railroads except to point out that the article stated that:

1. Miles in Northeast Indiana: 875
2. Miles in abandoned since 1970: 1,640

The fifth article was entitled: “Money, As Usual, Answer To Fixing Wornout Roads:” It stated the following:

1. Miles in Fort Wayne and Allen County: 2,300
2. Need repair: 1,200 miles
3. Repair cost over 10 years: $114 Million

Fort Wayne has 746 miles of roads, neighborhood streets and alleys to maintain. But tight finances have prevented the city from resurfacing and rebuilding the 37.3 miles it must average each year to replace roads within 20 years—resurfacing’s expected life span.

Traditionally, up until 1982, it very seldom exceeded 12 miles. In 1982, the city has played catch-up. Mayor Win Moses requested a $3.1 million bond issue plus $1.2 million from gasoline sales taxes to allow us to resurface more than 47 miles of streets. All of the $4.3 million dollars is under contract and we are preparing bids for about a million more at the present time. That means that we will resurface a total of 59.5 miles by October 1983.

However, since 1975, the last year bonds were issued for resurfacing, the city has resurfaced an average of 12.72 miles per year. Without bond issues or special appropriations, the city has about $1.1 million annually for resurfacing, but Fort Wayne needs a minimum of $2.5 million per year for resurfacing over the next decade—even with this year’s catch-up program—just to maintain the current roads.

The sixth article was: “Age, Tight Funds Take Toll On Local Bridge System”. The article stated:

1. Number bridges: 299 major bridges, more than 700 minor ones.
2. Closed: 8
3. Need immediate replacement: 14
4. Need replacement by 1990: 33
5. Replacement and repair costs over 10 years: $60 million

The county’s 1,000 bridges have been losing that fight for so long that $60 million is needed during the next decade to make long overdue repairs, according to Ed Heidenreich, Design Engineer of the Allen County Highway Department. With current tax levels, Allen County expects to receive $10 million for bridge repair during the next 10 years,
that leaves the county $50 million short of the amount it needs.

The last of the seven articles was entitled: "A City That Works' Takes Planning, Money". The article stated that despite the fact that the City of Fort Wayne is stretching that tax dollar as far as it will go and implementing a new comprehensive pavement and management system that will let the city keep closer track of how much it spends on capital improvements and maintenance and how much it can afford. The fact remains that there is not enough funds to maintain the existing infrastructures. The public must be made aware of this and the articles published in the Journal-Gazette did an excellent job of accomplishing that.

I would also request each of you to develop a good relationship with the media to encourage them to publish articles pertaining to public works and their accomplishments as well as their problems. The public must be made aware.

The APWA Task Force on Communications can tell us what we need to do to develop these necessary skills. But meanwhile, we can begin cultivating those city hall and statehouse reporters by telling them the good news about public works and building their confidence in us. That's a necessary first step—one that too many of us have too long overlooked. We dare not fail at this task.