

chapter

6

COMMUNICATING BETWEEN ADVOCATES AND TRANSPORTATION PROFESSIONALS

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MYTH:

Advocates and transportation professionals live in two parallel universes that never intersect.

REALITY:

Advocates and government employees share a common concern for safety. Better communication is possible and leads to improvements in bicycling and pedestrian infrastructure.

INTRODUCTION

The first chapters of this manual help advocates understand and navigate a maze of transportation facilities, policies, and related government agencies. This chapter aims to facilitate communication between advocates and transportation professionals in order to improve bicyclist and pedestrian safety and access to transportation networks.

Transportation professionals are the stewards of the systems we enjoy when bicycling and walking, and they use and enjoy these systems. Advocates represent a large constituency—like the tens of thousands of members of local bicycling clubs—that use bicycling and pedestrian facilities. Advocates distill civic opinions and desires from users and deliver this information to transportation professionals and governmental representatives. Successful governments listen and react to a broad constituency of user groups.

This chapter provides general ways to develop empathy between advocates and transportation professionals. Empathy makes advocates more effective representatives of constituent groups, and allows transportation professionals to better integrate feedback from these groups into public policy decisions.

COMMUNICATION

Communication problems are a principal source of conflict between advocates and transportation professionals. Often differences arise from the kinds of information people use to make decisions, and the ways people process such information. That is, advocates and professionals are simply from different cultures and neither is crazy or always in the right (plus neither all advocates, nor all transportation professionals, think alike).

For example, transportation professionals consider a number of factors when making decisions (though they may seem to favor quantitative data). When weighing options, they consider and balance neighborhood and political sentiment, governing legal constraints, program mandates, and agency policies, available budget, scheduling problems, and other items not readily apparent to (or appreciated by) the general public.

Also, the professional, with limited resources, cannot address all deficiencies and must prioritize. As a general rule, the engineer prefers to invest public money where it can prevent a pattern of actual crashes (as opposed to a pattern of near-misses). Advocates often present their case in the context of their own experience or anecdotal information (even if they have used other sources, such as statistics, newspaper articles, or reports, to formulate their opinions). But professionals tend to view anecdotal information about near-crashes the same way Chicken Little's neighbors reacted to his

claims about the sky falling—advocates are overreacting, and lacking compelling evidence to back up their claims.

Nevertheless, there are various things advocates and transportation professionals can learn about the way each other listens to, and processes information.

On the one hand, advocates can learn to prepare certain types of data to bring to present to transportation professionals. When asked to examine an intersection, for example, many transportation professionals will first want to know certain statistics. How many crashes have occurred at this intersection? Under what conditions? Of course the responsible transportation professional will also want to inquire about scheduled projects for this area. See Chapters 7 and 8 for some tools to use when compiling and presenting data.

On the other hand, transportation professionals can learn from the information that laypeople accumulate from experience. This user's perspective may hold key pieces of information about designing intersections and modifications so they truly fit the way people use the built environment. Good design is not simply measured by how it is used under optimal conditions (e.g., all users obeying all laws) but other factors as well, such as how well it communicates proper use to the user, or how much it accommodates the way people tend to use it. The key is for both parties to find a middle ground where they can not only listen to each other, but take in new information and put it to use.

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COMMON MISPERCEPTIONS

Many would-be advocates don't take their case very far because they are stymied by common misperceptions about how things work in the transportation world.

Often, advocates are told it is too late for them to make modifications to designs. In actuality, the point in time that changes can be made to an underway project depends on the change's scope, cost, and schedule impacts. By not assuming it is too late to make modifications, costly retrofits or renovation work may be avoided. Of course, if it is truly too late to change a design, advocates can become more involved in future planning processes to ensure decisions best accommodate the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians, or in collecting feedback on recent projects.

Advocates tend to assume all government funds are already programmed (earmarked for spending according to a department plan), and there is nothing left to spend on new projects. The reality is agencies continuously revise their programs and can reallocate funds toward bicycling and pedestrian projects. For example, most of the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians can be met through minor adjustments to existing programs and plans, or as part of regular highway and transit projects.

Ignoring bicyclist or pedestrian needs increases liability.

Furthermore, new highway and transit projects are added to the “over-programmed” list everyday. Bicyclists and pedestrians can be there to ensure simple things (such as shoulders being part of highway projects, sidewalks in urban areas and bicycling facilities at transit stops) get done now, not later.

Another common misperception by advocates is the Department of Transportation is responsible for all traffic engineering in New York State. NYS DOT owns only 15,000 of the 115,000 miles of road in New York, and operates no transit systems. Although leadership does come from the state DOT, there are about 1,600 highway jurisdictions and 400 transit operators in New York. Most bicycling and walking takes place on local (rather than state) systems.

Advocates may be told accommodating bicyclist and pedestrian needs exposes local governments to increased liability. This is not always true, and often ignoring bicyclist or pedestrian needs can increase liability. About 2,000 people die on New York State’s transportation systems every year, and about one-third of highway and transit fatalities in New York State involve a bicyclist or pedestrian. It would be financially impossible for every municipality to correct every highway or transit safety deficiency, but they can help protect themselves by *prioritizing* their safety deficiencies. Ask for, and advise on, a prioritized list of high-accident pedestrian or bicyclist locations.

HELPING TRANSPORTATION PROFESSIONALS

Advocates can become more effective by understanding how transportation professionals make decisions, and the constraints they face. For starters, advocates can start by amassing targeted information:

- Find out if any projects are already scheduled for this area. For example, is the intersection ranked on the Transportation Improvement Plan? If there is an established planning process, get involved early and become a part of the initial conceptual phases, to avoid offering criticism after expensive design work has already been done.
- Familiarize yourself with relevant maintenance and retrofitting possibilities (see Chapters 3 and 4).
- Contact any relevant agencies (see Chapter 5).
- Present some ideas about where the money to fix the problem can come from (see Appendix C).
- Collect information about the problem to be discussed, such as a dangerous intersection (see Chapters 7 and 8).
- Be ready to present possible solutions (see Chapters 7 and 8).

Additionally, advocates will do well to remember their problem spot is but one problem among many facing transportation professionals. It is important to champion a single area, but it is equally important to keep things in perspective. Having a larger perspective reduces the stress levels for both advocates and professionals. Communicating calmly will improve advocates' effectiveness, and allow transportation professionals greater latitude in listening to advocates' perspectives.

Transportation professionals are people too, and appreciate common courtesies. This includes keeping meetings brief and to the point. End your meetings with a concise statement of your purpose. Make your point, and then end your meeting with a concise statement of what you suggest and why. (This last sentence was meant to be a subtle joke about people's tendency to repeat themselves.) Afterwards, thank them and their staff for their time. If appropriate, follow up with a letter of thanks reiterating your suggestions and any agreed upon follow-up steps.

HELPING ADVOCATES

Advocates are known, and at times rightly so, for being loud, pushy, emotional and even obnoxious. At the same time, many advocates are also patient, technically savvy, highly motivated, educated, experienced, and passionate.

The words "emotional" and "passionate" describe both the best and worst qualities of an advocate. To advocates, being told they are being emotional can sound like being told they are wrong, unrealistic, or making a big deal out of nothing. Transportation professionals can understand citizens are emotional because transportation networks play a significant role in the way they live. By building on this emotion as a resource—rather than a liability—transportation professionals can begin to use advocates as a source for baseline information about the transportation network used by all citizens.

Transportation professionals should understand that for an advocate, an issue may be very important, even personal. At the same time, transportation professionals can provide perspective by explaining the priority of a given project within a regional plan. Provide advocates with a list of individuals and groups to contact (including MPO, DOT, City, Local Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committees) and information about how funding decisions are made.

Additionally, transportation professionals should bear in mind advocates want to feel empathy for their plight. By showing you are listening, you will help create a constructive working relationship aimed at addressing the problem. Good communication helps keep both parties calm, and better able to provide and assimilate important information.

Communicating calmly will improve advocates' effectiveness, and allow transportation professionals greater latitude in listening to advocates' perspectives.

When going to an elected official to discuss a problem, make sure you have a specific solution or list of possible solutions to present. Prepare and provide one or two pages of notes regarding the issues, relevant history, possible solutions and support for the project. Don't forget to add a contact name and ways (phone, e-mail) staff could get more information.

Advocates are motivated to take action. Take advantage of their energy and commitment by helping them to get involved in decision-making processes. As transportation network users and regular travelers, advocates often have thoughtful contributions to the design of transportation networks. Advocates can help to bring interested parties out to review plans and fulfill public meeting requirements.

Keeping advocates involved in the scoping and design process may be time consuming, but it also helps ensure a more "context sensitive design," defined by the NYS DOT as design that "seeks to build in context with the surrounding community, responding to its character rather than ignore it." Added effort in the beginning can save time in the end if potential conflicts are avoided or resolved ahead of time.

Further, officials have a basic duty to assure citizens have meaningful participation in local affairs. The NYS Local Government Handbook notes participation is significant because it helps:

- Avoid misunderstandings (citizens should be involved in the planning stages of a program or project);
- Obtain firsthand knowledge of citizen needs and problems;
- Take advantage of local citizen expertise which otherwise might not be available, especially in small communities with limited bureaucratic staff;
- Spread the base of community support;
- Improve public relations; and
- Fulfill the requirements of certain federal and state programs [NYS 2000: 126, 132].

ELECTED OFFICIALS

Sometimes the best recourse for solving a pressing bicycling or pedestrian problem within the local or state road system is to work directly with your locally elected officials.

It is easy to become worked up about a general problem or situation. When going to an elected official to discuss a problem, make sure you have a specific solution or list of possible solutions to present. Prepare and provide one or two pages of notes regarding the issues, relevant history, possible solutions and support for the project. Don't forget to add a contact name and ways (phone, e-mail) staff could get more information.

Don't set yourself back by taking an overly dogmatic position from the outset. When interacting with public officials, focus on the issue at hand, bicyclist and pedestrian mobility and safety. Many politicians (and transportation professionals for that matter) are turned off when people talk stridently about the environment, rights, or social problems—even when it is something they believe in. Many people

have knee-jerk negative reactions to people they perceive to be prone to inflexible and polemical positions.

Contacting elected officials

There are many different ways to contact your local elected and state officials to express your opinion, concerns and ideas. While it is always good to get over the hurdle of making the contact, the most effective (and time-consuming) method is still face-to-face. The next best thing is to write a letter of concern or praise. Often you can reach an aide or assistant by phone. Emails tend to be read by assistants and tallied based upon content, and are often not actually seen by the governmental official.

Do not begin the process of addressing a problem in the local road system by having a press conference attacking your local government or officials. It is usually more effective to wait till you have exhausted all other friendly approaches before going negative.

For more information on state assembly members and senators, see: www.assembly.state.ny.us and www.senate.state.ny.us.

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Talking points

When discussing bicyclist and pedestrian issues with elected officials, remember one of their primary goals is re-election. You might want to help them take credit for improvements. Here are some talking points:

Bicyclist and pedestrian issues are quality of life issues. Providing and maintaining bicycling and walking supportive infrastructure will support health, transportation choice, promote tourism and create quality communities. The recently published Quality Communities Interagency Task Force Report, available from the NYS Lt. Governor's Office, provides excellent examples of these goals.

SAFER STREETS FOR KIDS

These will present savings to the community in injuries prevented and lives saved. They will allow children to provide their own transportation to and from school, increase their independence, improve their fitness and health, and save school monies for items other than busing.

RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES/TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVES FOR ADULTS

Providing adults with opportunities to choose different ways to commute or run errands has the benefit of decreasing overall vehicle traffic. Providing additional recreational opportunities will help create communities where people want to live and raise families, improve public health, and even improve tourism, all of which have added economic benefits.

TRAFFIC CALMING

Providing a safer transportation system benefits all road users and increases mobility choices. Traffic calming also has the side benefits of less overall traffic congestion, improved local economy, and a decrease in noise and air pollution.

NEW MONEY SOURCES FOR COMMUNITIES

Creating a community-wide plan that focuses and prioritizes the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians will allow the community to apply for funding sources with bicycling and pedestrian projects the community has agreed upon.

AFFORDABLE TRANSPORTATION

Bicycling and walking are affordable means of transportation. Affordable transportation is an integral part of the equation for successful urban development, along with affordable housing, safe streets, and job opportunities.