**There are partners among us!** By: Marilee LaFond, UNH T2 Manager

Public works is often the unsung hero in the community. The late hours spent clearing roads from a winter storm, removing fallen trees from a wind event in the wee hours before commuters come out, and collecting municipal trash from parks following a holiday weekend of celebration and fun are all in a day’s job, but often go unnoticed or unrecognized. However, supporting safe, resilient roadways is a common goal shared by many in your community, and there are likely partners and advocates for the critical tasks public works does, right outside your door. For instance, engaging with your local law enforcement and your citizens can provide ample opportunities to gather critical road user information and enhance roadway safety.

**Engage your local law enforcement!**

I recently attended a workshop with several state police members, local law enforcement, traffic engineers, and traffic planners from throughout New Hampshire. We explored the benefits of leveraging the eyes and ears of our law enforcement community with our public works objectives. The strongest argument to building a positive, collaborative relationship with your law enforcement team is to promote safer roads.

Understand the incidents

One way this partnership can support that goal is by gathering and sharing timely, meaningful data to provide a more complete picture to those who lead traffic planning and road design efforts. Take time regularly to engage with law enforcement in your town. Ride along with them and invite them to ride along with you. Ask about the “hot spots” in town - where are speed offenses most common, stop signs missed? Are there certain corners or stretches of roadway that they’re frequently called out to for a roadway departure or other type of crash? Offer to provide education and outreach to better equip them to consider the roadway from a design perspective. What are the signs of an ineffective or broken signal phase? Why would it be valuable for you to know if there’s a guardrail that seems to be hit routinely, or perhaps there’s been a crash in which a vehicle rolled over it? Is there a mailbox that has been knocked down several times? If there’s an intersection in town where crashes occur on a regular basis, perhaps there is inadequate signage, poor lighting, or the intersection signal phasing no longer meets the traffic volume needs. While enforcement efforts may address the cause of some traffic issues and challenges, road design can also play a key factor in enhancing roadway safety. Build a strong partnership that supports open, timely dialogue regarding your community’s roadway incidents.

Understand your users

Talk with your local police and emergency responders about their understanding of your roadway users. Are pedestrians coming and going from certain community buildings, retail stores, or other destinations across intersections at certain times? Are there parts of your community where users have special needs that make navigating roadways safely more challenging for them?

Gathering meaningful data

As more and more communities look to Data Driven Safety Analysis (DDSA) and systemic analysis to enhance roadway safety, the quality, availability, and timeliness of data becomes more critical. Have you talked with your local law enforcement about how traffic engineers utilize data from traffic counts, crash reports, and other sources to develop a picture of your roadways? Crash reports provide critical information well beyond information for insurance purposes. Knowing the precise location where a crash occurred can help traffic engineers to identify potential problem areas and avoid attributing the wrong factors to a crash based on a misunderstanding of location (such as a curve rather than an intersection, a signage issue rather than a visibility issue). Ask your law enforcement professionals to include GPS coordinates or other identifiable location specifics whenever possible in crash reports.

Be a safety advocate

Be sure every individual you engage with for work zone flagging is trained and familiar with proper MUTCD sign package and work zone safety. Provide training resources and opportunities to your local law enforcement and contractors that you partner with. Be sure that accountability for safe work zones is clearly understood and embraced by everyone that is a part of a work zone in your community.

**Engage your community!**

Gather public input

Encourage community participation and input early and often, and whenever possible! Engage with your public ahead of decisions or town meetings, such as when you draft Levels of Service (LOS) Agreements, consider a new roadway project, or develop a traffic plan to address an upcoming project. NHDOT recently held a walking tour at three locations along Route 108 in Somersworth. They utilized public comment from the prior listening sessions to identify locations that warranted more conversation and a hands-on awareness. On the walking tour, the general public had an opportunity at each of the three stops to engage with NHDOT representatives, project managers, consultant engineers, and elected officials to share their roadway user stories. By scheduling this “onsite” public input session during evening hours that encompassed prime commuting time, participants were able to experience and discuss the traffic corridor similar to the average local user experience. Business owners, residents, and commuters across all methods (bike, bus, foot, and personal car) talked about the intersections they avoided during rush hour, how they navigate traffic to get to their morning coffee spot, traffic speed, and many other topics.

While a road safety audit (or RSA) allows transportation partners to look at engineering and design specifics, crash data, and other details in the context of roadway safety, a public input opportunity like the listening session or walking tour gathers direct user feedback about many factors, including traffic patterns, delays, and driver habits. Although different in nature, RSAs and public input sessions each serve an important purpose to traffic engineers and planners. By understanding how the roadway is actually being used and where the perceived trouble spots are, engineers can design a future roadway that not only meets the needs of more users by incorporating design elements such as complete streets, but can also potentially enhance community, economic, and development opportunities. Public involvement also allows the design team to build collaborative relationships with the community- to meet and engage with community members and openly hear their thoughts and challenges. Local road users are part of a road project not just during the planning and construction period, but well after the last piece of equipment leaves and the roadway is complete. Public input sessions are the start of a long-term vested relationship.

Highlight Public Works as Educators – and Innovators

Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) routinely releases new Tech Briefs, videos, and infographics on the “Every Day Counts” (EDC) initiatives. These resources give an overview of the proven countermeasures that are available to increase roadway safety. Many of the documents include associated CRFs (Crash Reduction Factors) to highlight the success these investments in safety can have. Since they are user-friendly to a broad audience, these documents can help you to inform public support for integrating these countermeasures into your road project budgets. Feature relevant resources at public meetings, on community television, in your newsletters, reports, and presentations, and wherever possible. Distributing information about the advances in roadway safety technology also achieves another purpose; creating awareness of public works as a profession. Workforce development is a critical goal for public works – sharing the latest technologies with your community highlights that your profession is rich in opportunities for engineers, innovators, and change agents.

To get started, check out:

* [Safe Transportation for Every Pedestrian](https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/innovation/everydaycounts/edc_5/step2.cfm)
* [Reducing Rural Roadway Departures](https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/innovation/everydaycounts/edc_5/roadway_departures.cfm)
* [https://www.nh.gov/dot/org/projectdevelopment/highwaydesign/hwysafetyimprovements/index.htm](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__www.nh.gov_dot_org_projectdevelopment_highwaydesign_hwysafetyimprovements_index.htm&d=DwMFAg&c=c6MrceVCY5m5A_KAUkrdoA&r=bpF1lb0EcUwdSGMYxbGvS_CY3RDUFQpLzvRKR_ZngWk&m=TZhlyERuNKXuuZk5hjOUYg2DxBnNa8RxJCOxi8_p4uk&s=xaC1ujsA2nOzenJAorUDSeCtN-Va6bNGte8hDKM-1L8&e=) which includes details on the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) and Road Safety Audit application

Engage your elected officials

Another benefit of public input is to create ownership in a project, and to engage local champions. Elected officials turn to the public to understand what matters to the community, to best address the needs of those they were elected to serve. The voice of the people they represent is an important one. Consider inviting your elected officials on a ride-along during your next winter storm, or to empty trash barrels at public parks. Create opportunities for them to engage with your team and understand the work you do, and the challenges you address (most often without any public recognition or awareness).

Engage local advocates

Build the same collaborative relationship with your community members. If you’re having trouble furthering a project, ask yourself who cares about a project you are considering, or who benefits from it. That person may be a good champion to engage with. It may be someone who has a personal connection to the project, such as their children cross the intersection every day on their way to school, or they were involved in a crash at that intersection. People with personal interest in a project are more likely to energetically advocate for it. If you have a local contributor- someone who attends your project hearings or reaches out with concerns- consider how to engage that person in your efforts towards positive change, including asking him or her to attend public input sessions, town meetings, and selectboard meetings where projects the person values will be discussed.

Public engagement can take many forms- online polls, social media, community days, and more. We’ll share some best practices in future *Road Business* issues about these and other engagement strategies. Meanwhile, we’d like to know- how are you engaging with your community, and do you have any success stories that have come from building strong local relationships? Please call us at 603-862-1362 or email us at T2.center@unh.edu to share your story of how you are engaging with local community partners and how this synergy has helped you to tackle some hurdles. We look forward to hearing from you.