

Avoid Roundabout Controversy with Effective Public Outreach

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Communities: Government

Avoid Roundabout Controversy with Effective Public Outreach

By Mark T. Johnson, P.E.



Modern roundabouts produce challenges for implementation related to controversy caused by misconceptions, the inherent fear of the unknown, and other concerns regarding what effects they may have on business and economic growth. These issues can come from agencies, stakeholders, elected officials, the business community, decision-makers, or the general public. I learned early on that roundabouts represent change—and change is inherently challenging—and fear of the unknown.

Addressing these challenges with a proposed roundabout project in a community is critical to the ability to implement the roundabout. To address these issues, opinions must be well-informed with a well thought out approach. Here are a few lessons I have learned over the many years of roundabout implementation.

Establish Positive Public Perception

Public and stakeholder opinion should be viewed like an environmental factor (e.g., constraints, elevation, or capacity), and needs to be investigated at the start of every project. Identifying a strategy for a project that includes key stakeholders is an important first step. The public and

key stakeholders' opinions of a project must be well-informed. This is accomplished with sound analysis and well-formed identification of the problems and available solutions.

I have learned the hard way that the typical board or council meeting formats, with a shortened allotted time to present information, are not conducive to successful communication of the issues with a proposed roundabout. I recommend using workshop or seminar-style formats, as these formats provide adequate time to present information about the project and roundabouts. This format has been very useful to establish base-line understanding and to allow for a productive dialogue and, importantly, allows for the development of trust and ownership through open communication and transparency.

Informative Visualizations

Presenting complex technical traffic information in a manner that the general public can easily absorb and understand is important in gaining public support. The typical level-of-service discussions lack the depth and breadth that stakeholders want and need to understand potential solutions that include a roundabout. Also, visualizations are a valuable tool in communicating project details to the public, most of whom lack training or experience in the interpretation of construction plans and details. This does not mean only attractive pictures and graphics, but also graphics that present key information that allows the public to understand how and why the roundabout is a good solution for a given problem.

For communicating important details, 2D and 3D visualizations provide an accessible medium and are a flexible alternative to technical engineering drawings. They should be developed in a manner that facilitates understanding of design alternatives while removing the uncertainty and concerns typically associated with design details in final implementation.

Additionally, showing videos of actual operating roundabouts and associated testimonials from other roundabout projects can assist in addressing concerns of citizens and stakeholders.

Modern roundabouts represent change, and change is hard and can produce high levels of controversy. Managing public perception and communicating design alternatives and their intent to the stakeholders is key.

Public workshops and presentations must include those who are directly affected by the project, those who perceive themselves to be affected, and those who may be affected in the future. It is important to set aside sufficient time to allow for a productive dialogue. Addressing the public's concerns about a proposed roundabout in their community can lead to successful implementation.

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THE CALIFORNIA BLVD AND 1ST/2ND STREETS ROUNDABOUT PROJECT IN NAPA, CALIFORNIA, WAS DESIGNED TO RELIEVE TRAFFIC CONGESTION, IMPROVE TRAFFIC SAFETY AND TRAFFIC OPERATIONS, AND MINIMIZE QUEUES AND DELAY FOR ALL THREE INTERSECTIONS.

4 Keys to a Successful Public Education Event or Meeting

1. Ensure attendance by a broad cross-section of key stakeholders.
 - Invite agency engineers and planners, elected officials, bicycle and pedestrian advocacy representatives, chamber of commerce, local media.
2. Allow ample time for the community to ask questions and receive informative answers.
 - Provide information that facilitates understanding.
3. Communicate information/studies about roundabouts in an easily understood, in-depth manner.
 - Present materials that illustrate and clarify contentious issues.
 - Visualizations are an invaluable tool in communicating project details to the public, many of whom do not have training or experience in the interpretation of construction plans and details.

4. Present complex technical information in a way that the general public can easily understand.
- Use educational materials to help illustrate project concepts.
 - Informative presentations allow community members and decision-makers to fully grasp proposed alternatives.
 - Illustrations provide an accessible medium for communication of important details as an alternative to technical drawings. They also help to:
 - » Facilitate the understanding of alternative proposals, and
 - » Remove uncertainty and concerns typically associated with design details in final implementation.

<https://www.nspe.org/resources/pe-magazine/spring-2021/avoid-roundabout-controversy-effective-public-outreach>
