

Spitfire Strategies

Building Public Support to Fund Preservation Work

Prepared by Spitfire Strategies

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State
Smart Transportation
Initiative

Practical Solutions to Move America Forward



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Overview

The State Smart Transportation Initiative (SSTI) provides direct technical assistance to 19 state Departments of Transportation (DOT) to guide transformative and replicable smart transportation reform efforts. As part of this work, the Iowa Department of Transportation asked SSTI for assistance building public support for a gas tax increase to fund critical repair and maintenance work. SSTI contracted with Spitfire Strategies, a strategic communications firm that works exclusively with nonprofits and foundations, to help Iowa craft effective messaging that would resonate with policymakers and key stakeholders.

Based on SSTI and Spitfire's work in Iowa and recent polling, this paper outlines how transportation professionals can gain support for a "fix-it-first" approach to transportation policy. It highlights messages and tactics that have effectively garnered voter and policymaker support and presents lessons learned from the Iowa Department of Transportation.

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Why Make the Case for Preservation

Infrastructure is oblivious to shrinking budgets. Faced with decreasing dollars, state departments of transportation are forced to make difficult decisions about how to spend limited transportation funds. But voters understand how hard it is to make choices between competing priorities. They understand that you can't build an addition onto a house when you can't afford to fix the roof. To translate this into a transportation analogy – you can't build new roads when infrastructure is in bad condition. Voters want government to invest in strategies that will spur economic development and create jobs. A strong case can be made that repair and maintenance can do both.

Describing Repair and Maintenance Needs

To gain support for preservation projects, it is important to describe aging infrastructure and propose solutions in a clear and compelling way, using direct language instead of industry jargon. When speaking with people outside of the traditional transportation community, avoid technical terms, acronyms and complicated statistics or graphics. Express your ideas in the shortest, most direct way possible. Below are examples of language to avoid and ways to reword transportation concepts for a non-transportation-focused audience.

Example: Jargon and Indirect Language

A state DOT used the following language to describe their preservation plan:

"A formula that includes consideration for conditions and that is influenced by the lane miles in each Field Division is applied to the roadway asset preservation baseline amount to ensure an equitable geographic distribution of each Fiscal Year projection. Likewise, a formula that is focused on the square footage of bridge deck in each Field Division is applied to the bridge preservation baseline amount to achieve a similar distribution of the available bridge asset preservation funds."

It is unlikely that anyone outside of the transportation community would have a good understanding of the concepts described in this paragraph. In particular, industry terms such as "roadway asset preservation baseline" can be confusing and should be avoided. This paragraph

is also confusing to read because the sentences are constructed in passive voice without a clear subject. A clearer way to structure this paragraph would be:

“To make sure that transportation budgets are distributed equally across the state, it is important to consider current road conditions and the amount of lane miles in each district. Similarly, the state should make sure that the sizes of bridges are calculated so that bridge maintenance funds are applied equally and effectively.”

Another state DOT explained the need for preservation funding using clearer and direct language paired with strong supporting statistics:

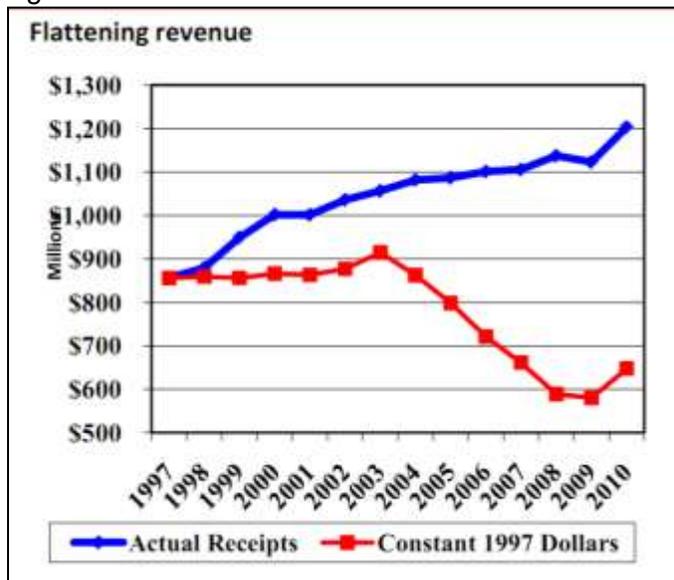
“The 2035 Statewide Transportation Plan estimates that local roadway needs have grown to \$74 billion for the period between 2008 and 2035. Revenues available over the same period are estimated to be \$61 billion. Over the last three years, the gap between local roadway needs and revenues has grown by \$1 billion to \$13 billion.”

While these sentences are easier to understand than the previous example, there are still opportunities to be more direct and concise and to cut out statistics and phrases that don't provide additional meaning. Since the most important message in this example is the projected funding gap, it can be highlighted by re-wording as:

“Road maintenance needs will continue to grow against declining revenue sources. Critical repair work will cost us \$74 billion, while revenue is projected to be just \$61 billion, leaving us with a \$13 billion funding gap.”

Example: Complicated Numbers and Unclear Visuals

The following graph was used by another state DOT to demonstrate declining revenue. Although the reader can identify that dollars are decreasing against receipts, it is unlikely that everyone will understand what “constant 1997 dollars” means, or be able to judge the significance of this trend based on the dollar amounts listed on the left side of the chart.



A clearer way to present this information and make the argument that the DOT doesn't have the same budget it once had would be to simply state that, “Today our buying power is a quarter

less than it was 15 years ago.”

Social math can also be an effective way to paint a picture. It’s hard to visualize the 18,000 deficient bridges in the largest U.S. metropolitan areas. But if you say that major cities in the U.S. have more deficient bridges than McDonald’s – that gives people a clear mental picture.

Appealing to Your Audiences’ Values

Repair and maintenance messages should also tap into the values of target audiences. Just because you may care about the environmental impact of repair and maintenance of existing infrastructure doesn’t mean that’s what your target audience cares about. Understand what moves voters or policymakers. Try to meet your voter or policymaker audiences where they are, instead of highlighting the arguments that might resonate well within your office or the broader transportation community.

According to national polling, the most effective values to tap in your preservation messages are *job growth, economic development and safety (particularly for policymakers)*. A [2010 survey](#) by Smart Growth America (SGA) found that 68 percent of voters believe now is the time for state governments to invest in transportation, because if done right, these investments will create jobs and attract new business. The poll found that 91 percent of U.S. voters believe that maintaining and repairing our existing roads and bridges should be the top or a high transportation priority for state governments. Also according to the survey, voters responded best to messages that linked transportation spending to jobs and economic development. Saving money by using tax dollars efficiently is also a compelling message. For voters, the cost-savings message also resonates. They respond well to the fact that spending \$1 to keep a road in good condition now prevents spending \$7 to reconstruct it once it has fallen into poor condition. Another message that moves this audience is that repair and maintenance projects provide at least a 400 percent return on investment, on average, by preventing the need for future reconstruction, spurring economic development and reducing damage from potholes.¹

The polling also gave insightful guidance about how to communicate these values when making the case for repair and maintenance. Regardless of party affiliation, voters agreed with both of the following arguments:

“Our government has an obligation to the people in this state to create jobs and implement policies to strengthen the economy, protect the environment, ensure opportunity for all. On transportation, we don’t need to build more, we need to fix what we have and give citizens low-cost choices that protect the environment and economy at same time.”²

“We can’t afford to spend more government money on transportation. Instead of writing blank checks for new roads/other projects, we need to be fiscally responsible, repair infrastructure we have, and invest what’s left on projects with high return.”³

Sample Messages

As noted above, strong messages reflect the existing values and core concerns of each target audience. These messages educate audiences about the realities of the mission, dispel any

¹ Smart Growth America, [Recent Lessons from the Stimulus](#), 2010

² *Very/fairly closely reflects my view: all voters - 71%; Democrats - 78%; Republicans - 60%; swing voters - 73%*

³ *Very/fairly closely reflects my view: all voters - 59%; Democrats - 51%; Republicans - 64%; swing voters - 60%*

myths or misconceptions that may exist and overcome any barriers that could stand in the way. They motivate audiences to get involved and make a difference.

Each of these messages has four main points:

- **The Value** – Reminds the audience of your common ground by tapping into a specific value that your audience holds. You will want to focus this message on economic development, job growth, and/or safety, depending on the audience.
- **Overcoming the Barrier** – Communicates new or unexpected information to address any preconceived barriers that might prevent the audience from “buying into” your message.
- **The Ask** – At least one message point should be focused to encourage the target audience to take action. The “ask” should be specific and doable.
- **The Vision** – Echoes the value message point. It says, “If you do what I ask, then you will get what you want.”

These four points support a value, or several equally important values, that a particular audience holds and can be used in any order. All message points do not need to be used with every communication. However, moving forward, all communications should be consistent in delivering these messages.

Following this model and utilizing the language that was tested in the SGA poll, below is a sample message set that has been effective with voters. States can tailor these messages with specific local trends as supporting points.

Voter Message

Values: Safety and economic development

Barrier: Lack of awareness of the severity of deficient roads/bridges in their state; lack of awareness that investing in repair and maintenance is the smartest investment strategy for transportation dollars in terms of safety and economic growth

- Value: State transportation should do two things: be safe and reliable for citizens and support our state’s economies and jobs.
- Overcome barrier: Roads and bridges are crumbling in STATE, and at the same time people need more ways to get around. We can’t afford to spend more – but we can spend smarter.
 - XX% of our state’s roads are in a state of bad repair. STATE ranks NUMBER in deficient bridges.
 - Smart spending on transportation can actually stretch our dollars further.
 - Rough roads cost each driver an average of \$383 a year due to damaged tires, suspensions and reduced fuel efficiency.
 - Per dollar, road repair focuses 16% more jobs per dollar than new construction.
- Ask: Tell [STATE LEADER] that you think [STATE] should focus its limited transportation resources on repair and maintenance of existing roads and bridges.

- Vision: Then citizens will have a safe and reliable transportation system that's also fueling our economy.

The above message set can also be used for policymakers. With this audience, it is helpful to tailor the value and vision messages to reflect the issues that resonate most with the specific policymaker, or at least with his/her party affiliation. For example, with Republican policymakers, we have found it effective to focus on financial efficiency messages that highlight the high return of preservation projects in light of historic budget deficits. With Democrats, it is helpful to focus on the job and economic growth opportunities.

Case Study: Iowa

SSTI recently worked with Spitfire Strategies to test out these messages and strategies in Iowa, a state with dire repair and maintenance needs. Iowa's roads are in poor condition; the state ranks 31st in state highway performance and cost-effectiveness. Iowa's infrastructure continues to deteriorate. Based on road roughness, it ranked 43rd in urban interstate condition and 34th in deficient bridges.⁴

Every five years, the Iowa Department of Transportation reviews revenue from the state's road-use tax fund and makes recommendations to the general assembly about how to meet the state's infrastructure needs. To assist with this legislative mandate, the governor appointed a Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) to work with the state DOT to review road needs and funding options. The CAC held seven public input meetings across the state to get public input on the condition of Iowa's transportation system, the importance of roads to Iowans and how to pay for it.

The DOT forecast an annual revenue shortfall of \$215 million. As a result of this shortfall, the DOT said there will be an increased number of bridges with weight restrictions and bridge closure; deteriorating conditions across the system – including high-level roads critical to the movement of goods and people; increased costs to transportation providers and users; and potential economic losses to the state of Iowa.

Research Findings

To support the Iowa DOT's public input meetings, Spitfire Strategies conducted a range of research activities to better understand the impact of failing infrastructure and gauge public support and opposition to a gas tax increase, including:

- Analyzed state news coverage of the potential gas tax increase,
- Reviewed stories about the state of Iowa's infrastructure
- Interviewed key stakeholders
- Attended community meetings and
- Analyzed state polling on a gas tax increase and national polling on voter sentiments about transportation funding.

Spitfire's research indicated that:

- **The problem was more visible than the solution.** Iowans were aware of the poor state of their roads, but were less familiar with solutions or funding options. In conjunction with community input meetings, the DOT secured media coverage to

⁴ *Annual Report on the Performance of State Highway Systems*, Reason Foundation, David T. Hartgen, Ph.D., P.E., and Ravi K. Karanam, December 2009 and September 2010

promote the repair and maintenance messages. To further advance a repair and maintenance effort, SSTI recommends a proactive media strategy that could include editorial board meetings, op-eds and letters to the editor from key stakeholders that highlight the need to prioritize repair and maintenance using the messages outlined above as guiding framework. In Iowa, first responders and school administrators would have been the best messengers for the safety message; farmers, truckers and engineers were compelling messengers to convey the economic imperative of repairing and maintaining existing infrastructure.

- **Economic growth messages resonate most strongly.** As anticipated based on the polling referenced above, the economic argument for repair and maintenance was pervasive throughout state media coverage. Papers quoted a variety of business association leaders who discussed the amount of money the agriculture and trucking industries would lose if roads continued to deteriorate. Business leaders also effectively described how their bottom lines impact the rest of the state, since these industries dominate Iowa's economy.

Public Comments

Spitfire's research findings were echoed in the Commission's public input meetings, where Iowans discussed the impact that failing infrastructure has on their lives and livelihoods. The Commission heard testimony from a variety of professions about how they are impacted by poor road and bridge conditions:

- Firefighters said they sometimes have to drive miles out of their way to reach an accident scene because bridges are closed or have weight restrictions due to poor conditions.
- Emergency responders spoke about regularly traveling over roads that are overdue for resurfacing.
- Principals spoke about buses traveling extra miles to get kids to school for the same reason, and school superintendents lamented the number of schools named after students who have died on Iowa's roads.
- Engineers said they have wasted money patching 40-year-old roads instead of replacing them, and that Iowa is on the verge of structural decay.

Key Takeaways for Messaging

Based on the research and feedback at the public input meetings, SSTI worked with Spitfire to develop comprehensive talking points that highlighted the economic impact of insufficient funding. To support the broader messages outlined above, Spitfire developed the following talking points tailored to Iowa's economy:

- Not only are poor roadways inconvenient and unsafe, but they also pose a **significant economic impact**.
- **Poor roadways threaten our agriculture and trucking industries, whose profits are closely linked to reliable roadways.** With farming and agriculture-related industries accounting for more than a quarter of Iowa's overall economic input and employing one out of every six Iowans, we can't afford for farmers to have their products delayed.
- **If Iowa wants to attract new businesses, we need roads that are in a state of good repair.** Out-of-state businesses consider infrastructure when deciding where to invest. Every billion dollars invested in highways creates or supports more than 44,000 jobs.

Navigating Challenges

Although the gas tax increase received strong public support at the public hearings and a gas tax increase passed the State Senate's Transportation and Ways and Means Committees, legislation was blocked from a full vote in the House. The DOT believes that the gas tax increase failed in the state legislature because of its timing before the election. In Iowa, Tea Party candidates are contesting Republican seats and a tax increase could have hurt incumbents' re-election.

In retrospect, the Iowa DOT noted that continued media outreach might have helped blunt Republican resistance. In particular, targeted op-eds in key legislative districts might have kept the issue in the public's eye and reinforced the economic messages that were effective during the community meetings.

Despite the legislative setback, the Iowa DOT was still able to secure additional preservation funding from the Iowa Transportation Commission. Using the talking points and research identified above in a commission presentation, the DOT secured a 50 percent increase in funding for preservation projects.

Conclusion

To gain public and legislative support for repair and maintenance projects, state DOTs should appeal to audiences' existing values using direct, non-technical language. Voters understand the connection between smart transportation policy and sound economic decisions. During tough economic times, voters want – and policymakers support – transportation investments that are a sound return on investment.