

Pre-scoping Outreach: Early Collaboration with Communities

Project Background

- MnDOT annually identifies new projects to be entered into the 10-year Capital Highway Investment Plan (CHIP). Projects are then typically scoped between years five and six of the CHIP, funded when they enter the State Highway Investment Plan (STIP), and designed and developed until the plans are implemented into construction.
- This is a cycle that has worked well for MnDOT for many years.
- But over time, there have been a growing amount of scope changes on projects due to issues uncovered late in project development. The process was putting projects at risk for having missing components because of a lack of early information from the impacted communities. It left MnDOT District 7 staff primarily reactive, rather than proactive, to city, county and township needs on a project.

Public Engagement Challenge

- It became clear that there was room for change in project development after seeing the scope changes on projects causing project delays, additional expense and inefficiencies. District 7 planning staff saw an opportunity to incorporate early community outreach in the planning and scoping process in an effort to build relationships, gain insight from key stakeholders and reduce scope changes.
- This identified opportunity started as a Wildly Important Goal (WIG) 2.0 initiative for the district planning group, which was to improve pre-scoping community outreach.
- The intent of this outreach was two-fold – to improve relationships with communities and key stakeholders, and to gain better scoping documents, which in turn provides better executed projects.
- The pre-scoping community outreach would increase the lead time for community partners to voice needs, allow time for MnDOT and locals to enter into collaborative planning efforts, and provide more time and awareness to local communities so they can set aside necessary funds for future projects.
- Planning staff established a set of key messages to use, explaining that the CHIP projects are not commitments and they are subject to change, but they are on MnDOT's radar. This messaging was critical for both internal buy-in of the process and for future meeting expectations.

Public Engagement Approach

- Once district leadership and staff were on board with the pre-scoping community outreach, planning staff started with high-level outreach at the county commissioner meetings, which often included other county and city staff. At these meetings, MnDOT District 7 shared the draft CHIP, explained how they would be moving forward with early outreach, and discussed the benefit it would provide to more comprehensive planning for cities, counties and MnDOT alike.

- A survey (via Survey Monkey) was sent to District 7 cities and counties with planned projects in the CHIP. The survey covered topics they'd like to discuss, from access and bicycle/pedestrian accommodations, to transit, safety and freight accommodations. It also touched on a community's vision for the next 10 years, as well as their specific concerns.
- Once results were analyzed, an outreach plan was formed and customized presentations were created to bring to meetings with community partners in the CHIP. At the meetings, MnDOT showed the latest CHIP and looked for input. Questions such as "what might be missing?" and "are there obvious gaps?" opened conversations and input for the next update of the CHIP.
- For communities in year five and six of the CHIP, MnDOT District 7 staff held community meetings that were more project-specific. Planning staff created a worksheet to use at these meetings, which would uncover items to be included in upcoming planning scoping worksheets for Project Management.

Key Takeaways

- The feedback from communities regarding these now annual pre-scoping outreach meetings has been exceptional. Surveys are also conducted following the meetings to ensure the goals and outreach is beneficial for all involved. Survey results indicate city and county stakeholders rely on this planning and like the once- per-year frequency, with additional meetings as fit (i.e. larger, more comprehensive projects in the CHIP or STIP).
- What's quite possibly the most successful part of the implementation of the pre-scoping outreach is that what started as a WIG 2.0 initiative has now become a fully adopted part of the MnDOT District 7 planning and project development process.
- As this process further evolves, planning staff are looking to attend and present at the League of Minnesota Cities annual meeting. The goal would be to conduct MnDOT breakout sessions structured by districts, and attendees could select based on their region. This would provide an opportunity to further the reach of the early scoping conversations and collaborations.

Level of Engagement: Collaborate

- Because of the early engagement with key community stakeholders in the CHIP, MnDOT District 7 staff has improved relationships with these contacts. Because of these improved relationships and early communication, projects are more accurately scoped. Through early engagement, communities are able to provide input, become involved and collaborate on projects that directly impact them.

Quote

"Prior to the pre-scoping outreach meetings, Project Managers would spend significant time and resources on last-minute scope changes, which unfortunately didn't always allow us to deliver the best, most comprehensive projects," said Forrest Hasty, Project Manager, MnDOT District 7. "Now we're working with planning staff to meet and collaborate with key stakeholders much earlier, and as a result, we're more efficient in developing projects. In addition, the communities

we serve have expressed how they feel heard and valued when they're included early in the process. It's truly a win-win."

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