

Public Communications – Perceptions and Early Communications Tools

Utilities routinely face large capital requirements to manage their wastewater assets. The public can better understand the situation if there is a strategy to relay the information. An effective communications package – aimed at public officials, policy makers, utility managers, and ratepayers – can help utilities “tell their story” about strategic asset management practice and guide them to convey that message.

This report examines elected and appointed officials’ perspectives on asset management and infrastructure sustainability. The authors use results of a survey, focus groups, interviews, and case studies to understand how public support for infrastructure sustainability can be gained. Relevant and readily usable tools that focus on infrastructure sustainability issues are presented. There are messages that elected, appointed, and salaried public officials can use when discussing sustainable utilities with their stakeholders.

Perceptions

Before forming any communications strategy, it is necessary to know the perceptions of local and elected officials on sustainability of their wastewater assets. What are their needs and concerns about why asset management is a vital component of infrastructure sustainability?

Asset management is a means to this end. The public does not need to understand all aspects of asset management. However, they need to understand sustainability as it relates to water and wastewater infrastructure and the services provided. Elected officials must be educated and kept informed. The public expects that the utility manager and staff are competent. However, asset management approaches ensure that infrastructure planning is conducted as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Successful Utility Communication Tools and Messages for Utility Managers

The following outreach and communication tools were identified in the study:

- A “checklist” for utility managers to discuss and educate new decision makers (newly elected and appointed officials) about strategic asset management and the need for long-term infrastructure sustainability.
- Approaches and tools to “get the word out” to the public and decision makers, including:
 - Developing a Strategic Asset Management (SAM) plan
 - Attending state conferences for ongoing education of board members and utility managers
 - Using readily available resources for public outreach and communication
- Key messages proven to help educate the public about the need for infrastructure sustainability.



Public understanding and support for investment in aging water infrastructure is essential to close the gap between current funding levels and projected infrastructure needs.

BENEFITS

- Provides insight into the perspectives of elected and appointed public officials regarding asset management and infrastructure sustainability.
- Includes a case study of successful public outreach to gain support for asset management approaches and infrastructure investment.
- Provides a checklist water utility managers can use to implement a strategic communication effort.
- Identifies materials specifically designed for public outreach on infrastructure sustainability.
- Provides messages that water utility managers can adapt for their own public outreach programs.

RELATED PRODUCTS

Leading Practices for Strategic Asset Management (SAM1R06)

Decision Analysis/Implementation Guidance (SAM1R06c)

Gaining Public Support – Experience with Citizen Advisory Committees (SAM1R06f)

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High Quality Communication Aids

The research team identified and cataloged public outreach tools for utility managers and public officials. These materials, produced by various organizations including public broadcasting, university, and trade associations, range from reports to promotional handouts, to DVD presentations on sustainability. A series of fact sheets describing each package and its availability was prepared and is included at the end of the report.

A spreadsheet on these tools includes:

- Water is Life, and Infrastructure Makes it Happen™ developed by the Water Environment Federation.
- Sustainable Water Infrastructure Video and Case Studies produced by the Local Government Advisory Committee.
- Bridging the Gap developed by Penn State’s College of Engineering, World Campus.
- Liquid Assets: The Story of Our Water Infrastructure developed by Penn State Public Broadcasting.

Summary

This research shows that local and elected officials communications with the public must be continuous. The public needs to understand sustainability as it relates to water and wastewater infrastructure, the services provided, and the costs of that service.

Leadership from knowledgeable utility managers who are willing to change the organizational way of thinking about their assets (moving from “operation-centered” to an “asset-centric” approach) leads to successful asset management. It involves all disciplines and depends on support across the organization from top decision makers to field personnel.

The strategies, case studies, and tools provided in this report can help form the foundation that utilities have to let stakeholders know what they do, that there is value in what they do, and that the services they provide are delivered in a quality manner. Experiences of municipal leaders demonstrate positive results from dialogs between utilities, local officials, and the rate-paying public. Public support of asset management on the utility level leads to improved service, more efficient use of resources, and improved compliance. Often the improvement in one department leads to wider acceptance of asset management practices in other parts of municipal operations.

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