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PANEL: Understanding How to Motivate Communities to Support Public Transportation

REMARKS: *I come from an advocacy background as a registered lobbyist in Illinois, representing mission-based non-profits, particularly the Midwest High Speed Rail Association where we were the driver behind the country's biggest expansion of Amtrak service last year by doubling the state budget for Amtrak service.*

I then started working with Chicago's Regional Transportation Authority on their strategic plan for a transit investment, which we named Moving Beyond Congestion.

And now it's time for transit to get the investment we deserve as the nation's best investment for fighting global warming, job-killing traffic congestion and social isolation!

I'm here to talk about how we can better advocate for transit investment and I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak before so many public transportation leaders.

So, how do you get your community to support transit? Not to ride transit, but to politically support their transit network.

*There's a one word answer: **ASK***

To get your community to support transit, ask them.

Ask every rider. Every taxpayer. Every employer. Every driver.

Ask every day.

Ultimately, the voters get what they want. And we can reach so many of them! They ride with us every day and they drive past our facilities and buses every day. If you don't ask, you don't get. And our rivals – schools, highways, health care,

wars – believe me, they are asking every day for public support. Don't be shy.

So, who asks? How do you ask? Is this something the General Manager is responsible for, along with running the agency? The Board? Everyone?

You need a plan. And your plan should be integrated in all of the rest of your regular communications.

Transit agencies are in the information distribution business as much as the people hauling business.

Building a healthy, bidirectional information distribution network into your operations will allow you to ask the community for support as part of your regular communications with them.

I want to give you an advocacy perspective on how to mobilize our base and get to a yes for transit as part of an integrated communications plan.

It's a three-step process.

- 1. Develop an Ask*
- 2. Make the Ask*
- 3. Campaign for a Yes*

Let's go through it together.

1. Develop an Ask

How often have you heard an elected official say they support transit – but they don't vote to expand it? Or they support transit, but just want you to live within your means. People pay us lip service all the time, but when push comes to shove, they aren't making us a priority.

That's not their fault. That's our fault. That's our failure to define precisely and exactly what it means to support transit at this time in this place in this budget cycle. If we allow our legislators to stay general "I support transit...because I say I support transit" then that's our fault for letting them off the hook without presenting a specific, actionable request that they can either say yes or no to.

Specificity wins in political language. General language allows for ambiguous responses from our elected officials which leads to no new investment.

As an example of the difference between a general statement of support and a specific ask, consider marriage.

If you say to your spouse: "I support this marriage" what are you really saying? Nothing. But if you say "I will make the time to go out to dinner with you once a week" then you are getting somewhere.

If an elected official says "I support public education?" what is she really saying? Nothing.

But if she says "I support finding the resources to extend the school day to 5 pm this year so that children aren't leaving school at 2:30 in the afternoon" now you've found a champion for better schools.

General Support for Transit is Meaningless.

We need specific, actionable proposals for our elected officials to embrace or reject in order to find out who really supports transit and who does not.

Do you know what you are asking for this year?

If not, go through this exercise with me. I'll explain how we (and my client is the Midwest High Speed Rail Association) developed our ask for Amtrak Illinois service. Amtrak is like transit (it's got a farebox recovery ratio of around 55%) and the states can choose to invest in more service out of the general funds if they'd like.

Here's the process on Developing an Ask

- A. *Dream Big*
- B. *Segment the Dream into Actionable Improvements*
- C. *Describe the Gap Between the Status Quo and Your Improvement as a Problem to be Solved*

Let's go through it.

A. Dream Big

Start with a dream. For the Midwest High Speed Rail Association, our dream is European-style high-speed rail in the Midwest. Pretty good dream, right?

I want you to think about your transit-related dream for your community. Dream big. And then describe it in a sentence.

Here are some ideas:

- *Provide every resident reasonable access to a transit network*
- *Tripled market share of trips*
- *Doubled ridership*
- *World-class transit*
- *10 minute headways*
- *Best transit network of its size in the country*

To get the community to support transit, define your big dream first. Then you can see who shares your dream.

Now that you have a dream, we need to work on making that dream a reality. To do that, we're going to segment the dream into actionable improvements.

B. Segment the Dream into Actionable Improvements

For us, we divided European-style high-speed rail into improvements that can be implemented over the next few years:

- *Faster trips*
- *More frequent trips every day*
- *New trains with new tracks*

Each of these improvements advances the dream of European-style high-speed rail into reality.

Notice that none of these are "More Money". That's not an improvement. That's just the universal cry of every agency. And it is immediately tuned out. For the Midwest High Speed Rail Association, we

picked more frequent trips. We wanted to run five trains a day instead of three trains a day between Chicago and St. Louis. We want them to travel 110 mph and we want new trainsets as well, but we decided to focus on getting five round-trips a day instead of three at first.

You pick yours – it has to be something the decision-makers can do this year or next year. You can (and should) come back later with another ask next year. The more you ask, the more you get.

This process of dreaming big and segmenting the dream into actionable improvements should be tied with good transportation planning to build community partnership.

Chicago's Regional Transportation Authority did a good job of this with their Moving Beyond Congestion campaign. We asked every resident of the region through surveys, a website and lots of public meetings to participate in dreaming big. People like to be asked their opinions, and the best way to share your dream is to ask your residents what they think about it. And of course, asking your residents to partner with you as you dream about the future of your region helps to build support for transit.

All your planning work with the community should be used to build a base of supporters that you regularly communicate with (we'll get to that later as to how to mobilize). For now, however, you've picked the actionable improvement you want the decision-makers to implement over the short to medium term that will help advance the dream. The final step in this process of developing an ask is to refine your language.

C. Describe the Gap Between the Status Quo and Your Improvement as a Problem to be Solved

For example, in Illinois, we wanted more frequencies on existing Amtrak service.

So, instead of asking for more money – the two worst words in advocacy -- to run more service, we said

“Existing Amtrak service doesn't allow for day trips – a visitor has to spend the night in order to spend a day Downstate.”

Running more frequencies allows people on both sides of the route to take a trip and get back the same day.

The improvement we are advocating for would

solve problems. What problem is your improvement going to solve?

Use language that will appeal to the people we are trying to reach. Don't use the language of agency action but rather the language of benefits.

What will people get out of it and so what problem would you be solving?

Some of the problems that transit solves include:

- *Traffic congestion.*
- *Senior or disabled isolation*
- *Exporting wealth to oil-producing nations (on the other side of the War on Terror)*
- *Global warming*
- *Cutting our oil addiction (as explained by the President of the United States)*
- *Employers can't get workers on the night shift / weekend shift*

That's why we named the campaign for transit expansion in Chicago “Moving Beyond Congestion” to draw attention the problem we are trying to solve.

Now that you've developed your ask into something a policy maker can implement in the short term and you are describing the problem your improvement will solve, you are ready to make the ask.

2. Make the Ask

There's a saying about Amtrak on the Hill. "Amtrak has a lot of friends in Congress. Amtrak does not have a lot of good friends."

It's always a few people who will really push hard in a legislature or city council for a particular improvement.

Our job is to cultivate champions who will spend their political capital on your shared goals.

Ask for lots of little things from lots of different decision-makers to see who is interested in building a relationship with you. Find ways to deepen the relationship.

There are lots of little things to ask for. For example: ask for a statute to waive tolls for buses, ask to include a transit system map in municipal or county mailing, ask for a resolution acknowledging transit's contribution to community, ask for a link on their website, ask for a town hall meeting on transit in their district and ask them to ride transit and generate a nice puff piece in the local paper.

The point is to get adopted.

Asking decision-makers to solve problems with you is not a zero-sum game. It isn't like shooting a gun where you've only got so many bullets over your lifetime, so you need to save them for when the time is right.

Instead, it's like a muscle, where the more you use it, the stronger it becomes.

Only practice will teach you how to ask for something compelling and actionable, to increase the odds you will get what you are asking for. Elected officials like to improve things for their constituents. Give them concrete ways to do it.

It's important to maintain your information distribution network to the broader community. How are you in touch with your riders and your supporters? Your riders are a base. When particular elected officials make their lives better,

let your base know about it. Celebrate every victory.

And we also know that people like something new more than maintaining something old. Embrace that language. Take your maintenance and infrastructure and turn it into something new. It's not track maintenance: it's a slow zone elimination project. It's not bus maintenance: it's a refurbished fleet extension project with a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the bus garage and a big sign on the bus.

So make your big ask that solves a problem. Sometimes you'll get a yes. But sometimes you won't. That's when you need to mobilize the community.

3. Campaign for a Yes

If you don't get a yes from the decision-maker to implement your improvement and solve a problem, then it's time to engage the community.

We have to think like a political campaign. Mobilize. Organize. There are three steps to this:

- A. BUILD YOUR BASE WITH A FORMAL MECHANISM TO PARTNER WITH THE CAMPAIGN
- B. TELL YOUR STORY: GENERATE EARNED MEDIA
- C. ASK EVERYONE TO ASK THE DECISION-MAKER TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM

A. Build Your Base

How many people do you touch every day? If every transit agency in the nation worked together, we'd probably touch 80% of all Americans once a week, with riders and drivers passing our facilities. Fare medium, posters, telephone trip planners, maps, timetables, websites, billboards, ads on the side of buses, posters at train stations – we touch a lot of people.

When we touch them, we have to ask them to get in touch with us so we can continue to communicate with them. For the Moving Beyond Congestion campaign, we created a Partners for Transit program. We asked every rider and every institution (municipalities, local governments, civic groups, environmental groups, higher education institutions and chambers of commerce) to sign up as a Partner for Transit. All that meant is that we listed them as a Partner and we could communicate with them. It gave us something to ask for.

We took our RTA system map and plastered our Moving Beyond Congestion message and toll free telephone number on the front panel of 250,000 maps.

We took the Chicago Transit Authority fare card and put the Moving Beyond Congestion brand, website and telephone number on every one of them.

We put posters and car cards everywhere.

Harvest your base.

Create a method for your Partners and riders to

engage. Launch a stand-alone website with a telephone number and public meetings. Use cheap contact management software to email your base.

As an example: send out a quarterly electronic newsletter to anyone who signs up for it on your website. Mail out a quarterly postal newsletter to everyone who asks for it – and ask everyone who calls your trip planning call center if they want to get on your quarterly mailing list. Put every elected official on your postal newsletter list.

There are many people who support transit (more every month). Give them a chance to be your partner.

B. Tell Your Story: Generate Earned Media

Don't think like an agency. Think like an advocate.

An agency thinks that the press will show up at the monthly board meeting and hopes the story will be accurate. An advocate starts with the message to get out through the press and bends over backwards to come up with excuses and ideas to attract media to convey that message.

Make a big deal out of data. When the Texas Transportation Institute study comes out, hold a press conference with a business leader on the job-killing congestion hurting our region – and the incredible money that transit is saving drivers.

For the Moving Beyond Congestion initiative in Chicago, we built much of our messaging around the cost of congestion: \$4.2 billion in wasted fuel and wasted time. And simply by showing up to a suburban paper and reporting the cost of congestion, we generated a front-page story with the headline "4.2 billion."

If congestion isn't the main problem you're solving, and instead it's isolation of senior citizens, hold an event at the senior center celebrating your senior riders. Ask the local elected officials to give an award to all the senior riders, to get the message out that your service solves the problem of senior isolation.

If high gas prices resonate the most, come up with an estimate as to how much money your riders saved over the last year (plus or minus 50%) and hold a press conference at the bank where you deposit a huge check on behalf of the community for \$4,000,000 based on 2 million rider saving \$2.00 in gas costs each trip, and get out the message that your agency grows the wealth of your community by saving gas money.

Spotlight deficiencies in the status quo to gain

agreement on the problem to solve. Here's what we said for Illinois Amtrak service: "We are turning people away from trains. Driving costs are huge. State employees are flying between Chicago and Springfield and with a decent train schedule, they could take the train and save the state money."

Describe the benefits that will flow to the community from the improvement.

C. Ask the Community to Ask Decision-Makers

This is the heart of what mobilizing your community means. They ask their elected officials to invest in transit. This is advocacy.

If your state won't permit you to fund direct advocacy ("contact your legislator here"), that's OK. You can still do 90% of it. You not only have the opportunity but the obligation to tell the community the civic consequences of implementing the improvement and failing to implement the improvement. Let the voters connect the dots.

If decision-makers are getting shy about the solution to the problem, then hammer away at the problem. Show just how bad traffic congestion has become. Go to chamber meetings and find retailers who can't get workers at night or on weekends because of a lack of bus service. Recruit some allies who share your concern with the status quo and want to solve the problem.

Recruit messengers with constituency working groups (advocacy and environmental groups, higher education, chambers and employers, seniors, municipalities and local governments, CVBs and tourism industry). If you open your doors to constituencies and listen to their ideas and concerns, they are far more likely to go to bat for you when you need help.

In Illinois, we helped make the Amtrak expansion both an economic development investment pitch from Downstate mayors as well as a higher education investment pitch from the university presidents on each line. We rail advocates stayed in the background during the legislative hearings because those messengers had more authenticity than we did.

Bottom line: Create and implement a systemic communications plan to develop an ask, make the ask and if necessary, campaign for a yes.

Without a communications plan integrating your marketing, external affairs, government affairs and civic outreach, your ask is ad hoc and improvised, your staff is not tasked to convey the message and hear responses and the effort falls on the shoulders of the Director or General Manager to do all the work.

If you don't plan to ask, then it gets lost, and then when elected officials are deciding what to invest in, transit is off the table.

If it's ad hoc, it won't get done.

Thank you for listening.

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