

# Bridging the Gap Between City Hall and the Downtown

**R**omero's microphone had a very short cord, so he couldn't move away from the pointed questions. At one point, he seemed almost like a bear chained to a stake by a short tether, trying to defend himself from the bites and snarls of a pack of angry dogs!

—*Telegram-Tribune*, San Luis Obispo, California,  
March 3, 1992

I will never forget these lines, written by the local newspaper's business reporter in describing a town hall meeting held in 1992 by San Luis Obispo's downtown Business Improvement Association (BIA). I later had these words inscribed on a plaque, which I presented to Dave Romero when he retired so that he, too, could always remember them. At the time the meeting was held, Romero was public works director of San Luis Obispo and the person who was responding to questions about a controversial public improvement project. (As he is now a city councilmember, his local government adventures continue.)

Staff members had been invited to the town hall meeting to outline the city's upcoming plans for public improvement projects in the downtown. Was the reporter guilty of a little journalistic hyperbole? Only a little. Downtown business owners were upset, and city staff members were on the ropes (if not chained to a stake) most of the night.

You see, downtown merchants were just getting over the completion of several construction projects, and the city was laying out still more projects to come. The mer-

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**Ken Hampian**

chants feared that sustained construction of this type—and the noise, dust, and street closures that usually go with it—would send customers packing. In particular, merchants worried about the planned replacement of the Higuera Street waterline, which runs through the heart of the downtown. They also were dead-set against the replacement of the Nipomo Street Bridge, which is located next to our children’s museum and serves as a vital link in our downtown circulation system.

Concern about our plans was understandable. But why so much outrage? After all, much of the infrastructure in the downtown is antiquated, and logically it must be replaced. The rusted-out and too-small waterline was nearly 100 years old at the time, and the bridge was at 80-plus years, its load limit exceeded solely by the layers of surface concrete set down in long-ago maintenance efforts. As the staff struggled to point out at the meeting, local governments that do not replace such dilapidated infrastructure “crumble, both figuratively and literally.”

Maybe this agitation was caused by the recession? A few days after the town hall meeting, the administrative officer’s office received a letter signed by more than 30 merchants, who scoffed at this notion. “No business can sustain several months of construction even in the best of times,” the letter stated. “When customers avoid construction and our livelihood is taken away, anger and concern are natural reactions.”

### **There Is a Happy Ending**

Hopeless stalemate? A business/government fight to the finish? No, this story has a happy ending. In fact, only 11 months after the infamous town hall meeting, the newspaper published a letter from the BIA that described the work on the waterline as “outstanding,” adding that “merchants have expressed nothing but

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positive comments regarding . . . the smoothness with which the project is moving forward.” This past spring, with the full support—and, yes, enthusiasm—of merchants, the city held its “bridge-breaking” ceremony for the bridge replacement project. How did this change come about?

The city council led the way by adopting a policy that, to achieve a better outcome, we had to stop doing projects in the same old way. How were we doing them? As in nearly all other cities, a project was funded and staff prepared the plans; the project was bid; and soon a contractor was on the job. Yes, we did coordinate to a degree (we have long

avoided work during the holiday season), and some advanced warning was provided. But the merchants’ impression was that it could be peace and quiet one day, and the next day . . . jackhammer city!

We signaled our changed ways by starting our current practice of holding quarterly project coordination meetings with the BIA and the utility companies (cable, gas, electric, and telephone). During these meetings, future projects are discussed, and the city and utility companies plan work to avoid digging up the same streets over and over. Projects are scheduled to do as much work as possible in the slow times of year.

For the major projects, special teams of city representatives and downtown merchants are formed to tackle the most detailed aspects of project planning and design. For both the waterline and bridge projects, for example, this team approach produced a number of special strategies:

- Based on a merchant survey, the waterline project started on January 4, 1993—immediately after the holiday season but soon enough to finish the job before the tourist season. The bridge was delayed for one year to avoid doing it at the same time as the waterline.
- During the waterline project, trenches were filled at the end of each day with a “soft pack.” On Thursday night, special cleanup provisions were made so that the city’s weekly Farmers Market could take place on Higuera Street itself. (The market routinely draws up to 10,000 residents and tourists and is important to the cash flow of many downtown businesses.)
- During the current construction, access to stores is being maintained for pedestrians and deliveries, as is the availability of parking. For example, the city has reconfigured an

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adjacent parking lot to assure its use throughout bridge construction.

- Instead of dull and uninviting standard construction signs, upbeat, colorful signs are used to welcome customers to the construction area.
- To avoid the look of a war zone, the contractor is allowed to store on-site only the equipment and supplies needed during a given day.
- Noise is kept to a minimum. For example, electrical drops have been installed at the bridge to avoid noisy, gas-powered generators, and much of the bridge formwork will be constructed off-site.
- Besides imposing the usual penalties for tardy work by the contractor, we now offer financial incentives for early completion. These incentives have helped to get the waterline completed early.
- The city identifies a "single point of contact" on the construction site. This person, who gets to know the area merchants face-to-face, can help with rumor control


and problem solving.

- Further, communication is assured through weekly meetings that include the contractor, city staff, and downtown representatives. Fortunately, we have had local contractors for both the waterline and the bridge, and they have readily embraced our spirit of collaboration.
- Special city matching funds have sparked creative downtown promotions, often with a construction theme. For instance, through city cooperation with the schools, local children could participate in a construction hat contest that produced positive public relations for the waterline project. The bridge-area merchants also have a number of things in store, and the children's museum is planning bridge exhibits and a viewing area from which children can watch the actual construction.

### **The Investment Has Been Worth It**

Yes, these efforts probably have increased project costs to a degree. On

the other hand, we had been spending a tremendous amount of staff time simply on arguing the basic need for projects, then on trying to smooth over numerous complaints and problems after the projects were under way. This reactive, rear-guard approach required a major investment of time but did not yield any of the benefits of proactive collaboration.

Our success, however, did not come easy. At first, city staff worried about "letting the dragon in," or at least the pack of angry dogs referred to by the *Telegram-Tribune* reporter. For their part, the merchants were sure that our main goal was to make their lives miserable. But instead of a pack of dogs, we found a partner that has helped us plan and manage better projects. Conversely, merchants better understand the need to replace our old downtown infrastructure, despite the inconvenience. So, what we now have that we did not have before is trust. With trust, even man's best friend and a tethered bear can lie down together. 

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