

A Trip Past the Strip: Clark County Is There

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Las Vegas. With the mere mention of the name, the mind defaults to images of jackpots beyond imagination and an illusionist, fantasy-filled cityscape. Like so much else in Las Vegas, things on the Strip are seldom as they appear. And so it is in the metropolis that surrounds it, where tourists seldom venture. Within just a few blocks of the Strip in either direction are prototypical neighborhoods where soccer moms and Little League dads are as busy as they are anywhere else, where residents generally take as much responsibility for the welfare of their communities as if they had been born and bred there, which is not usually the case here. Also largely unnoticed behind the mirage is one of the best-kept secrets in local government: Clark County.

Clark County is the fastest-growing county in the nation, its population almost doubling in the past 10 years and now approaching 1.2 million. Moreover, about 35 million tourists will have descended upon the Las Vegas Valley in 1999, and many of them soon will be among the roughly 1,500 new residents who move into the valley per week. Not only has the county kept pace with this seemingly crushing growth, but it has turned itself into a model for overburdened local governments everywhere, especially in the hard-hit realm of public works.

While Las Vegas in the abstract has its own permanently carved niche in American pop culture, the county that contains the city and the myth and that rules the Strip (almost all of the Strip lies outside the Las Vegas city limits) has wisely taken many of its lessons from the citizens and businesses it serves. County commissioners and public information officers may not be able to make white tigers disappear, or to dance and sing like Tommy Tune and Tina Turner, but they still manage to put on a sparkling show of their own.

And their constituents know a good performance when they see one. Despite county citizens' increasing weariness over the relentless growth, they can see that this unprecedented metropolitan invasion has not caused endless traffic jams or a hopelessly inadequate public transportation system; this is not a region suffering chronic housing shortages or overflowing sewer and sanitation infrastructure—yet. The Las Vegas metropolitan area just seems to work, sometimes only sufficiently, sometimes brilliantly.

It has built a “higher road” and induced both the residents and the hotel/casino operators to buy into it. Making an early and unwavering commitment to systematic long-range planning, then effectively packaging the tax measures and private sector incentives to make it all possible, were the essential starting points for Clark County and other area governments when they faced the growth crunch. Lifestyles and demographics were shifting dramatically, and many thousands of tourists, retirees, sun worshippers, and second- and third-chancers were on their way to town to savor the climate, the low taxes, the booming gaming and construction industries, and a territory highly favorable to entrepreneurship.

Citizen/Customer as the Focus

While few communities today are spared the frustration of shrinking budgets and ever-escalating capital improvement costs, not all take full advantage of one of their most valuable assets in this struggle, their citizen/customers. But by making citizens genuine stakeholders in public works projects, by soliciting their collective ideas, talents, and energies and then putting them to work, the county made its successes lasting and built on them from one project to the next.

If government in southern Nevada is writing its own chapter in the millennium’s new-age management text of local governance, then successful community relations and citizen involvement programs as they’re being developed here—programs that get people involved and keep them involved—certainly are the pivotal theme.

Much of the credit goes to county officials skilled in selling capital improvement products and services to the people, which began long before the integration of local government and marketing fully solidified in the U.S. This fact is underscored when you consider that 70 percent of Clark County’s current population wasn’t there 15 years ago (taking into account the new growth and the turnover of existing residents). This is not exactly the soil in which deep-rooted community commitment and activism typically flourish.

By shifting responsibilities from government to the citizens and making residents coequal partners in the public works process, Clark County has made a number of remarkable things happen. For instance, people who in the past might have entered the process through the painstaking complain-and-demand ritual, or through the court system, were mostly already in the loop, their energies constructively diverted into such roles as neighborhood advocates and community coordinators.

What follows are stories that convey some of the more practical ideas currently employed on a day-in, day-out basis in Clark County’s public works department. These can either be looked at as places to start right off in

developing a nascent community relations-in-public works program or be taken as material to be remolded and adapted to another community's needs, personality, and programs already in place. Nor are these applications and insights by any means limited to public works. Whatever your vantage point or approach, the goal remains the same: getting citizens involved and keeping them that way, making them partners in the process from the moment a project is announced to the day of completion and from one project to the next.

Build Your Own Beltway?

The Las Vegas Valley got a critical head start in meeting its increasingly urgent transportation needs when voters overwhelmingly passed the Clark County Master Transportation Plan (MTP) in 1990. MTP was a multifaceted tax package that has since provided the county with more than \$100 million annually to build new roadways and enhance existing ones, as well as to foster a much-improved mass transit system.

MTP was a concept brought to life in the late 1980s by a county commissioner who, along with a cadre of political and administrative co-visionaries, realized that traditional approaches to roadway construction and finance—and the traditional roles of local government generally—would be inadequate to meet demand as it was projected into the 21st century. These leaders saw the future clearly and took an alternate route, which, as it turned out, has become an expressway to innovation throughout county government.

With MTP at the forefront, Clark County not only began taking full control of the growth issue before it reached a crisis stage but also gained control over its own fiscal destiny. Specifically, the centerpiece of MTP has been the Las Vegas Beltway, a \$1.5 billion project that is the largest public works venture in Nevada's history and that has been financed solely by the county. There was no state or federal collaboration on the project.

Note that, while keeping the beltway's funding entirely within the county was a major enabling force, the project was nonetheless a tightly coordinated intergovernmental affair, with regular input from the public and other project partners, including the Nevada Department of Transportation, the Regional Transportation Commission, the city of Las Vegas, and the city of North Las Vegas. All partners had roles in determining the configuration and design of each segment of the roadway.

The 53-mile beltway project was originally scheduled to be completed in 2020 but now will be finished in 2003. At least, there will be a contiguous roadway in place, to be widened and improved over time. Apart from coming in 17 years under schedule, among the beltway's other noteworthy achievements has been its highly successful community relations effort, itself a case study in how far a

guiding vision can go in making government consumer-friendly, and even fun. Here are a few details of some of the contributing efforts:

Monday-night meetings. These meetings were held over the course of 18 months in established, well-to-do subdivisions, whose residents were not looking forward to the construction work and especially not to a freeway running perilously close to their homes. Nothing new here. The more prosperous the neighborhood, the more complaining one is likely to get, and these residents were the beltway's centerstage Not-In-My-Backyard opponents.

The Monday-night meeting concept, however, was begun to solicit the opinions of residents on what they wanted in the project, both in the process and in the finished product. Loosening the grip of discord, these meetings effectively brought the more inhospitable residents directly into hands-on, decision-making roles.

The meetings succeeded not only in forging the government/citizen/contractor partnership for particular segments of the beltway but also enabled the public information staff to pinpoint the most obstinate and generally troublesome people. These people, then, became the top candidates for appointments to new citizen action committees, which turned into fonts of inventive, citizen-initiated ideas. Residents' recommendations resulted in the installation of decorative noise walls, design adjustments to a nearby interchange to improve local traffic circulation, various landscaping additions, and a recreational trail for nonmotorized use.

The mall program. Another strategy arising from the beltway project was that of setting up information tables in the middle of shopping malls to catch the attention of shoppers and to serve as general information centers for their areas. Now a fixture in major public works projects, these mall booths were, and are, staffed by a public information team along with, depending on the nature of the project, representatives of the general contractor, project management personnel, utility spokespersons, Nevada Department of Transportation staff, and personnel from other involved agencies. They answer questions, pass out literature, and preside over a variety of displays that include scale models of the project, maps, and video presentations of the project-to-be.

An unforgettable ribbon-cutting ceremony. For the beltway, no ordinary project, no ordinary opening celebration could really suffice. While the opening of two segments of the beltway were by footpower rather than horsepower—"fun runs" that raised thousands of dollars for local charities—these weren't precisely main events by Las Vegas standards, despite the goodwill also raised. So how about a jetpowered limousine that blurred its way down the new freeway and, having set a new speed record of 391 miles per hour, flew right

into the Guinness Book of World Records? It happened, and something like it might work in Wichita, too.

A Parkway Rebuilt

Maryland Parkway, a major north/south thoroughfare on the east side of Las Vegas, runs through a densely developed commercial area flanked by middle- and upper-middle-class neighborhoods. Opposing the county on some specifics of this rebuilding project were hundreds of businesses on either side of the roadway, many of which were within one of the region's largest shopping malls; thousands of people needing access to and from these businesses; large numbers of heavy commuters; and the users of a large hospital. A recipe for mass inconvenience and frayed nerves, perhaps, but otherwise not a project destined for the chronicles of public works. Yet it still made its mark on local history.

The construction management team, in addition to making a number of special accommodations to the affected businesses like working only on one-third wide, half-mile-long segments of the road at any one time, found solutions to some of the most pressing problems by turning directly to these business owners and managers. For example, by visiting personally every establishment in the area, the community relations team got the answer to the project's paramount question: whether, on the one hand, to pave the central six-block portion of the parkway over a scheduled five-week period, causing intermittent but certain delays and inconvenience, or, on the other hand, to close the entire road for 48 hours and pave it all within that time.

After polling each business, the county found that the overwhelming choice was the 48-hour option. And soon thereafter, a new term was added to the public works lexicon: the Pave-a-Thon. The do-it-all-now, Pave-a-Thon concept in this case was so successful that it reduced the delay time from an estimated 3,513 hours, had the original construction schedule been followed, to 107 hours. This approach has since been adopted by a number of public works departments across the country.

If turning a predicament into a new concept is a tour de force of can-do thinking, then Clark County earned even more stripes for ingenuity on this job. After the Pave-a-Thon was approved, the public information brigade quickly followed with another of its signature spectacles, the Public Works Street Party. The party idea started innocuously enough, with county staff members walking the entire vicinity to distribute information, preparing everyone for what was about to happen.

A party tent was set up at the main entrance to the site and staffed by county personnel around the clock until the parkway was reopened (five hours ahead of schedule). In the tent was a chart showing the progress of construction, a

media table, food, and piles of tee-shirts emblazoned with “I survived the Ultimate Overnighter.” During this 43-hour soiree, local news stations aired 34 Pave-A-Thon features, many conducted on-site, including an hour of free primetime TV coverage. This alone was worth about \$24,000 in donated public-service air time, and it served to elevate the county’s image significantly in the public eye.

Everything else was donated, too, primarily by local businesses, including the printed materials, tee-shirts, and refreshments. The county’s final tab for its own party was negligible. This is the kind of self-sufficiency the public information office has built into many of its promotional and regular information service functions, which includes having contractors pay for project newsletters and information updates for citizens.

Some Closing Pointers

The parkway case has hardly marked the end of the Clark County story. Here are a few additional lessons from the public works playbook.

Take the project to the people as early as possible in the design phase of the project, far in advance of the usual preconstruction meeting. In so doing, Clark County learned to its considerable satisfaction this can change the entire temperament of a project. By introducing a project to the people early enough, a local government gives everyone a better chance of adjusting to upcoming changes, and potential conflicts have a greater chance of being addressed before they turn into real strife when the stakes are much higher. More specifically, the NIMBY residents and similar activists can be spotted early and directed into positive project pursuits.

Conduct preconstruction citizen meetings in a lively manner. The county has made many citizen/clients happy at the outset simply by changing the format of its preconstruction meetings from that of a lecture to more of an open house. After the opening remarks, these meetings move into a series of breakout sessions; citizens can roam from one small gathering or display booth to another and can chat personally with representatives from design, engineering, project management, public information, and so forth. This gives all attendees a chance both to learn and to express their concerns face to face and makes an excellent foundation upon which to build citizen participation in the project.

Next to the citizens, the media are your greatest asset, as highlighted in the chronicle of the Maryland Parkway. While information can be distributed in many ways, keeping the media informed and in action during the full run of a public works event can be a promotional treasure trove. Gaining this level of coverage requires that a steady flow of press releases be sent out by all involved

bureaus, along with video trailers, printable copy, and stories that will compel live, remote coverage.

While sponsoring a jet-powered limousine race or holding a Harley-Davidson rally to mark the opening of a new roadway segment may not replace the traditional ribbon-cutting ceremony in Buffalo or Springfield, what's taking place in Clark County is much more than an instance of showbiz in government. After all, creative intelligence operates on the far side of the way things have always been done. Thus, Clark County has prevailed over self-imposed bureaucratic confinement, its message unmistakable for local governments everywhere.

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