



Massachusetts Municipal Association

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MMA Policy Committee on Public Works, Transportation and Public Utilities

Best Practice Recommendation: Prioritize Relationships, Communication, and Key Policies to Ensure Effective Infrastructure Project Coordination

BEST PRACTICE: At the core of good governance is ensuring that public resources are effectively invested and the needs of the public are met. Infrastructure projects often require significant public funding and human power. Such projects can also disrupt the lives of residents and businesses.

Repaving a road may require several weeks of rerouting traffic, causing slowdowns, inconvenience and safety risks for residents and workers. Infrastructure projects spearheaded by utility companies can have the same disruptive effects on a community. In addition to disrupting transportation, utility projects may also result in decommissioned materials like extra poles or pipes left in the public way that create safety risks while impacting the appearance of the neighborhood. Municipalities have limited authority over utility companies and any possible disruptions their work may have.

A goal of municipal officials is to ensure that all infrastructure projects are completed in a timely manner that maximizes impact while minimizing disruptions. Effectively coordinating projects with utilities and other relevant stakeholders can help to achieve this goal. Such collaboration can be encouraged by prioritizing relationships and communication, while enacting key policies at the municipal level.

Proactive Coordination

In addition to financial constraints, community dynamics, and environmental concerns, the health of stakeholder relationships can influence project success and affect efficient project coordination. Long before the start of any project, two key actions are recommended:

1. Establish regular open communication between municipalities, utilities and other key stakeholders.
2. Create multi-year plans, zoning, grants of location, and/or street-opening policies that will outline required actions by utility companies to help mitigate common conflicts.

Regular Open Communication

A practice of scheduled communication among relevant stakeholders should be established. This will likely take the form of a regular meeting of key representatives. At the municipal

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level, a liaison should be appointed to help establish regular communication between parties. Municipal department appointees, utility company representatives, and state-level representatives from relevant departments (e.g., MassDOT regional representatives) will form the core group of stakeholders, with additional representatives included as needed for each municipality or based on specific projects.

Regular meetings allow for all stakeholders to share their plans, resources, needs, and concerns about upcoming or in-process projects. Such meetings are excellent venues for sharing information about infrastructure plans to help ensure that projects are efficient. For example, a utility company may share its multi-year plan for infrastructure updates, and a municipality may use this information to better plan when to reclaim a street (or vice versa). It's important to remember that in most instances all stakeholders are interested in minimizing disruption to the public.

Establishing a pattern and culture of open communication helps to create a respectful dynamic between stakeholders and supports healthy professional relationships. Such a climate promotes collaboration and can lay the foundation to ensure that any project hurdles are handled quickly and efficiently when encountered.

In addition, regular communication with the public is key to successful infrastructure projects. Communities have used a variety of methods to keep residents and businesses informed, including project web pages, email alerts and notifications, and social media posts. If a community's ability to do these things is limited, the project design consultant or a communications consultant could be a useful resource.

Ensuring the public is informed about projects or utility issues creates trust in the community while holding companies and governments accountable. Public meetings may be used to bring together a legislative delegation, alongside company executives, to address issues affecting the public. For example, public meetings addressing gas leaks in the community allow for public engagement and can be a useful tool for tracking progress on repairs.

Municipal Policies for Accountability

Multi-year roadway infrastructure plans and municipal policies that outline the community's requirements and priorities for utility infrastructure can be powerful tools to ensure healthy relationships. A multi-year plan provides transparency about upcoming project priorities and may help in coordinating with utility company infrastructure projects. Creating zoning, grants of location, and/or street opening policies that outline required actions by utility companies can help mitigate common conflicts and provide leverage for municipalities to ensure that utility companies follow through with necessary actions.

A community may choose not to grant new permits or grants of location to utility companies if companies have outstanding infrastructure maintenance in the right of way. For example, a municipality may implement a policy to not approve a grant of location or to postpone a permit approval if a company has been slow to remove one or more double poles. Such a practice encourages communication between the municipality and utility companies while also holding companies accountable.

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In addition to leveraging grants of location and permits, municipalities may require that companies complete questionnaires about utility infrastructure prior to granting permissions. Asking for information about the conditions of utility infrastructure or the status of requested action can help to ensure that all parties are informed and encourage companies to complete outstanding work. For example, communities may ask if there are any known leaks, if there are any double poles, and what the plan is to address such issues. An annual review of outstanding issues is also recommended.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to coordination with utility companies. Individual relationships and project specifics may also impact collaboration. Emergencies may arise and require expedition of permits. And standing practices — for example, to open a road no more than once every five years — may not be adhered to. In addition, small communities may feel they have less leverage as a singular unit and will benefit from working together with neighboring communities to adopt uniform policies and regular coordinating meetings for the region. Absent legislative action to provide additional authority to municipalities, communities can work together with local-level practice and policies to help ensure that infrastructure projects are well coordinated and utility companies follow through on infrastructure obligations.

Project Coordination Checklist

Here is a recommended infrastructure project coordination checklist:

Establish a pattern and culture of regular, open communication:

- Hold monthly meetings for stakeholders.
- Maintain a contact list and establish relationships.
- Invite departments/boards to meetings as needed. Be proactive.
- Create a culture of transparency and support. Openly share resources, plans, maps, relationships, policies, expectations, etc.

Enact and use relevant municipal plans, policies, and practice:

- Create and maintain a multi-year roadway infrastructure plan that can be shared with relevant stakeholders.
- If not already in place, create municipal zoning, grants of location, and/or street opening policies that outline required actions by utility companies.
- Outline in writing key municipal processes to ensure transparency and accountability, including an outline of the permitting processes. Before beginning a project, have participants sign an understanding of the expectations.
- Create checklists to help ensure necessary approvals are in place, including easements and rights of way.
- Outline timelines for necessary processes.

Sample policies:

- [Town of Lexington Department of Public Works/Engineering Requirements for Paving Contractors](#)
- [Lexington Select Board Policy: Grants of Location in the Public Way](#)

Note: This Best Practices recommendation builds on and updates a recommendation from 2017: [Coordination of Infrastructure Work With Utility Companies](#).