



PUTTING RESEARCH TO WORK

# BRIEF

## Enhancing Communication with Local Governments

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation provides services to 1,923 local units of government through its central office in Madison and five regional offices located throughout the state. Coordinating effective communication with these Wisconsin localities is central to WisDOT's mission to provide leadership in the development and operation of a safe and efficient transportation system.

### What's the Problem?

WisDOT provides services to a wide range of localities, from small communities with fewer than 100 residents to large metropolitan areas. Often, smaller localities have a less well-developed communications infrastructure and face greater challenges in responding to WisDOT requests and obtaining needed information in a timely manner. This project focused on those localities less likely to have a well-developed communications infrastructure and sought to gather information that would allow WisDOT to enhance its communication methods for this subset of local governments.

### Research Objectives

This research sought to identify the most effective and efficient techniques WisDOT can employ to communicate with the local governments it serves. Targeting smaller communities, researchers recruited focus groups composed of officials from cities, villages and towns in different regions of Wisconsin to assess their:

- Technological capabilities for receiving communication.
- Preferred communication formats.
- Perspectives on WisDOT's current communication efforts.
- Familiarity with and use of the Programs for Local Government section of WisDOT's Web site.

### Methodology

Given the researchers' emphasis on localities with a less well-developed communications infrastructure, officials were recruited from localities with populations less than 65,000. Local officials gathered to participate in four focus group locations: Fitchburg, Richland Center, Wausau and Waukesha. The 27 officials who participated had a wide variety of roles in their local governments, from clerk to mayor. Experience levels varied, from service of less than one year to more than 50 years.

### Results

Discussion in the focus groups centered on four areas: communication modes and accessibility, communicating with WisDOT, evaluating WisDOT communication vehicles, and use of the WisDOT Web site. Information gained from the discussions included:

**Communication modes and accessibility.** While most localities had Internet access, smaller towns and rural areas were more likely to either not have Internet access or to have slow connections. For those with Internet access, e-mail was seen as an effective mode of communication given its speed, flexibility and record-keeping capabilities. Towns were most likely to prefer postal mail and obtaining information through colleagues or related agencies.

**Communicating with WisDOT.** Most communication with WisDOT is done through the regional offices; however, many localities receive WisDOT information from other sources, including county officials, engineering consultants, and municipal or town associations. Some participants noted a concern about the timeliness of WisDOT responses and announcements.

#### Investigator

*"With this study we identified frequently occurring themes that can help WisDOT understand the kinds of communication issues faced by local governments throughout the state."*

—Robert Cradock  
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The Programs for Local Government section of the WisDOT Web site provides access to useful information targeted to Wisconsin's cities, villages and towns.

## Project Manager



*“Forming strong partnerships with local governments is at the core of virtually everything we do at WisDOT. This research project provides valuable insight into how we can enhance communication with locals using the latest in communication tools and strategies.”*

—Lori Richter  
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**Evaluating WisDOT communication vehicles.** Online newsletters like *WisDOT Connector Express* were seen as useful and accessible, with general newsletters of greater interest than topic-specific newsletters. An index of topics covered in general newsletters would be of value to local governments.

**Use of the WisDOT Web site.** Both experienced and first-time users found the WisDOT Web site fairly easy to navigate. Those actively using the Web site had three main patterns of use: using the Search box to locate information, clicking on links of interest, and visiting a few specific Web pages repeatedly. The Programs for Local Government section of the WisDOT Web site was not being accessed by some smaller cities and towns.

## Recommendations

Research results indicate that certain localities have unique communication needs. WisDOT can use the information gleaned from this research to encourage effective communication with local governments by:

- Continuing to offer traditional methods of communication, such as postal mail, in-person meetings, newsletters and telephone calls, to augment e-mail and Web communication.
- Assisting with the establishment of peer-to-peer networks of local officials.
- Partnering with intermediaries (such as counties, consultants and municipal associations) to push WisDOT information to local governments.
- Tailoring communications to locality type.
- Providing timely and detailed responses to local government inquiries.
- Providing WisDOT contact information and keeping it current. For new officials, consider offering workshops or other assistance/documentation to help them get up to speed more quickly.
- Maintaining the WisDOT Web site with local governments in mind. Provide a specific access point for new local officials and include links to new Web pages that emphasize topics of interest to smaller localities.

## Implementation and Benefits

This research provides important insights into the communication needs and expectations of smaller Wisconsin localities. An implementation plan that addresses the recommendations arising from this research is in development and is expected to be fully executed by the end of 2009.

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