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Access Management and Public Involvement: Lessons Learned the Hard Way in Utah

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Utah Setting

Utah is a conservative state with a high percentage of the population focused along a 100 mile long urban core from Ogden to Provo, and centered on Salt Lake City. The "Wasatch Front" as it is called, has grown in population from less than 1 million people in 1975 to approximately 1.7 million people today, in a State with only 2.2 million people. This linear band of urban population is served by four counties and approximately 70 separate cities. Sales tax in the state is largely distributed based on point of sale, so the cities are very focused on "zoning for dollars" in the expectation that each new strip mall will balance the budget.

Planning and zoning policy and legislation is focused on strong support for private property rights. Most cities do not proactively zone land but rather wait for land owner requests and approve or disapprove each zoning and development request based on its own merit, with guidance but not strict criteria offered in the community comprehensive plan. The legislature of Utah is a part time body that serves over a 45 day session. Legislators have other full time jobs that may range from planner to plumber but are often anxious to take on issues during the remaining 320 days of the year to remain in contact with their constituents.

The urban core is developed around a north-south freeway, Interstate-15, which continues for the length of the state, and an east-west freeway, Interstate-80, which passes through Salt Lake City. Commercial development is commonly served by a series of east-west arterial streets which connect to freeway interchanges approximately every one and a half to two miles. These arterial streets form a strong grid of arterial and collector streets that serve a mire of driveways, local streets, and private properties.

Access Management Program

The Utah Access Management Program was initiated in approximately 1999. The concepts of the program were based on many of the lessons learned in other states with an expectation that roadway efficiency improvements were part of a multi-pronged approach to meeting the transportation challenges associated with continued strong growth. Access management was primarily initiated through rank and file support from

the urban planning division of the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) with conceptual support from region traffic engineers, both in the urban and rural areas.

The original concept of an Access Management Program was to follow a slow implementation plan. The program was drafted in 1999, region engineers were anticipated to follow the program principles and essentially work through the bugs and start educating the public and local governments in 2000, with full adoption of a program scheduled in 2001. The initial program development was guided by consultant support, which recommended a stratification of roads into access management categories based on both the function of the road in the State Highway System and the location of the road, either urban or rural. Access management standards were guided by accepted traffic engineering principals and discussed openly in various committees represented by state traffic engineers and permit officers, local government traffic engineers and planners, and local developers to ensure that the standards were not overly rigid as to limit there application. Resulting access management standards seemed to strike a compromise between what traffic engineers and local developers could support.

Project Setting

Concurrent with the start of the Access Management consultant study, an Environmental Assessment was initiated on a suburban arterial, 12600 South. Serving the extremely high growth area of Draper and Riverton Cities, the 12600 South corridor was a two lane road serving up to 20,000 vehicles per day near its I-15 interchange and extending approximately two miles east and 5 miles to the west of I-15 as the primary entrance to each City. Roadway improvements along 12600 South were programmed to begin with Right-of-Way purchases beginning in late 2001, followed by design in 2002, and early construction activities for a proposed railroad bridge, interchange upgrade, and other priority bottlenecks phased between 2003 and 2007 as funding allows.

The project included in the Long Range Transportation Plan was based on widening the road from two lanes to four, including two through lanes in each direction and a center turn lane as right-of-way allowed, upgrade of the existing interchange, as needed, and improvements to the at-grade railroad crossing, also as needed. Traffic projections which indicated future traffic levels of over 40,000 vehicles per day for much of its length, most improvements evaluated through the environmental process reflected the “needed” case of as-needed. An early public meeting focused on the need for improvements, followed by several meetings to review alignments for widening that best fit property owner plans and environmental constraints (there was a large pocket of wetlands and another pocket of historic buildings). Final meetings focused on the ability to minimize visual impacts of the railroad bridge, but the concept of raised medians was also presented.

In the end of the environmental process, the many businesses adjacent to the road were supportive of the need and voiced support for “pulling the bandage off quickly” since it cannot be painlessly. Adjacent residents expressed concern that they could not get in and out of their driveways and hoped that the state would quickly decide on property acquisition so that they could get on with their lives. Residents not adjacent to the corridor but served by the road were very supportive of the need, favored the

improvements sooner rather than later, and seemed to be frustrated that the study process was taking so long when the state could be using the time and money to construct necessary and obvious improvements.

The Best Laid Plans of Mice and Men…

Events unfolded according to the political realities and not according to the schedules established by either the Access Management Program or the 12600 South Project Program. Upper level management of the Department of Transportation became excited enough about the concept of access management that they wanted more time to ensure that the program would get started on the right foot. UDOT managers were somewhat paralyzed in knowing enough that this was a good idea, but not knowing enough of the details to fully add support. At the same time, the 12600 South project became the poster child for getting something done. UDOT managers, with the help of national and state legislators, accelerated the funding and construction of the project using the design-build technique of project delivery (as opposed to the traditional design-bid-build). UDOT leaders decided that this was not a project where the details really matter, "let's just get in and make it work."

During the unfolding of events, all the people that had some small concern in their overall support of the 12600 South project now started to vocalize their concerns within the context of raised medians. New traffic lights, maintenance of traffic during construction, pedestrian crossings, landscape treatment, even buried power poles were all discussed as trade-off of raised medians. At the same time, many at UDOT were sold on the benefits of access management and felt compelled to support the principles, standards, and practices as simply the "right thing to do".

Ready, Fire, Aim

There are many reasons to establish an access management program before implementing the standards on an individual project. We learned all these reasons the hard way.

- Establish the Rules before Playing the Game

  The biggest benefit of an access management program is the "level playing field" aspect. It matters much less whether a referee calls off-sides vs. illegal motion than when a referee always calls the close penalties on one team and not the other. Similarly, it matters much less whether the driveway separation standard is 250 feet vs. 275 feet than it does when one property owner gets three driveways separated at 100 feet each when your project is denied a second drive 225 feet from the first.

- Education and "Spin"

  The concept of "suicide lanes," while commonly accepted in Utah, got its name from the original perception. There is a growing body of knowledge and data on the benefits, and impacts, of access management principles. Having answers to the hard questions before they are asked eliminates much of the controversy.

- Everyone Sings the Same Song

There is a certain positive bureaucracy about an official program that keeps non-decision makers from making decisions. A properly conceived program has established rules and a process for variances. Well minded people will be less likely to go around the process with a quick answer knowing that there has already been thought into the issues.

- Take the Emotion out of Emotional Decisions

Finally, there is a large benefit to making policy decisions for the good of the system without getting bogged down with everyone's problems. Every curb cut has a name and a face. Access management decisions affect people's land and create certain problems. The point of access management decisions is not to close down a certain use or harm a certain individual. Access management decisions can be very emotional from the land owner perspective and case by case access management decisions can appear to single people or uses out.

The End Justifies the Means

In the end, raised medians were implemented on 12600 South and most people became supportive of sound practices. In fact, some of the political forces which originally called for the elimination of all raised medians wanted to ensure that the engineers would not bend too far and allow traffic problems to be created on a newly improved facility. In the end, good decision making and sound application of principles won over an emotionally charged debate.

The access management lessons on the 12600 South Project were hard fought lessons that are not recommended to be learned in the field. If we had it to do over again, we would continue to push to implement a program before fighting for certain features on an individual project. Similarly, the upper level support for raised medians on the project were not always clear, and we would recommend better support from the top down. Addressing access management trade-offs case by case is hard, it was even harder when state legislators were getting mixed answers from region engineers and UDOT managers.

Yet, we recognize that the way the stars aligned in Utah is probably similar to the way the stars align in other places, and making the best of a bad situation is a practicality that has to be dealt with. The following are some of the tips that we learned in a successful application where we did many things wrong.

1. Listen Before Teaching

The public, private land owners and local governments had many valid concerns. Although people who deal with access management have heard the concerns before, most people have not fully understood their own concerns until they articulate them themselves. We learned that people did not listen to our answer until we listened to their question.

2. Identify and Communicate the Important Issues

If engineers are bad listeners, they are worse communicators. In the quagmire of standards, there are some things that are absolute and others that are guidance. The more absolute a standard is the more solid the reason for the standard should be. Everyone wants safe roads and no one wants to spend $60 million on a capacity improving project that only lasts five years. People understand good ideas, but these ideas can be lost if not clearly communicated.

3. Compromise and Seek Solutions

The first two steps lead to the success of this third step. The important traffic and safety issues can often be accommodated at the same time as citizen concerns. The concern of u-turns from raised medians can be addressed with improved back access. The concern of creating mid block left turn queues that block the through traffic can be addressed with left turn controls in one direction versus another. Not every median will go in but the major benefits will still be preserved.

4. Stay on the High Road

For many, the idea of compromising is a slippery slope. If you give in on the first issue, they will come back on the second and third. Stay focused on what is important and do not get into debates. "When you wrestle with pigs, you get as dirty as the pig." The true benefits of access management are fairly clear, keep them clear by avoiding petty distractions.