



A Background Paper on Enhancing Communication by and within the Lane Council of Governments September 2010

At the June, August and September Executive Committee meetings, the report of the Communications Subcommittee of the Climate of Prosperity Task Force was discussed. Out of those conversations it was resolved that the Executive Committee would offer a specific recommendation for the consideration of the Board of Directors in September. This paper is designed to help frame and inform the Board's discussion.

First and most importantly: Good, clear and purposeful communication is absolutely vital to the success of the various regional enterprises with which this council of governments is engaged. For the collective vision of "good government" to be realized, there need to be clear channels of communication between public agencies and the public, the citizens and their governments, and from government to government. Inadequate performance in any of these three areas diminishes the effectiveness of public process and, in truth, compromises the viability of the democratic system.

The Subcommittee considered the present structure of communication and identified a number of issues or shortcomings that should be addressed. In addition, Concerns about communication seem to fall into three categories:

- **LCOG's communication with its membership and the public (providing information and "telling our story")**
- **Meaningful access for the citizenry to communicate with government, including LCOG (genuine and broad-based citizen involvement and participation)**
- **Effective communication channels between local governments in the region and between those jurisdictions and higher levels of government—notably the State Legislature.**

Addressing these concerns calls for distinct approaches, but approaches or tactics that are integrated, one with another. As has been suggested, a communications plan is appropriate. The outcomes developed in such a plan need to be specific and action-oriented. The plan could be developed quickly, but thoughtfully, and would follow a classic form of identifying goals, objectives, outcomes and action steps. With such a common strategic vision in hand, the procedural, budgetary and staffing provisions could be made to accomplish the vision of a more robust and effective communications program.

The Communications Subcommittee identified the three areas noted above for which improvements are needed. Each deserves its own assessment and probably its own unique steps toward improvement.

Communication between public agencies (including LCOG) and the public

Individual agencies, like individual elected officials, manage this important task in their own ways. Some jurisdictions rely heavily upon press conferences or releases to the commercial media, while others use direct mailings, public postings, and utility stuffers. LCOG does utilize media notices (but not frequently), our newsletter, *Regional Focus*, several websites, and on specific projects flyers, brochures and other notices. Examples would be the roll-out of the ADRC by the Senior & Disabled Services Division, or the provision of information around transportation planning issues. In the transportation arena, LCOG staff maintains the [keepusmoving.info](#) website that informs the public of significant road and highway projects, and in the public safety arena, the Community Emergency Notification System (CENS) has proven itself to be an effective tool. Similarly, staff members often make presentations on their specific issues—say, the Rivers to Ridges project or the Willamette River Vision and Action Plan. LCOG has a capable Creative Services work group that maintains websites, produces presentation materials of all kinds and prepares video and PowerPoint presentations for staff members' projects. Likewise, Metro TV, administered by LCOG, produces informational pieces and PSAs that address the public sector's communications needs.

But it is telling that the Board and the Communications Subcommittee believe that the public does not know what LCOG does. That is probably quite correct. The Executive Director has shared that when he interacts with community members, he has found “that many have a specific and usually very narrow (sometimes dead wrong) vision of what the agency does... *Ah, yes, you do maps ...or You do Meals on Wheels...or You're telling me what I can't do with my property...* In his report

to the Executive Committee, Kloeppele noted that “when I do an agency show-and-tell presentation for a service club, I often get a response that runs along the lines of *I had no idea that LCOG was involved with all of that...*

One of the questions that must be resolved in the development of a communications plan is, plainly stated, what do we want and need the general public to know... One subcommittee member observed that we need better “branding,” and that “when I have a need for information, I (should) immediately think to call LCOG.” For the elected officials and staff of our member governments, the ethic of “think to call LCOG” makes sense; and that ethic is reinforced in every way possible. It is less clear if that same level of familiarity and confidence is a realistic expectation when it applies to the general public. LCOG is “owned” by its members, and while its programs and services provide public benefits, first and foremost, the member jurisdictions need to be kept informed about, and supportive of, the activities of the organization. At the same time, it is recognized that public opinion—positive or negative—has a bearing on the political health of an agency like LCOG.

Clearly, the COG could make the commitment to “let our light shine” more brightly in the public square. We could actively proclaim successes. But in some areas of the work program, it is understood that the successes, if they come, are the successes of the jurisdictions who participated. In many cases, the agency intentionally refrains from unfurling the LCOG banner, but rather steps to the rear of the crowd when the speeches are made and ribbons cut. A tactical mistake? Maybe. The communications plan should address this. Unquestionably more can be done in terms of getting the public sector’s story out—without stepping on the toes of the membership. And yet, such a goal needs to be pursued very carefully. The Board of Directors plays a key role in this regard. They, the members of the Board, are in a great position to communicate both with their own jurisdictions and their constituents. The staff’s provision of detailed program overviews at every Board meeting has been designed to arm the elected officials that sit at the COG table with the real-life benefits of LCOG’s work. As respected members of their communities and agencies, the members of the Board are invaluable ambassadors for the organization.

Finally, recall that it was Jim Torrey who, at a Board discussion of this subject, advocated for better two-way communication between governments (plural) and the general citizenry. He wanted information about the work of the public sector to be more broadly communicated and better understood, and he was anxious to have the informed input and public comment of a broader cross section of citizens.

There is more about the citizen-to-government communication below, but the idea that LCOG should be the medium for disseminating information about our local governments is one that should be explored carefully, and certainly should be a part of a Communications Plan.

Citizens' communication with government, including LCOG—meaningful public involvement

An effective Communications Plan should provide for enhanced two-way communication between the people and their governments. This objective is fundamental to a healthy democratic system. Recognizing that the demographics of the American population and the technologies particularly relevant to a younger population are changing, a number of local governments and regional councils are beginning to utilize “social media,” as well as the more traditional mechanisms, to obtain “input” from citizens. With speed and volume as measures of effectiveness, it could be argued that “Twitter” and “Facebook” yield far greater “citizen engagement” than traditional public meetings, hearings and workshops. However, from all reports, such techniques demand significant monitoring and staff time. LCOG’s Communications Plan should include the goals of making the work of the public sector transparent and of providing access to a diverse citizenry for substantive participation in government decision-making.

LCOG currently uses a variety of techniques to solicit public comment. While public hearings and occasional opinion polls are used, the most common path for the public’s communication with the council of governments lies in the use of advisory councils and committees, the majority of which conduct their own public hearings. As examples, broadly representative (arguably not broad enough) citizen groups address areas of economic development (LEC), senior and disabled services (SSAC and DSAC) and transportation (MPO-CAC). The latter has developed (and the MPC has adopted) a vigorous Citizen Involvement Plan, which continues to evolve and expand with experience. Similarly, the Metropolitan Policy Committee has adopted a comprehensive Title VI Plan that sets forth the means of assuring that full participation in the transportation planning and budgeting processes is afforded to minority and disadvantaged citizens and that project decisions do not impose a discriminatory hardship on such groups. And yet, with all these efforts, a significant stumbling block to a fully perfected citizen involvement process remains: The substantive work of the council of governments often appears far-removed from the here-and-now interests of much of the general public. A process of self-selection by busy citizens seems to yield not broad, but narrow and all-too-

familiar, citizen input. A question that should be addressed in the Communications Plan is a long-standing one: How does the council of governments interest, and then seek input from, citizens of the region?

Another aspect of the citizens' communication with government arose during the Board's discussion of establishing a "Climate of Prosperity." It was suggested that something like regional forums (my term) be conducted throughout the region with citizens invited and encouraged to speak to a variety of topics from development and land use issues to public safety and education. For such a strategy to be meaningful, either elected officials would need to actively participate or careful reports would need to be prepared and provided to policy makers. A question that the Plan will need to address is: Are multi-topic regional forums worth pursuing?

Governments communicating with other governments

This third element of the Communications Subcommittee discussion lies at the heart of LCOG's "reason for being." While regional advocacy to the "higher levels" of government was part of the recommendation and is addressed below, the notion of local governments working and talking with one another toward the end of more effective and efficient public service is fundamental. The importance of collaborative behavior and cooperation between local units of government should not be glossed over. Nor would a new communications strategy be complete without due attention being paid to this most basic COG role.

As with the other two aspects of communication, there is plenty of room for improvement in the channels by which elected and appointed public officials communicate with one another. And yet, for nearly sixty five years this COG has facilitated such communication and the list of cooperative ventures that have been put in place is long and impressive. Of course there are institutionalized venues for intergovernmental communication and decision making such as LRAPA, MPC, PSCC, REG and MWMC, and there are somewhat *ad hoc* mechanisms, such as the Lane Mayors Roundtable, the Joint Elected Officials (JEO) group, the FACT-LC and task forces that are asked to come together to address specific topics of multi-jurisdictional importance. In addition, there are numerous staff-level groups, both long-established with regular meeting schedules and *ad hoc*, whose work serves as the glue to make intergovernmental cooperation possible. Examples include the Regional Information Officers (RIO), the Planning Directors' Group, the Transportation Planning Committee (TPC), the Public Area Network (PAN) Group, and the list could go on. Here, however, for purposes of example, four established bodies that facilitate better government by fostering open

communication between jurisdictions are highlighted: The LCOG Board of Directors, the SEL group, the Regional Managers group, and the Lane Mayors Roundtable. Each provides strong testimony to the value of personal familiarity, trust and candid communication.

The LCOG Board, while large as “working groups” go, has been an important venue for communication between jurisdictions. Meeting more frequently, the members of LCOG’s 8-member Executive Committee have even more opportunity to learn from and build trust with one another. The “SEL” which meets every two weeks is vitally important to the intergovernmental health of the metro area. The CEOs and IGR staff of Eugene, Springfield, Lane County, LTD and LCOG have been able to resolve issues and “get on the same page” through these meetings. The Regional Managers Group, consisting of the CEOs of the cities, the County and the COG, meets every two months. Not only are regional issues discussed and opportunities for sharing explored, but the meetings provide a chance to know and appreciate what might be happening “just down the road.” And finally, the Lane Mayors Roundtable—12 mayors plus the Chair of the Board of Commissioners—meets on about a three-month cycle. These chief elected officials craft their own agendas, sometimes ask that outside resources be brought in, and occasionally agree to take a common position on a public policy topic. Notably, LCOG facilitates all of these intergovernmental meetings.

The Communications Subcommittee concluded that additional effort should be applied to communicating the needs and wishes of local government in the region with other levels of government. It was decided to pursue the creation of a “Regional Voice” program for communicating with the State Legislature. Work is underway in that regard, with the first step toward the 2011 Session being an invitation to the county’s legislative delegation to attend the September 30 meeting of the LCOG Board of Directors. The challenge with developing a clear statement of legislative priorities relates to the diverse membership of the COG. Interestingly, that diversity may also be one of the primary strengths of the Regional Voice.

In each of these areas, goals and intended outcomes for enhanced communication can be crafted within a strategic Communications Plan. Realizing those goals and achieving outcomes would be a subsequent step, largely the responsibility of staff. However, it has been suggested that good things could be accomplished in this arena by augmenting the existing staff by the addition of a communications

manager. Without presuming too much about the content of the yet-to-be-drafted Plan, it is reasonable to guess that a trained professional could assist the organization in several ways. Certainly he or she could be expected to help find new and effective means of “telling our story.” Likewise, the goal of encouraging citizen involvement, whether through new technologies or the more familiar, could be advanced with more staff energy being applied. Finally, assisting existing staff in support of the Board’s directives regarding government-to-government communication tactics would be a logical role for such a professional. The pursuit of this approach will require an examination of the existing skill sets of the staff and also of the projected costs. But those considerations are down stream.

It is recommended that the LCOG Board request that the staff pursue the development of a comprehensive Communications Plan and that the Plan be submitted for the Board’s review after the first of the year.