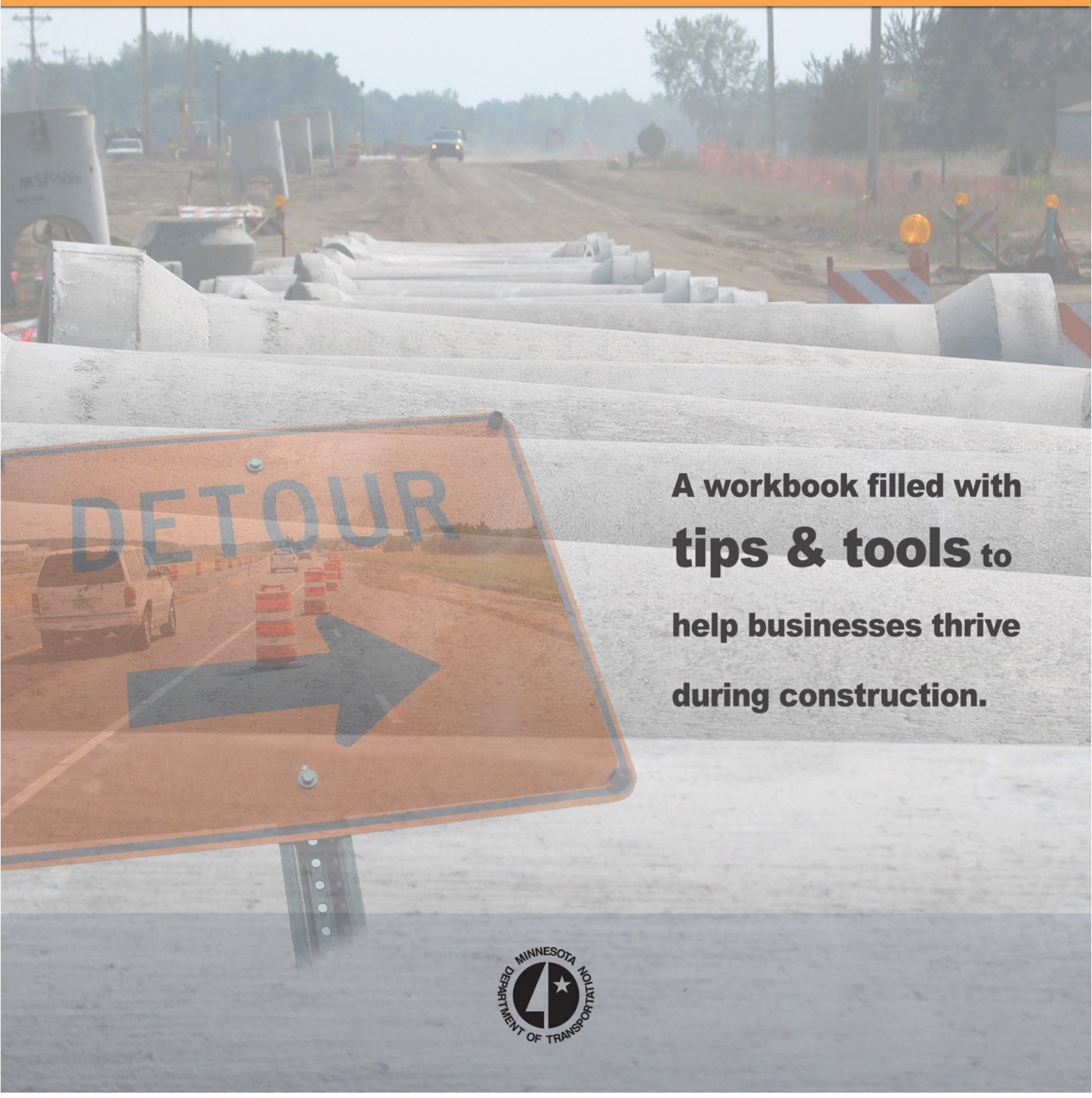
How to THRIVE during Road Construction



A workbook filled with tips & tools to help businesses thrive during construction.

MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

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A workbook filled with tools to help Minnesota businesses thrive during road construction

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Minnesota Department of Transportation

Introduction

A cartoonist once portrayed a lost tourist asking a local resident for directions, to which the laid back homeowner replied, "Mister, you can't get there from here." Little did the cartoonist realize that "You can't get there from here" would become an idiom that's repeated every time a driver is lost, confused, or detoured by highway construction.

The cartoonist did no favor for businesses that rely on customers having an unimpeded path to their doors. "You can't get there from here" became the convenient excuse for shoppers to take their business elsewhere.

You *can* get there from here
"You can't get there from here" should be stripped from our lexicon. It should be replaced by a can-do attitude epitomized by the children's story "The Little Train That Could." It would be helpful to recall the courageous attitude of the Pilgrims and other immigrants who crossed treacherous oceans to get here or pioneers who pushed westward across mountains and plains to find new homes in the West or Midwest. They were not people easily intimidated by challenge; they wouldn't be intimidated by today's orange barrels at road construction sites. The barrels would be welcome beacons to safely guide them to their destinations.

Deal with perceptions
Now, the reality check: Without a strong motivation, it is human nature to avoid orange barrels, barricades, Road Closed signs, big trucks, earthmovers and other indications of dusty, dirty construction zones. The perception that "you can't get there from here" may be wrong. But this is a case when perception is reality, and our challenge is to deal with the perception and to keep customers coming.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) recognizes that businesses located in a work zone have special needs. It's critical that their customers have access to business and that they continue to patronize the businesses, in spite of any road work inconvenience.

Mn/DOT helps these businesses in a variety of ways and tries to help businesses to help themselves.

This workbook is a compilation of techniques that have been used successfully in several Minnesota communities and in the state of Wisconsin. It includes samples of what others have done, and descriptions of their efforts. It is offered to business and community leaders as an idea source as they plan for road construction closer to home.

This workbook includes an array of ideas communities might implement, worksheets to follow progress, and a timeline to check off accomplishments as they are completed.

Planning ahead

Many highway construction projects have a design phase of five or more years. This is the time when Mn/DOT engineers, in cooperation with local government officials, plan the project, define the scope of what will be accomplished, study the alternatives available, evaluate the impacts on the community or neighborhood, and design the plans that a contractor will need to finish the improvement. Occasionally, Mn/DOT hires consulting engineering firms to design the improvement, and sometimes to manage its construction.

Throughout this design phase, Mn/DOT holds periodic meetings with local officials and citizens to hear their suggestions and concerns. By the time the construction crew rolls on-site, all of the design decisions have been made. It's important, therefore, for the business community to get involved early in the design phase and stay involved during construction.

Getting organized

The key to survival is bringing businesses and the affected stakeholders together early and working together to survive economically while the infrastructure is improved. A local chamber of commerce or business association often becomes the focal point as business people get organized. A leader can be identified to represent the business community to keep business concerns in mind, to channel questions or suggestions to Mn/DOT and to carry information back to the businesses. Sometimes, a smaller group or committee is formed to specifically represent those who are most affected by the construction.

Working cooperatively as a group has advantages. Together, the business community has the synergy to accomplish more than its individual members could accomplish on their own. Resources and ideas can be pooled for the maximum benefit. Working together saves time and money in the long run.

Staying informed

Keeping the public informed about highway projects and their impacts on citizens' lives is a key to public understanding, and Mn/DOT uses a variety of techniques to spread the message. It's important for businesses, as well as citizens, to understand why a highway or bridge needs to be rebuilt, the alternative solutions that were evaluated, the efforts to ensure that negative impacts are kept to a minimum, and why there may be some inconvenience during repairs.

Businesses play a dual role in road construction: first as citizens impacted by road work; second working with Mn/DOT to keep their customers coming and minimizing inconvenience for customers and drivers. Businesses and Mn/DOT are truly "in this together," united in recognizing the need for road improvements and the long-term benefits they will share when the project is completed, and working together to minimize any negative consequences.

Businesses, not unlike the general public, are more likely to endorse highway repairs when they have all the facts early enough so they can participate in the decisions, offer suggestions and plan ahead. When they are involved early, businesses tend to assume some ownership for the improvement and more optimistically face the challenges during construction.

How to do it
As a business person, you can stay informed by:

- Attending public meetings during the design phase and other meetings just prior to construction.
- Inviting Mn/DOT representatives to discuss the project at your business association or group meetings.
- Sharing what you've learned with other business people, using letters, newsletters, ads and other techniques to make the community more aware of what's ahead.
- Staying in touch with the Mn/DOT project manager, once construction begins. Learn the project manager's name and phone number and where the project field office is located.
- Establishing a line of communications. Call if you have questions. You may identify one of your members as the point person to collect questions and concerns, to take them to the project manager, and to bring back responses and other information. When warranted, the point person may wish to attend periodic meetings between the project manager and the contractors.
- Identifying key business people to whom Mn/DOT can mail or fax news releases and project updates.

Handling traffic

Ideally, a contractor can repair or rebuild a road more quickly and less expensively if all traffic is removed during the work. But that is not feasible many times if Mn/DOT is to maintain access to businesses and minimize the impacts on them or if an adequate detour is not available.

When front access is critical, we accommodate traffic in two ways:

Under construction but open to traffic
This alternative is used on high-volume highways like the Interstate or on multilane roads where one lane can be rebuilt while traffic is restricted on the other, or for resurfacing on low-volume roads where suitable detours are not available and the project can be done one lane at a time with signs or flag persons to direct traffic.

Road closed to through traffic, open to local traffic
"Through traffic" means those vehicles that don't have an origin or destination inside the work zone.

Detour signs direct them to an alternate route around the work zone. We usually keep the detour length to a minimum, making certain the road is in good condition and capable of safely handling heavy traffic, including trucks. An important consideration is whether travelers can follow the detour easily.

When a road is closed to through traffic, the "through traffic" driver who does not have an origin or a destination within the work zone is subject to a traffic ticket.

"Local traffic" means those drivers who *do* have an origin or destination within the work zone. This includes people who need access to their homes, their visitors, businesses making deliveries or pickups, school buses, emergency vehicles, business owners, their customers and employees.

When someone needs access in the work zone, we ask them to minimize their use of the road. This can be done by using side roads that intersect close to the destination.

The reason we restrict local traffic is because the work zone may be filled with dozens of trucks, earthmovers and other equipment, all moving in different directions. When local traffic is heavy, the contractor needs to hire flag persons to direct traffic and prevent collisions between drivers' vehicles and construction equipment. The heavier the traffic, the greater the danger of collisions, delays for everyone, and cost.

Handling traffic

While the contractor is required to maintain a safe and adequate path on which local traffic can drive, the roadway may be bumpy, dusty, or muddy. Occasionally, the contractor may provide a temporary path on gravel adjacent to the construction. Sometimes, the road may be temporarily closed to all traffic and only maintained for emergency vehicles. It may be a few hours or a few days, and Mn/DOT works hard to keep that time as short as possible. Important deliveries can be scheduled with the contractor and the project manager.

Concrete pavement requires a “cure” time of three to seven days, depending on the amount of cement in the concrete. If access is given to businesses during this time period, it is necessary to provide a “gap” in the pavement. Such gaps require the paving contractor to stop operations, move the paver ahead and restart the entire operation. The contractor must then fill the gaps at a later date.

Pavement gaps delay project completion, compromise ride quality and increase costs. Businesses may be approached by the paving contractor to work with them to

eliminate the need for paving gaps. Without paving gaps, contractors can pave nearly a mile a day. With gaps, the production can be cut in half or worse. That means overall construction will take longer. The goal of everyone is to get the project completed as quickly as possible, at a reasonable cost. Businesses may consider closing shop for a few days to enable earlier project completion. Or they may share gaps with other businesses to reduce the number of gaps.

Reducing traffic

Businesses and Mn/DOT walk a fine line together, seeking to reduce traffic on the highway under construction so that contractors can complete their work efficiently, quickly and safely, while maintaining the traffic stream so that customers and employees can reach the businesses as easily as possible.

When four lanes are reduced to two lanes, or when two lanes are narrowed to one, it becomes essential to reduce traffic by a significant amount. Even when the highway capacity has been cut in half, diverting 10-20 percent of the traffic to other routes can keep the traffic stream workable for both drivers and the contractor. That permits the remaining 80-90 percent of the traffic to flow through the work zone at a reasonable speed and for drivers to reach businesses, industries, and residences along the route.

Traffic is like an overflowing river: it takes the path of least resistance. It may follow a marked detour route. But most local traffic spills onto nearby streets and roads with which drivers are familiar, each driver finding his or her own special way to circumvent construction.

When the highway is being reconstructed "under traffic," Mn/DOT suggests drivers use alternate routes.

How businesses can help reduce traffic
Here is a checklist of ways in which business can help reduce traffic jams during construction:

- ❑ Tell your customers and employees about traffic restrictions. Distribute brochures, flyers and paycheck stuffers. Inserts with regular customer billings can be very effective.
- ❑ Help your suppliers and their truck drivers identify alternate routes to your business or industry. Do this *before* construction starts.
- ❑ Consider routes for your outgoing vehicles to avoid the work zone or schedule shipments at nonpeak times.
- ❑ Establish a company-sponsored carpool or vanpool program, or encourage employees to use existing programs.
- ❑ Look into starting a company shuttle to take employees to and from park-and-ride lots at locations outside the construction area.
- ❑ Investigate flextime or four-day work weeks that reduce employee travel during rush hours from 7 to 9 a.m. and 3 to 6 p.m. weekdays.
- ❑ Consider telecommuting or other strategies that allow employees to work at home.

Keeping customers informed

Drivers who are well informed about road construction tend to be "happy campers, inconvenience notwithstanding. They understand why the improvement is desirable. They know about construction before they leave home, rather than being surprised by the sudden appearance of barricades, orange barrels, and Road Closed signs. They've been told about roads that are closed or restricted; they follow and sense the construction progress being made; and they've given some thought to other ways around construction either by studying the map or checking out possible alternate routes on their own rather than fuming in frustration as their vehicles sit in a long line of stop-and-go traffic.

Mn/DOT has stepped up the flow of road work information to the public. We use changeable electronic message signs to advise drivers when delays are expected and to safely steer them through or around construction zones. Communications professionals use a variety of techniques to inform drivers about projects, their value to the public, and traffic detours or restrictions that might affect the public. News releases provide valuable background information to news media. News stories and interviews with TV, radio and newspaper reporters can be set up. Major projects with significant traffic impacts warrant brochures, generally with maps, that clarify the work ahead, detours, and alternate routes. Telephone recordings are used to bring inquiring drivers up to date. And the Public Affairs Coordinator in each of Mn/DOT's eight districts statewide is a convenient, available information source for drivers needing help.

How businesses can keep the customers coming:

- Mn/DOT may permit businesses to have directional signs in construction zone.
- Contact the project manager to make certain that the sign you contemplate complies with Mn/DOT guidelines.
- Use simple maps to tell your customers about the best alternate routes to reach your business. Post them on your doors and bulletin boards, insert them into billings and other mailings and distribute them to your customers. Be especially mindful of customers who come a long distance and may be unfamiliar with local streets and roads.

- Let the public know that you're open for business. Develop ads for newspaper, radio or television. Pool your resources for group advertising. Advertising cooperatively can be very cost-effective. Brainstorm for innovative ideas to promote your businesses.

Tips for businesses:
how to survive road construction

Here are some basic actions business owners can take to help survive roadway construction:

- Plan ahead as much as possible; get involved early. A year is not too far ahead to begin organizing and planning.
- Form an alliance with other businesses in your locale.
- Attend public meetings to stay informed. Have knowledge of the project. Contact Minnesota Department of Transportation to voice your concerns.
- Hold frequent and regular meetings with other businesses for support and strategies. Write down your fears and questions for discussion.
- Pool resources to purchase group advertising.
- Hold a pre-construction meeting with the Mn/DOT project manager and contractor to find out how long the project will take, what to expect, i.e. dirt, mud, ground shaking, etc.
- Meet the on-site project manager. Keep his/her telephone number in a handy place.
- Establish a line of communication with the project manager. Project managers coordinate with the contractor.

Brainstorm for innovative ideas to promote your business and to communicate with customers:

- Hold events prior to construction start-up to draw attention to the area.
- Work with the Mn/DOT Public Affairs Coordinator to plan groundbreaking activities.
- Design a logo for use by all affected merchants during the construction period.
- Hold special promotions such as free hot dogs and pop, or a one-day sign-up in parking lot for a free vacation.
- Print placemat advertisements.
- Place advertisements in outlying newspapers.
- Plan hard-hat promotions—some for sale, some as giveaways.
- Sell hard-hat lunches to go.
- Schedule a grand finale—work with the Mn/DOT Public Affairs Coordinator to plan ribbon cutting ceremonies; plan street dance, t-shirts, prizes.
- _____
  _____
- _____
  _____

Worksheet CHECKLIST & TIMELINE for business owners

- ❑ Form an association of businesses that will be affected by the construction project. Let the Mn/DOT district office know the name and address of your organization's primary contacts.

- ❑ Attend first meeting with Mn/DOT project development staff responsible for project design.

- ❑ Discuss project schedule, question and answer session.

- ❑ Form committees for advertising, promotions, signing, special events, etc.
  Committees: *Members:*

- ❑ Develop and implement promotional campaign.
  Adopt theme.
  *Delegated to:*_____ *Due by:*__/__/__

  Design and produce newspaper, television and radio advertisements.
  *Delegated to:*_____ *Due by:*__/__/__

  Brainstorm and produce additional promotional materials.
  *Delegated to:*_____ *Due by:*__/__/__

  Plan special events.
  *Delegated to:*_____ *Due by:*__/__/__

***TASK* - 3 to 6 months ahead**

- ❑ Attend second meeting with Mn/DOT staff.

- ❑ Discuss project schedule, question and answer session.

- ❑ Meet Mn/DOT project manager, who is responsible for construction, and with the prime contractor.

***TASK* - 1 month ahead**

- ❑ Meet Mn/DOT project manager and contractor.

- ❑ Discuss project schedule.

- ❑ Construct roadside signs needed to guide drivers to parking and business accesses. Arrange for erection of signs to coincide with the start of any detour.

- ❑ Distribute final promotional materials.
  *Delegated to:*_____ *Due by:*__/__/__

TASK

- ❑ Attend construction business meetings held throughout the duration of the project.
- ❑ Continue committee work.

Key contacts

Minnesota Department of Transportation

Please feel free to contact me for more information on this booklet or any other Mn/DOT construction project questions you may have:

Mn/DOT District 3 Office - *Baxter*
7694 Industrial Park Road
Baxter, Mn 56425
Phone: (218) 828-5700

Mn/DOT District 3 Office - *St. Cloud*
3725 12th Street North
St. Cloud, Mn 56303
Phone: (320) 223-6500

Other key contacts are listed on the District 3 Website:
www.dot.state.mn.us/d3.html

District 3 Construction News Releases:
www.dot.state.mn.us/d3/construct.html

For updated statewide traffic, construction, weather, and travel information visit www.511mn.org.

Conclusion

We hope this workbook helps you to keep your business, and the other businesses in the construction zone, healthy and thriving throughout the construction period. Your customers will appreciate your special attention to them and will keep coming back for years to come. When the project is done, both you and your customers will look at the new road or bridge as a definite improvement. The temporary inconvenience will be just that —temporary. But the new road or bridge will last.