

# **Measuring the Role of Public Relations in Public Policy Matters**

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**Indiana University School of Journalism at IUPUI - Public Relations Graduate Program**

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### **Abstract**

This research project found connections between public relations management and the process of finding road funding solutions through legislative measures and/or other public policy changes. The overarching question that served as the guide for this research project was: how can the Association of Indiana Counties (AIC) use public relations to engage stakeholders to work toward legislative solutions for road funding shortages? The research methodology used for this project was the multiple interview approach – an informal research method that used a semi-structured interview format to determine best practices for seeking road funding solutions. Eight thought leaders from associations that do work similar to the AIC were interviewed. The results did uncover 27 legislative successes and/or public policy changes on road funding issues; 26 of those victories had ties to transportation coalitions. Generally, the more formalized the coalitions, the greater the level of success on finding road funding solutions through public policy measures.

## **Background**

The use of public relations practices to accomplish organizational goals may not be the first strategy many top tier managers consider when planning how to achieve those objectives, but a growing body of research is beginning to show the need for organizations to consider public relations among its top priorities. Effective organizations, according to Grunig & Grunig (2001), develop and manage relationships with key constituencies, or publics as they are referred to in public relations. Grunig & Grunig (2001) further found that properly managed relationships with publics (or stakeholders as they will be referred to in this research) help the organization to: (1) establish priorities, and (2) further those goals. An essential element of successful relationship management is symmetrical communication, the two-way dialogical approach, with key stakeholders (Ledingham, 2003a). Furthermore, relationship management as a science helps to determine the conditions under which organizational-public relationships (OPRs) thrive while also predicting results of the partnership(s) (Ledingham, 2003a). The significance of the OPR has real value to organizations that practice symmetrical communication with their stakeholders. “The practice of public relations that focuses on relationship building ultimately brings about economic, societal, and political gains both for organizations and for stakeholders” (Ledingham, 2003b, as cited in Park & Reber, 2008, p. 1). OPR’s are relationships based on mutually beneficial communications and actions (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, as cited in Park & Reber, 2008).

Whether it is in the private sector or public sector, learning how to manage OPRs, should be a core function of any organization because there is always the potential for issues to develop with key OPRs (Ledingham, 2003a). The term issues management was introduced in 1976 by public relations practitioner Howard Chase; it has since been the focus of much study because as

Regester & Larkin (2008) point out, when issues arise they will continue to “have a significant effect on the functioning or performance of the organization or on its future interests” if not managed properly (p. 44).

An issue of great contention nationally has been the management of road revenue sources for county governments which are critically low according to the report by the National Association of Counties (NACo, 2011a) titled Reauthorization of the Federal Surface Transportation Program. The same report by NACo states “a major challenge is addressing how to increase funding” (NACo, 2011a, p. 1). The situation in Indiana is just as dire, and according to the Indiana Local Technical Assistance Program (Indiana LTAP) Center at Purdue University (2009) needs assessment study, funding has continued to decrease over more than a decade. In fact, the same study shows that funding levels in 2009 were equivalent to what they were in 2000; this figure does not account for inflation. The Association of Indiana Counties (AIC), an organization that actively lobbies for additional road revenue for its members, elected officials who are charged with building and maintaining local roads, is now looking for strategies to increase road revenue – among those strategies would be ways to engage relevant stakeholders in this issue. According to research by Grunig and Grunig (2001), effective organizations are those that develop and manage relationships with key constituencies. Therefore, a key objective for this research was to learn from other similar organizations how they developed OPRs and how they used relationship building strategies to prompt lawmakers to provide alternative revenue tools for local road projects.

### **Research Direction**

This research project was focused on determining how the Association of Indiana Counties (AIC) could use public relations strategies to find alternative revenue sources for road

maintenance programs and road resurfacing programs, specifically through legislative measures. Secondary research did show that many states are struggling to keep up with the funding required to: (1) maintain existing local roads, and (2) build new roads that are needed to accommodate new development. While a few states have explored alternative funding approaches, secondary research could not uncover any remedies that have proven to resolve all local road funding shortages. Further, secondary research did find that a few similar organizations in other states are using coalition building strategies to increase their clout on the road funding issue, but the details of how those relationships were developed and managed were not available in documents found on the internet during the secondary research phase.

The AIC believes the complexities of road funding issues in Indiana create a public relations challenge, and because there are multiple reasons for decreasing revenues, as per the Indiana LTAP (2009) needs assessment study, the funding shortages are difficult to explain to potentially influential stakeholders such as the news media and legislators. Foundational to this research project was the need to understand the nature of the problem for other states: (1) what were the specific needs, (2) how they educated key stakeholders about the problem, and (3) how they have used coalition building to find alternative revenue sources through legislative measures. Therefore, the overarching question that served as the guide for this research project was: how can the AIC use public relations to engage stakeholders to work toward legislative solutions for road funding shortages?

The three subset questions that will be described in this section were used to design the interview schedule (See Appendix A), the instrument used during the primary research phase. These subset questions were intended to uncover from participating organizations in other states specifically: (1) how they addressed road funding shortages through relationship building

strategies, and (2) how they used those relationships to find alternative revenue sources through legislative measures. The following subset questions were designed to help answer the overarching question.

*Question 1: How prevalent are road funding shortages in other states?*

This question sought to discern the complexities of road funding in other states. Secondary research did show that many states are experiencing problems significant enough to garner the attention of the National Association of Counties (NACo, 2011b) which in its legislative platform encouraged “the examination of alternative road funding sources” for local roads (p. 2). Determining the complexities of road funding for other states was important in order to gauge the kinds of communication obstacles that organizations similar to the AIC have faced when attempting to develop messages about the needs and the nature of the road funding problems. Being able to develop clear and concise messages is important during the relationship building process when organizations such as the AIC need to find common ground with other stakeholders who need to find alternative revenue sources for road projects (Thompson & John, 2007).

*Question 2: What new funding mechanisms for road revenue are being explored and/or implemented in other states?*

Question two sought to learn what kinds of alternative funding approaches have been implemented or are currently being explored by other states. Question two was also designed to provide the comparison data needed to set *benchmarks* for best practices, and as a result help the AIC to improve its methods for seeking road funding solutions (Kozak, 2004). In other words, the AIC can use this research to ask what is the AIC doing now that is not working, and what are

others doing that is working? The answers to these two questions can help guide the AIC into making research based decisions on its future strategy for finding new sources for road funding.

*Question 3: How and to what extent do similar organizations in other states use public relations to engage stakeholders?*

Question three was at the heart of the interview schedule. If the AIC is to learn how public relations can be used to find solutions to road funding shortages, then it must learn exactly what kinds of public relations strategies are working successfully toward this objective in other states. Question three attempted to uncover every aspect of public relations management in these organizations, from learning how the dominant coalition views the role of public relations to learning the specifics of public relations practices that have already been implemented.

### **Organization to be Studied**

The Association of Indiana Counties (AIC) is a local government association that, according to its mission statement exists “for the betterment of county government” (2011). Its membership is made up of the following county elected office holders: assessors, auditors, clerks of the circuit court, commissioners, coroners, county council, recorders, surveyors and treasurers. In addition, county highway engineers also serve as part of an advisory group to the AIC Board of Directors which is made up of various elected office holders. The AIC’s two main objectives, as stated by the AIC’s executive leadership during informal conversation with the researcher, are to serve as the liaison between state and county government as well as to administer professional development programs for its members.

One of the top issues for which the AIC has continued to advocate is better road funding alternatives. Two key groups of AIC members, commissioners and highway engineers, are

responsible for maintaining county roads which according to the Indiana LTAP (2009) needs assessment study, account for about 80 percent of all public roads in Indiana. During the researcher's conversations with AIC staff, they noted that local road infrastructure in Indiana is in bad shape and getting progressively worse due to failing funding sources. The Indiana LTAP (2009) needs assessment study noted that "local agencies described the funding situation as critical" during a 2008 Commission on Tax and Finance Policy Hearing (p. 2). In fact, funding shortages are so severe according to the Indiana LTAP (2009) needs assessment study that there is a \$5.4 billion dollar gap for the funding of backlog maintenance projects involving county and city roads, bridges and culverts. Further, the Indiana LTAP (2009) needs assessment study showed that it would take another \$858 million in funding every year, inflation projections not included, just to maintain existing roadways according to standards suggested by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO). These figures do not take into account any funding required for proposed new infrastructure projects.

Because road funding comes from a variety of sources, most of which are dwindling, as stated in the Indiana LTAP (2009) needs assessment study, the issue is difficult to explain, making it a great challenge for AIC lobbyists who are charged by its members to advocate for additional road funding sources. The AIC has not utilized formal public relations strategies to address road funding shortages. Further, the AIC charged the researcher with exploring possible solutions by learning how other similar associations are managing what AIC leaders described as a universal and critical problem.

### **Research Methodology and Implementation Summary**

Prior to choosing a research methodology it is important to review what public relations research entails and why research is necessary. Lindenmann (2006) said the absence of research

forces practitioners to function in the dark and leaves them without a base of knowledge from which to set goals and objectives. Further, Lindenmann (2006) offered the following definition of public relations research: it is an “essential tool for fact and opinion gathering -- a systematic effort aimed at discovering, confirming and/or understanding through objective appraisal the facts or opinions pertaining to a specified problem, situation, or opportunity” (p. 2).

The objective of this research was to find similar organizations that are or were faced with parallel road funding and maintenance problems, to determine what solutions they found, and how they achieved those solutions. The research method that was used to answer the overarching question for this research utilized an informal research method that according to Stacks (2002) would provide an “in-depth description and understanding” of how other organizations attempt to solve problems (p. 6). The, in-depth interview, which for the purposes of this research is being referred to as the *multiple interview approach*, was used to acquire for the AIC an ‘understanding’ of how other organizations are finding solutions to road funding problems. The multiple interview approach is a qualitative research method and “the only method that allows probing for more information in order to understand the responses or to explore an issue in more detail” (Phillips & Stawarski, 2008, p. 143). The multiple interview approach also allows for benchmarking which, according to Stacks (2002), provides assessments that can guide evaluative research in determining the effectiveness of a program or campaign. This was important for this research since part of its objective was to assess best practices. Benchmarking theory is based on comparison research, but benchmarking goes a step further to “evaluate operational and management skills” for the comparison research (Kozak, 2004, p. 234). Therefore, the multiple interview approach was the most appropriate method for the AIC’s research problem because

determining best practices for road funding required a rich set of comparison data from many thought leaders and experts from similar organizations.

The multiple interview approach does not collect quantifiable data that could be generalized to all 50 or 60 associations that do similar work as the AIC, as would be the case with research methods such as highly structured surveys; rather, the multiple interview approach collects qualitative data through open-ended questions during “semi-structured” interviews that help to gather “rich data” (Lindenmann, 2006; Sierra, 1998, as cited in Molleda & Moreno, 2008, p. 139). Further, qualitative methods offer a good starting point for exploring the nature of unresolved problems; Lindenmann (2006) noted that following qualitative measures with quantitative research will help to ensure that organizations have relevant information for strategic planning and program development.

Because the AIC, the organization for which this research is being conducted, admits that it needs to learn alternative approaches to finding additional road revenue for its members, the researcher focused on how similar organizations across the nation that have been faced with the same problem have worked toward solutions. The multiple interview approach was used because this methodology allowed for a wealth of data to be gathered from thought leaders that are facing similar problems (Daly et al., 2007; Gillham, 2005, Sierra, 1998, as cited in Molleda & Moreno, 2008).

### *Research Design*

The *interview schedule* (See Appendix A) was the primary instrument that was used for this research project. The interview schedule used a semi-structured, open-ended format. It included one question to gain a brief synopsis of each participant’s background and expertise in road funding issues. The researcher began building the instrument after meeting with top lobbyists for

the AIC, and finalized it after asking the AIC's two top lobbyists to review the interview schedule. They suggested very minor changes which were made. Phillips and Stawarski (2008) suggested that inclusion of the organization for which research is being conducted improves the chances that the research method will produce valuable data. The main body of the interview schedule included 20 questions that were derived from the three subset questions which were focused on answering how the AIC can use public relations to find legislative solutions for road funding problems. The top lobbyist for the AIC was very interested to learn what other organizations were doing to secure more road funding, and was also curious to see how public relations has played a part in these efforts.

### *Sample Selection*

Choosing the sample selection for this project required some background research in order to determine which organizations would best be suited for a research project that is trying to define best practices for finding new road revenue. The entire sample population consisted of about 50 to 60 organizations, across the country, whose primary objectives are similar to the AIC. In an ideal situation the researcher would have had time to carefully inspect the backgrounds of each of those organizations to determine which were best suited to serve as participants. However, due to time constraints the researcher instead primarily relied upon: (1) suggestions from the AIC since they regularly network with executives from other groups within the sample population, (2) internet searches using search terms such as "local roads" and "alternative funding sources" or "county" and "new road revenue", (3) website searches of nationally known groups that are active on road funding issues, and (4) recommendations from the top staff member for the National Association of Counties Transportation Steering Committee.

### *Research Implementation*

After several weeks of sample selection research and conversations with executives from the AIC, invitations to 10 prospective participants were emailed on April 4 and the first interview was conducted on April 6. The initial email provided a two-week window in which to conduct the interviews, but asked for commitments by April 10. However by April 18, only six interviews had been conducted. Follow-up phone calls were made on April 18 and 19 to the remaining four invited participants, two of which responded that they were interested but very busy and in the midst of legislative battles. The other two never responded. On April 19, the researcher contacted the National Association of Counties' top staff member for the Transportation Steering Committee to ask for recommendations. Four were provided and email invitations were sent out that day; only two responded and those interviews were conducted by April 22. (See Appendix B for the names and experience of each participant) Due to time and travel restraints, the interviews were conducted by telephone because each participant was located out of state. Further, the telephone interviews were recorded into a digital recorder to ensure accuracy of data collection. The recordings and the notes from the recordings will be saved in digital format for future reference along with other important documentation from this research project.

Because of the complex nature of this issue, the researcher believed it was important to transcribe the interviews word for word, even though time was short, in order to have all data as a reference for clarification during the analysis process. The transcription process began on April 21 and concluded on April 26. The researcher analyzed the data from April 26 to April 29 by using a series of Excel spreadsheets to find data trends. The spreadsheets included seven tables that included a total of 60 different variables. The categories of tables included: (1) the types of

organizations that comprised the most common stakeholder relationships, (2) strengths of relationships, (3) communication tactics, (4) road funding challenges, (5) road maintenance challenges, (6) legislative victories, and (7) miscellaneous trends that seemed important enough to capture. The process of analyzing trends within these data sets and completing the written report took place from April 30 to May 8.

## **Key Findings**

### *Road Funding and Maintenance Challenges*

Counties represented by the eight associations that were interviewed maintain between 60 to 90 percent of their state's public roads. Each participant noted that they rely heavily on gas taxes which are collected on a per gallon basis for each of the states represented in this research. All eight also stated that reliance on this flat tax source coupled with huge increases in construction costs – double the cost from just a few years ago according to one participant – are causing great strain on county highway budgets. All eight participants indicated that they do not have enough road revenue to meet all of their needs. Further, five of the eight expressed that they do not believe their state departments of transportation (DOTs) are fairly sharing federal dollars with local governments. One further note on funding sources: half of all participants indicated that when projects are funded with federal dollars, they are more expensive to deliver because of the additional oversight required. Finally, with regard to the condition of local roads, all eight participants explicitly stated or inferred that they have segments of roads that are failing – some more quickly than others.

### *Coalition Relationships*

All eight participants expressed that their associations have participated to varying degrees in a coalition with other groups that work toward road funding solutions. Some are no longer active. Five of the coalitions were more formal in nature, while the others were less formal to very informal (See Appendix C for data used to determine the level of formality for the coalitions). Still, the importance of having a coalition of stakeholders for associations whose coalitions are not formalized was viewed as significant. One such participant said, “We have to work very closely together because we must have the support of everybody to get any initiative approved.”

Furthermore, the strength of these coalition relationships was measured by determining whether transparency existed and if symmetrical communication was being practiced. Seven of eight demonstrated that their coalitions practiced symmetrical communication (e.g., transparency, and working through conflict) to varying degrees. (See Appendix C for data used to determine the strength of the coalition relationships). The participant with the second highest number of coalition-based victories stated, “The way to get things done is to be very transparent on the front end, and be very open with other groups, not trying to hide motives.” Another participant stated that if they go before the legislature as a coalition and, “are in disagreement, we’re not likely to be successful. If we can keep all of the stakeholder groups together, we can be very influential in getting the legislature to see things our way.” One of the outcomes of symmetrical communication from these coalitions was the issuance of comprehensive to somewhat comprehensive needs assessment reports (See Appendix C for data used to determine the level of comprehensiveness of the reports). For the purposes of this research a needs assessment report was deemed comprehensive if it included the needs of all modes of transportation. Five of the eight participants indicated they have issued or will soon be issuing

comprehensive to somewhat comprehensive needs assessment reports. Further, six of the eight indicated that they believed it is extremely important to: (1) understand the needs of all partners, and (2) know how to communicate those needs.

### *Common Stakeholder Relationships*

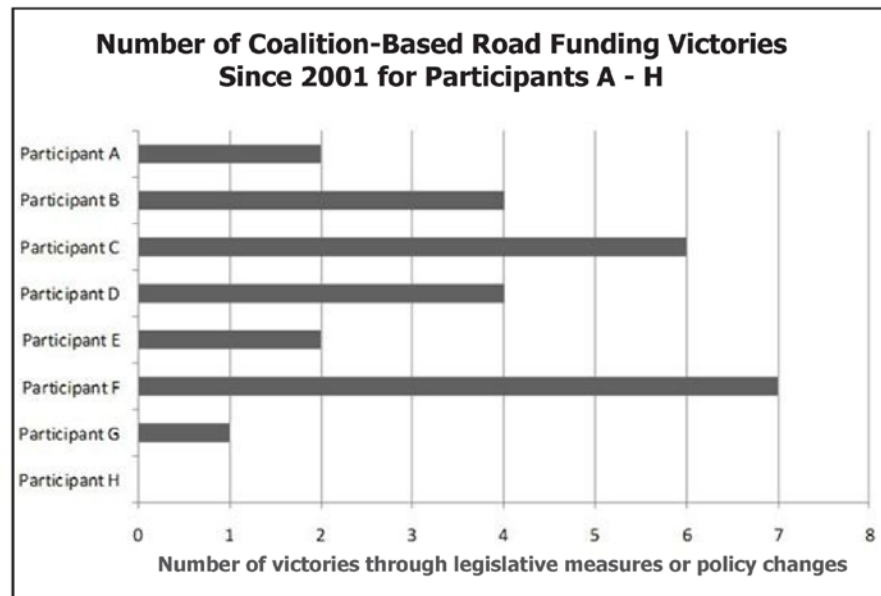
Interviews with the eight participants revealed that there are seven common stakeholder groups: state departments of transportation (DOT's), cities and towns associations, groups representing business owners, labor and construction groups, agriculture groups, trucking and freight associations, and groups that represent public transit (See figures 2 and 3 in Appendix D for a charted breakdown of most common relationships that exist). Seven of the eight participants expressed varying degrees of positive relationships with their DOT's. Six of the eight indicated they work closely with their counterpart cities and towns association. The most contentious of all the relationships was with agricultural associations because of the conflict over the growing number of heavy truck fleets that many farmers now operate. However, four coalitions still expressed that they made efforts to include this group.

There were other stakeholders mentioned; in fact, one participant stated that their coalition, at one point, represented 100 groups. This same participant along with three other participants did indicate that they consider all groups that benefit from road funding to be transportation partners and go to great lengths to bring all into the coalition. One participant stated that it was this attitude that allowed for that state's Chamber of Commerce to support a bill at the last minute, support that caused the legislature to pass a bill that provided a new road revenue tool for local governments.

### *Coalition-based Legislative Victories*

For the purposes of this research, only legislative victories that were due to the joint efforts of the transportation coalition since 2001 are being factored in as victories. Figure 1 shows all but one of the eight participants demonstrated that they have experienced one or more coalition-based victories.

**Figure 1**



See Appendix E for specific types of legislation passed or policy changes approved

The number of victories all varied; one accomplished as many as seven victories in 10 years while another experienced four victories in just two years.

Some of those legislative wins involved new revenue streams, while two victories involved saving existing revenue streams from being taken away from counties. Other victories involved tweaking existing revenue streams to boost revenue. The types of victories included but were not limited to: (1) the creation of regional or countywide sales tax options, (2) dedicating state general fund money to transportation purposes as one-time infusions and/or on a yearly basis, (3) the creation of pilot programs such as the Vehicle Miles Traveled program in two

states and a Design/Build pilot program in one state, (4) a floating gas tax in one state, (5) increases in the gas tax in two states, and (6) the ability to retain permit fees for heavy trucks. With regard to two of the victories, coalition efforts helped to override gubernatorial vetoes (See Appendix E for a detailed list of the legislative victories for each participant).

### **Analysis**

All eight participants included in this research share some commonalities with regard to the challenges they face: (1) all eight rely heavily on gas taxes to fund local road projects, (2) all eight indicated that reliance on gas taxes on a per gallon basis is causing shortfalls for county highway budgets because of decreased demand for gas due to higher fuel prices and increased fuel efficiency in newer vehicles, and (3) all represent some counties that are seeing some failures of their local road systems. The National Association of Counties' (NACo, 2011b) legislative platform echoed these concerns, and stated that fuel tax receipts have declined in part because consumers are using fewer gallons of gas. The NACo 2011 platform also noted that "state laws should recognize the authority of local governments to protect the public investment, to balance competing demands on this public resource (NACo, 2011b, p. 10)."

The revenue shortfall for local road projects that many of the participants are seeing in their states closely mirrors the situation in Indiana. The Indiana LTAP (2009) needs assessment study noted that in Indiana there is "a severe shortage of funds to adequately maintain local transportation facilities. The shortage has existed for a long enough period of time that there is now a need for short-term funding simply to" catch up on the back log of maintenance projects that are severely overdue (p. 2).

Despite the funding difficulties, seven of the eight participants demonstrated that they have seen at least one legislative victory that resulted from a coalition of relationships. This

supports the findings of Ledingham (2003a) who showed that organizations are more likely to see gains politically and economically when they incorporate relationship building strategies into their practices. One participant noted that it was relationship building with multiple transportation partners that moved legislators in 2004 to pass a \$300 million dollar bond for local roads and bridges. Further, the findings of this research show that seven of the eight participants demonstrated varying degrees of transparency and symmetrical communication practices with stakeholders in their transportation coalitions. Comparatively, Ledingham (2003a) stated relationships are more likely to be mutually beneficial when symmetrical communication (two-way dialogical approach) practices are present. Grunig & Grunig (2001) also found that organizations are more likely to be successful when they: (1) set organizational goals with the needs of other stakeholders in mind, and (2) include stakeholders in the pursuit of those goals.

### **Conclusions**

*How prevalent are road funding shortages in other states?*

All eight states represented in this research indicated that they have segments of roads that are failing. While there may be other factors involved, the failure of local road systems is directly linked to the lack of funds being directed toward maintenance. Each state has a different funding formula, but what they all have in common is that those formulas rely heavily on a gas tax – a flat source that is based on gallons sold rather than a percentage of the overall price for all participants. And while all eight are not struggling to the same degree of difficulty, all eight explicitly stated or indicated that new revenue sources must be found because gas taxes, when assessed on a per gallon basis, do not meet the demands of increased construction costs. One participant stated, “The gas tax, on a per gallon basis, is going in the wrong direction for road maintenance.” Furthermore, the instability of gas tax revenue is a problem that also impacts

federal dollars coming into the state for local roads. Five of the eight participants indicated that they do not believe their state DOT's are fairly sharing federally allocated dollars with local governments. One participant stated that if counties want federal dollars for roads they "better have a good relationship with their DOT". Half of all participants also expressed that when they do receive federal dollars for highway projects it costs more to build these projects because of inefficiencies that result from extra oversight required by the federal government. One participant noted that their state has even more stringent requirements than the federal government. This participant further expressed that their county engineers estimated it costs 20 percent more to deliver projects when federal dollars are involved. "In fact at one point, our folks were willing to sell their federal money to other counties for 80 cents on the dollar because it was so expensive to use federal money."

Perhaps the most important aspect of understanding how widespread the road funding problems are is being able to communicate the depth of those problems to decision makers. Six of the eight participants explicitly stated or demonstrated that knowing how to explain the need is critical to influencing legislators to respond to requests for more funding. One participant attributed the loss of a road revenue stream in the 1990s to not being able to communicate the needs, and further stated that they have since effectively communicated their needs and have been successful at "gaining ground to go back to an equal share (of the state highway fund) with recent revenue increases for the local road system." Communicating the funding needs of just one group of stakeholders may also be a problem. The involvement in coalition based efforts to communicate the needs of all transportation partners by all eight participants show that all believe to varying degrees it is more effective to work jointly toward attaining additional revenue.

*What new funding mechanisms for road revenue are being explored and/or implemented in other states?*

Between the eight participants interviewed for this research, there were 27 legislative victories or policy changes that positively impacted funding for local road projects; 26 were due in part to coalition efforts. Twelve of those victories involved new funding sources but none that could be categorized as new or non-traditional mechanisms. There were, however, three victories that could eventually involve new funding mechanisms. Two states have been involved or will soon be involved in a pilot program that allows counties to test the potential for taxing drivers based on the number of vehicle miles traveled (VMT). The future of this kind of funding mechanism, however, possesses the potential for controversy. The one participant whose state has completed the VMT pilot said that it was successful but there are no plans to implement it due to the “big brother” or lack of privacy element. Another participant noted a successful Design-Build pilot for local governments which lowered the cost of construction through time savings and fewer oversight procedures. In fact, the participant noted a savings of \$10 million dollars because the projects were completed in half the time. However, that pilot program has hit a road block, according to the participant, because it involves federal funding which requires additional oversight procedures that work against the guiding principle of Design-Build programs. Further, of the 12 new funding initiatives passed, most were one-time infusions of dollars, which means that funds from these sources have already been or will eventually be depleted. One time funding does not solve the dilemma of rising costs for construction materials that are needed for the routine maintenance of local roads.

Although the question of what new funding mechanisms are being explored is an extremely relevant question, not many new mechanisms have been found. However, it is also

important to ask what generally is being done to increase revenue for local road projects when new funding streams are not available. Six of the eight participants demonstrated that they have either saved or boosted existing revenue streams – efforts which have improved the funding available for local road projects. Thus, leads to the question of how are they achieving these victories? In seven of eight cases, the participants interviewed used coalition tactics to: (1) boost or save existing revenue, and/or (2) find new sources of revenue. Only one of the 27 victories on road funding counted for participants since 2001 had no ties to a coalition of transportation stakeholders.

*How and to what extent do similar organizations in other states use public relations to engage stakeholders?*

The essence of public relations is relationship management. And Grunig & Grunig (2001) showed that organizations prove to be more effective in achieving goals when relationships with their stakeholders are managed properly. Seven of the eight participants in this research project demonstrated that they have successfully achieved positive road funding legislation when other transportation partners were working in unison as a coalition. The question remains: how were these relationships cultivated? In the more formal coalitions, open call meetings were held to begin the process as well as to keep the momentum going. The participant that had the greatest amount of victories in the least amount of time, held two public meetings in four years. The participant added that by the time the second open call meeting was held, there were a lot more groups that had joined the coalition. Another important element to coalition partnerships is the amount of transparency between groups, and the amount of symmetrical communication (two-way dialogue) that is practiced. Seven of the eight participants expressed that these elements existed within their coalitions, although these are attributes that need to be carefully cultivated.

One participant said the meetings have to continue even when conflict is present. “We have used a facilitating process during the early stages to tease out what our common issues are and to identify the issues we should steer clear of.”

This research does begin to suggest that public relations is a necessary element for finding road funding solutions. In fact, six of the eight participants indicated it is critical while the other two showed that it is important. The importance of public relations in terms of relationship building is clearly demonstrated through this research. It is also important to note that from the results of this research, the more formal transportation coalitions generally tended to have greater successes in their state legislatures (See Appendix C for attributes of formal coalitions). There was once exception. The participant with the highest number of legislative victories participated in a less formal coalition, but noted that the relationship with other stakeholders such as the state DOT was very strong. This begs the question: what other types of legislative successes can be achieved on road funding issues through increased efforts toward relationship building?

*How can the Association of Indiana Counties use public relations to engage stakeholders to work toward legislative solutions for road funding shortages?*

The AIC has expressed that it needs to find ways to increase revenue for local roads. And the end of the 2011 session of the Indiana General Assembly – with the decrease in dollars being allocated in the Motor Vehicle Highway fund to local roads – there is a need to find ways to stop the legislature from taking away from existing revenue streams. Though the legislative victories mentioned throughout this research were not perfect solutions for the participants involved, they were victories nonetheless – victories that helped to save existing revenue, boost existing

revenue, and even create some new revenue. In many cases, these were victories that have led to the improvement of some segments of local roads. Further, 26 of those 27 victories counted through this research were tied to transportation coalition efforts. In terms of best practices uncovered through this research, coalition building efforts with other transportation stakeholders were the most significant. The results of this research also suggest there may be a direct link between improving local road conditions and the cultivation of mutually beneficial relationships through transportation coalitions. Further studies on this topic would need to be conducted to show quantitative results. However, this research does propose that there is much merit to making public relations a top priority strategy for finding road funding solutions. Specifically, this research suggests that the use of relationship building strategies, specifically in the form of a transportation coalition, could be very useful in working toward road funding solutions through state legislatures and maybe even through the federal government.

### **Recommendations**

#### *Create a plan for a formal transportation coalition*

Seven of eight participants have seen legislative victories that have positively impacted road funding in their states in the last 10 years, and all victories had ties to transportation coalitions. The states with more formal coalitions – coalitions with governing boards, symmetrical communication between stakeholders, and/or joint talking points – tended generally to see more legislative victories. Further, the more formal coalitions also tended to be more inclusive of groups from all modes of transportation. It is also noteworthy to mention that the one participant whose organization has not experienced a coalition-based road funding victory since 2001 said that a transportation coalition did exist in the early 1990s which helped to

influence legislators to approve funding for routes of regional significance. That coalition disbanded when the need was no longer present. However, in that same state legislators are now starting to dip into funds previously designated for local roads in order to boost that state's general fund. While this research does not prove the following, the findings do suggest that the lack of coalition efforts may have negatively impacted the relationship with state legislators in that state on transportation issues. Furthermore, this research clearly shows evidence that would suggest that it would be beneficial for the AIC to create a plan that would lead to the creation of a transportation coalition.

The researcher suggests the creation of a plan that is not based around specific legislation but rather around the issue of transportation funding in general so that the coalition does not lose momentum when one or two victories are achieved. Further, the coalition should include a diverse group of partners in order to show legislators that all stakeholders are working together toward solutions. This research also suggests the plan should include strategies on how to work through conflict, perhaps through the use of an unbiased facilitator, because as most of the participants demonstrated, the coalition is more likely to achieve its objectives when it stays together and works through obstacles that may hinder unity on road funding legislation.

*Partner with other stakeholders to complete a comprehensive needs assessment*

The AIC believes that the complexities of road funding are difficult to explain to everyone who has the ability to influence positive legislation. The findings in this research echo that sentiment. Five of the eight participants indicated they have attempted to explain those complexities, in part, through the issuance of comprehensive to somewhat comprehensive needs assessment reports. Further, six of the eight indicated or demonstrated that they believed it is

extremely important to: (1) understand the needs of all partners, and (2) know how to communicate those needs. One participant noted that when they were finally able to effectively articulate their needs, it was a “shock and awe” experience for legislators who that same year passed a floating gas tax bill. Further, this same participant is involved in a coalition which is in the process of preparing a comprehensive needs assessment report for the entire transportation system.

Another suggestion by the researcher is to partner with other coalition members to: (1) pull from the resources of all coalition members to complete a comprehensive needs assessment study that includes all modes of transportation in Indiana, and (2) include the Indiana LTAP Center at Purdue University in this process since it already has prepared a thorough needs assessment report of the local road system.

*Consider how this transportation coalition may be extended to reach federal legislators*

A lack of funding from state sources is not the only problem with road funding. Five of the eight participants expressed that they believe they are not receiving their fair share of federal dollars from DOT's. Further, the idea that federal money may cost as much as 20 percent more to use when delivering local projects because of unnecessary oversight needs to be addressed. Some participants expressed that the complex nature of how local roads are funded – the existence of different formulas and a variety of funding sources in every state – is too complex for the federal government to consider when distributing resources. “If we don't gather as a team of counties from each state to combine our road and bridge data, we will continue to be overshadowed by associations that promote rail, airline and the larger end of transportation.” If similar organizations in other states are finding success at joining forces with all modes of

transportation to improve local road funding for their states, as this research does suggest is possible, then it might not be a far stretch to say that this same strategy could work at the federal level.

Therefore, the researcher suggests that a long-term goal for the Indiana transportation coalition (to be spearheaded by the AIC) would be to eventually create a similar network of coalitions from each state that would work to bring change to policies about how federal dollars are allocated to local governments. These coalitions should work jointly with other groups such as the National Association of Counties and other associations that represent other modes of transportation to bring more local voices to Washington D.C. to help promote these changes.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A            Primary Research Instrument: The Interview Schedule**

#### **Interview Subjects**

The research will involved depth interviews with 10 organizations that lobby for road funding on behalf of local governments. Most of these will be organizations that represent county governments.

The people who will serve as interview subjects will be whoever is labeled as the ‘resident expert’ on road funding for the organization. In most cases, these will be registered lobbyists who have studied and advocated for road funding for several years.

Note to interviewer: the subset questions in this interview schedule are not to be read out loud to participants.

#### **Introduction**

Thank you for taking the time out of your schedule to be interviewed for this research project. As mentioned previously, this interview will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Your opinions are being collected along with input from nine other similar organizations, and will be used to complete a project for my graduate level public relations research class. This project will investigate the relationships between public relations management and public policy issues in the context of local road funding. The data will be used to determine better approaches for finding road funding solutions in Indiana. With your permission, I would like to record this interview in order to ensure accuracy of my data collection, and also to provide reference for future research on this topic.

## **Interview Questions**

Subset Question One: How prominent are road funding problems in other states?

- Please list and describe all primary sources of local road revenue for your state.
- Please list and describe all supplemental funding sources available to counties.
- Please describe the complexities of the road funding formula for your state.
- Please describe the evolution of county government highway funding over the last 20 years.
- Please describe any new sources of funding the state has provided in the last 5 years.
- Please describe any pilot funding programs provided by the state recently.

Subset Question Two: How are organizations engaging with stakeholders to resolve road funding problems?

- Please describe the role public relations plays for your organization.
- How does your organization use communication to address road funding issues?
- What kind of processes are in place for developing key messages?
- Which departments are involved in planning key messages?
- How do you determine if the key messages achieved desired outcomes?

Subset Question Three: Who are the relevant stakeholders?

- Who are the key stakeholder groups with which your organization communicates?
- How did you determine which groups would be key stakeholders?
- Describe your efforts to build relationships with key stakeholders on road funding.
- What have been the outcomes of these efforts so far?

- What would cause any apathetic stakeholder groups to become active in this issue?

Subset Question Four: What are the ideal objectives for solving road funding problems?

- What two or three things would do immediately to improve the funding formula?
- What new, non-traditional funding sources have you considered?
- What solutions, if any, should the federal government provide?
- What are your plans for addressing road funding in future legislative sessions?
- Is there anything else you would like to add to this entire discussion?

**Appendix B****Research Participants**

Participant A – California State Association of Counties (CSAC). DeAnn Baker, Senior Legislative Representative. Baker started with CSAC as a policy analyst in 1988. She was instrumental this year in lobbying for the floating gas tax which helped to save some existing revenue after the tax on the sale price of gas was converted to a tax on gallons sold.

Participant B – Association of County Commissioners Georgia (ACCG). Matthew Hicks, Associate Legislative Director. Hicks has been with the ACCG since 2004 and spearheaded efforts to create the Get Georgia Moving coalition. His work was critical to the passage of the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax.

Participant C – Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC). Ryan O'Connor, Transportation Energy Rural Development Policy Analyst. O'Connor went to AMC in 2008 after completing a capstone project for Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels on bio-fuels energy as a graduate student with the Indiana University School of Public Affairs. O'Connor was critical to efforts this year that persuaded legislators to place a Vehicle Miles Traveled pilot program among its top priorities.

Participant D – North Dakota Association of Counties (NDAC). Terry Traynor, Director of Policy and Programs. Traynor has been with NDAC since 1986 and has been heavily involved in road funding issues during his tenure with NDAC. He worked previously for a North Dakota county in the roads department. Traynor was instrumental in four legislative changes since 2009 that improved road funding including a bill that allows counties to retain fees from heavy truck permits.

Participant E – The Association of County Commissioners of Oklahoma (ACCO). Gayle Ward, Executive Director. Ward has been with ACCO in various positions since 1996 and worked for an Oklahoma county 10 years previous to that, specifically working for commissioners on road funding. Ward has been instrumental in efforts to reach out to other transportation partners. She was also instrumental in getting the legislature to dedicate general fund money to transportation as well as in legislation that created an infrastructure bank that allows counties to borrow start-up money with no interest.

Participant F – Association of Oregon Counties (AOC). Jon A. Oshel, P.E., County Road Program Manager. Oshel has been with AOC since 2001, but has worked on road funding issues for 35 years. He has been instrumental in working with legislators to pass laws that allow counties to experiment with non-traditional funding programs such as the Vehicle Miles Traveled pilot program.

Participant G – Tennessee County Highway Officials Association (TCHOA). J. Rodney Carmical, Executive Director. Carmical has been with the association since 2001. Carmical has a great deal of technical experience on road issues; he also worked as the Executive Director for the County Technical Assistance Service at the University of Tennessee, and prior to that worked for 10 years as a field auditor in the highway department for a Tennessee county. Carmical was critical to passage of a bill that allows counties to own their own asphalt plants, a highly contentious measure that was not supported by the construction industry.

Participant H – Wisconsin Counties Association (WCA). John Reinemann, Legislative Director. Reinemann has been with WCA since 2007 and came to WCA with a great deal of experience in legislative policy issues. Prior to working for the WCA, Reinemann had worked for state government for 15 years with part of that time serving as an aide to the governor at that time. It is interesting to note that Wisconsin was recently rated by Reader's Digest as one of the five best states for local road conditions.

## **Appendix C            Defining terms through conclusions draw from data**

### **Formalized Coalitions:**

In an effort to determine how important these coalitions were to the goal of finding additional road revenue, the researcher tried to determine the level of commitment to the coalition. Thus, the researcher used at least one of the following to classify the coalitions as being more formal in nature: (1) creation of a governing board, (2) the issuance of joint studies, reports, news releases and/or other communications tactics, (3) agreed upon talking points that were used during legislative hearings on bills of relevance to the coalition, and (4) pooled resources to study issues.

### **Strength of Coalitions:**

The strength of these coalition relationships was measured by determining whether transparency existed and if symmetrical communication was being practiced. Seven of eight participants demonstrated that they practiced symmetrical communication to varying degrees. The researcher used the following criteria to determine if these two strength building elements existed: (1) expressed all motives and objectives regarding shared legislative goals, (2) regularly sat at the same table to work through existing or potential conflict, and (3) members provide the opportunity for feedback if planning to act in a way that may create conflict within the coalition.

### **Comprehensive/Somewhat Comprehensive Reports**

For the purposes of this research a needs assessment report was deemed comprehensive if it included the needs of all modes of transportation. Somewhat comprehensive is used to describe reports that include the needs of several transportation partners in the coalition (i.e., more than just government partners).

Appendix D

Key Stakeholder Groups

Figure 2

Figures 2 & 3 Measured by Number of participants who had specific relationships.

Note: the strength of each relationship varied from "making slow progress" to "very strong".

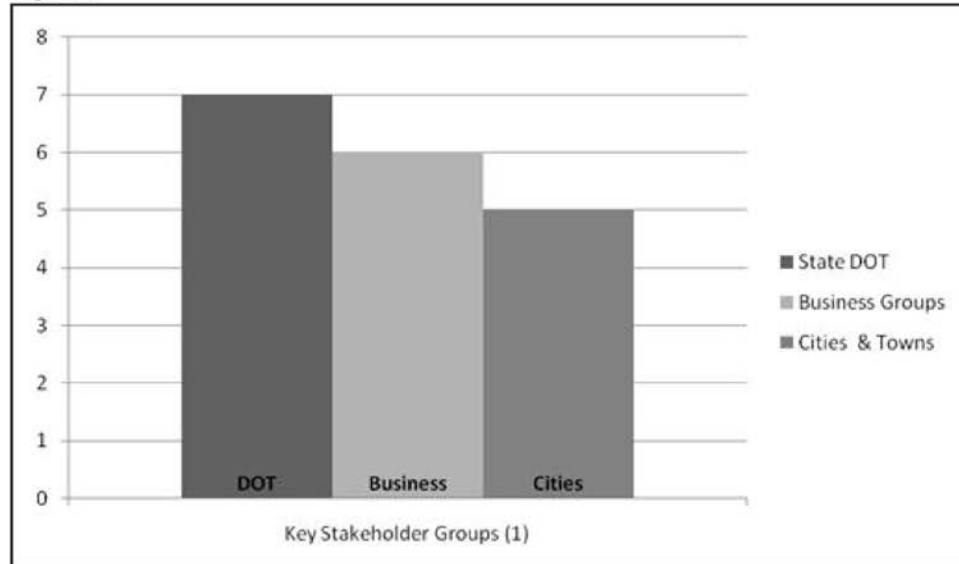
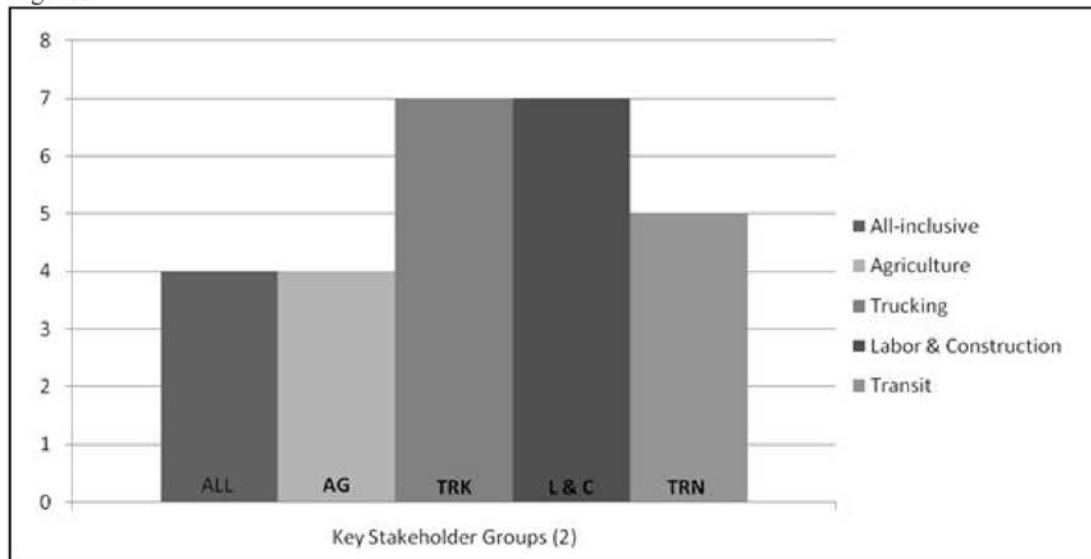


Figure 3



## Appendix E

## Legislative Victories

Legislation passed – (and some general policy changes) - some as the result of coalition work – some unclear (only count those within last 10 to 12 years)

### 1) Participant A: 2 victories in 5 years

1. 2011 (Coalition Victory) – Floating annual gas tax (*adjusts depending on the price of oil-less tax when prices are high, more taxes when gas prices are 'low'*).
  - i) Floating tax came on the heels of the 2010 gas tax swap (stakeholder victory to save existing revenue) that converted a
  - ii) The swap in 2010 converted the 6% sales tax on gas to an excise tax on gas of 35 cent tax per gallon. Going to excise tax did not help, but the floating piece in 2011 helped to save existing revenue that would have been lost by going to an excise tax.
2. 2006 (Coalition Victory?? Counting as coalition victory because it affected other transportation partners) – 20 Billion transportation bond. \$2 billion to cities/counties. All money has been allocated. (Not sure if this was a coalition victory)

### 2) Participant B – (Coalition existed informally to formally for about 7 years): 4 victories in 3 years

1. 2008 (approx) (Coalition Victory) - State Infrastructure Bank (revolving loan fund for road projects that offers low interest)
2. 2011 (Coalition Victory) – Gubernatorial policy changes to state infrastructure bank that eased borrowing requirements. All suggestions requested by formal letter from coalition were accepted by the new governor in 2011.
3. 2008 (Coalition Victory) - Local Maintenance & Improvement Grant (LMIG) Program (replaced two other state aid programs) – the victory was in 2008 when the coalition advocated that between 10 and 20% of motor fuel taxes collected by the state go into this grant program that only offers grants IF funds are available. The coalition inspired change guarantees that there will be some funds available for distribution.
4. 2010 (Coalition Victory) - Regional SPLOST (Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax) is similar to the countywide SPLOST passed in early 90s which is being widely used with great success for road projects. Regional SPLOST's past in 2010 divide state into 12 regions. Legislation all but requires cities and counties to come up with project lists that would eventually be voted on by referendum. (Regional roundtables can say they are deadlocked on their project lists but the legislation penalizes deadlock by increasing

matches required for any state funds acquired through traditional means). Both SPLOST's require a referendum to approve. The Regional SPLOST is considered a victory because it is a new tool to raise revenue, but it is still unclear how successful they will be since none have come on the ballot yet. Regional SPLOST's will require (1) a lot of collaboration by stakeholders to ensure there is no deadlock by roundtables and, (2) a lot of PR in the form of public information campaigns to ensure that the new revenue streams are passed by voters.

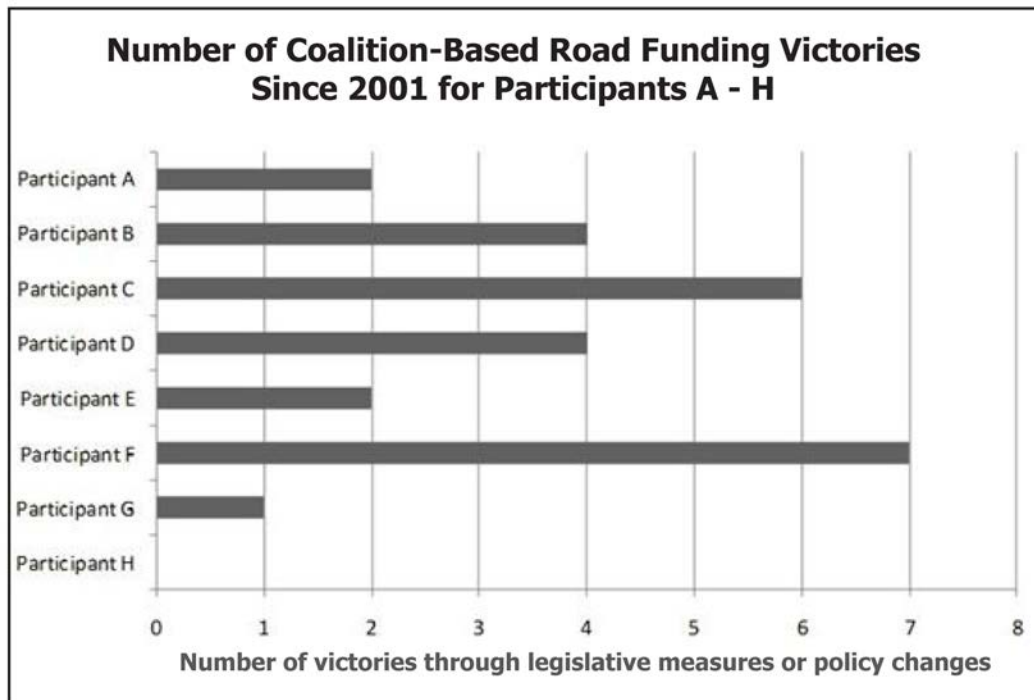
- 3) Participant C: (NOTE-C has a very strong relationship with its state DOT and the DOT clearly articulates local projects in its list of top priorities). 6 victories in 10 years.
  1. 2001 (Coalition Victory) – Design Build Program approved by legislature. State DOT has awarded more than \$1 billion in design-build projects since that date.
  2. 2006 (Coalition Victory) – Gas excise tax AND motor vehicle registrations dedicated to transportation purposes in state constitution (legislature overrode gubernatorial veto).
  3. 2008 (Coalition Victory) – Gas tax increase of 8.5 cents per gallon (legislature overrode gubernatorial veto).
  4. 2008 (Coalition Victory) – Creation of Local Road Improvement Fund. This is a state general obligation fund that pays for (1) routes of regional significance, (2) intersections, and (3) rural road safety.
  5. 2010 (Coalition Victory) - \$65 million bond from the state for bridge work.
  6. 2011 (Coalition Victory) *Not passed as of 4/22/11 but is expected to pass* – Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) pilot program.
- 4) Participant D: 4 victories in 2 years.
  1. 2009 (Coalition Victory) - Tweaked state road funding formula (mainly motor vehicle registrations) to the benefit of transportation partners that benefit from local road maintenance/improvements.
  2. 2009 (Coalition Victory) – State legislature appropriated with general funds for local road maintenance/improvements a one-time infusion, which was referred to by participant as a ‘modest increase’.
  3. 2011 (Coalition Victory) – State legislature just passed another a similar one-time infusion but the participant referred to this one as ‘shockingly large’
    - i) The participant stated about these last two increases that it was the first time in the state legislature ever appropriated general funds to local roads. Also, the reason for the two infusions, as stated by the participant, was due to the burden that heavy trucks are placing on local roads as a result of the oil boom in state.

4. 2011 (Coalition Victory) – Legislature passed a bill that allows counties to retain heavy truck permit fees. They tried to also retain penalties assessed but the legislature did not approve that because they believed that counties would ‘start beating up on local farmers’ if they had the ability to retain fees from penalties assessed.
- 5) Participant E (Though these victories strongly benefit counties, these are being counted as coalition victories because this participant is the lead organization in the coalition has demonstrated that it goes to great lengths to include all transportation partners in its attempts to find additional road revenue): 2 victories in 5 years.
1. 2006 (Coalition Victory) – County Improvements for Roads and Bridges (motor vehicle collections tax that previously was going into the state’s general fund was dedicated to the improvement fund in 2006 which is only for new construction). Money is divided evenly and given to state’s 8 DOT regional divisions that distribute funds. Requires each region to develop 5 year plans.
  2. 2006 (Coalition Victory) – Emergency Transportation Revolving (ETR) fund. \$25 million one-time money to start a bank that allows counties to borrow funds at no interest to start projects. This is used a lot for front money required for FEMA disaster funds. This is managed by the Circuit Engineering Districts (8 sub-state districts – different from DOT regional divisions) which is a district comprised of directors, highway engineers, inspectors, etc. who already work for counties in the district. Legislation to allow for these districts was passed in 1992 and tweaked in 1997 to enable counties to share resources and staffing.
- 6) Participant F: 7 victories in 10 years.
1. This # counts for 3 coalition victories. (The state highway fund has received some increases about every other legislative session since 2001. Mostly for bonded improvement projects, but there has also been some discretionary funding available.
  2. See #1 above
  3. See #1 above
  4. 2004 – (Coalition victory-counties worked very closely with freight/trucking association) \$1 billion into state highway fund.
  5. 2004 (Coalition victory) – State passed \$300 million bond program for bridge replacements. Counties got 85%.
  6. About 2006 (Coalition victory) – passed VMT pilot program which has since expired. It was successful but there are no plans to implement fully because the political climate amongst some County Commissioners and some legislators does not exist. The idea of having a gadget to track your mileage is contentious.
  7. 2009 (Coalition victory) – State increased gas excise tax from 24 to 30 cents per gallon and also increased other fees that go into state highway fund. Dollars from this fund to counties as a result of these changes increased by 50%.
- 7) Participant G: 1 victory in 4 years.

1. 2007 (Coalition victory) – Law passed to allow counties to own their own asphalt plants. The requirements are very stringent, however, and there won't likely be very many counties that will build plants. This participant notes that the construction industry is not a strong ally and has ensured a very monopolistic environment.
- 8) Participant H: 1 victory in 1 year
1. 2011 (Not really a coalition victory, and not passed as of 4.12.11) – New governor (former county elected official) has asked for \$115 million of the state's general fund dollars to go into a borrowing program. Governor states this is a payback for the state's actions over the last 7 or 8 years that resulted in significant transfers out of the transportation fund to balance the state's general fund.

**Figure 1**

(Figure 1 first referenced on page 15)



See Appendix E for specific types of legislation passed or policy changes approved

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