

Chapter 6. Public Outreach, Messaging, and Communication

Outreach and communication concerning alternative transportation funding mechanisms serves two key goals—educating the public regarding transportation funding challenges, and facilitating wider public and political acceptance of this approach. Additionally, it can also serve to inform the pilot sites about the types of messaging that are most effective in achieving the above goals.

Key Cross-Cutting Findings

Best practices pertaining to outreach, messaging, and communication that emerged from the Phase I sites are detailed below.

CROSS-CUTTING FINDINGS REGARDING PUBLIC OUTREACH, MESSAGING, AND COMMUNICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize the need for ongoing public/stakeholder education and outreach. • Develop a targeted communications strategy involving: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Messaging around key motivators. ◦ Communicating to address public concerns. ◦ Implementing a multi-pronged approach to outreach and communications. • Develop a framework for regional support. • Public outreach may be impacted by local political considerations, particularly concurrent efforts around transportation funding in the States.

Recognizing the Need for Ongoing Public/Stakeholder Education and Outreach

Implementing a RUC or another alternative form of transportation funding will require ongoing public education. Phase I sites demonstrated through their outreach efforts the variety of stakeholders that need to be informed and educated, including, among others, legislators, government officials, business and community organizations, and the general public. Educational initiatives can serve the dual purpose of increasing the level of education and support for alternative transportation funding solutions and informing the system designers about the concerns of the public and stakeholders. The lessons learned from outreach can also be applied to developing a communications strategy that focuses on appropriate messaging and approaches to reach the target audience.

Developing and Executing a Targeted Communications Strategy

An effective communications strategy involves identifying the target audience and differentiating messaging and approaches to reach them. A strong communications strategy would include:

- Targeted messaging around key motivators for exploring transportation funding alternatives.
- Approaches to conduct outreach to identify public/stakeholder concerns and develop evidence-based messaging to address those concerns.
- Multi-pronged approach to outreach and communications involving multiple media platforms.

These components are discussed in detail below.

Messaging around Key Motivators

Based upon the Phase I efforts of grantee sites, the following emerged as messages that convey the key motivator for exploring alternative transportation funding solutions (see Table 10).

- **Transportation funding challenges:** Educating the public on how transportation funding currently works is critical to making a credible case for RUC. Once that baseline knowledge is established, it is relatively straightforward to communicate the impact of increasing fuel efficiency on transportation funding and how this shortfall will impact the general public. For instance, falling revenues can be linked to poorer road maintenance, decreased road safety, damage to personal vehicles, and increased traffic congestion—outcomes that are relevant to the driving public. This can help establish the basic understanding for the message that a distance- or mileage-based charge allows States to collect enough transportation revenues to meet system needs.
- **“Fairness”:** Ensuring that a RUC is fair is a key message that is likely to resonate with the public. The central idea supporting fairness of RUC is that, as infrastructure needs grow in the face of increasing vehicle fuel efficiency and growing market share of electric vehicles, RUC provides mechanisms for users to pay according to their usage of the transportation system. The pilot sites that conducted research into public reaction largely found that messages regarding everyone paying their fair share and sustainable funding were among the most convincing rationales for RUC. At the same time, “fairness” is a challenging feature to communicate because different interest groups define the term differently.

Table 10. Key motivators and effective messaging in favor of exploring alternative transportation funding mechanisms.

Key motivators	Effective messaging based on Phase I site’s outreach efforts
Transportation funding challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As vehicles become more fuel efficient, Federal and State fuel tax revenue is declining across the country. A road usage charge (RUC) would provide a sustainable model for future transportation funding (Oregon, Eastern Corridor Coalition). • Roads and bridges are in dire need of maintenance (California). • Transportation funding is projected to decrease because people are buying less gas due to more fuel-efficient vehicles. An RUC would provide a more stable funding stream to maintain our roadways because it is based on usage, not fuel (Washington).
Fairness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RUCs ensure each driver pays their fair share based on how much they use the roads (Washington, Eastern Corridor Coalition). • Road charge balances the way roads are funded so that all vehicles share the cost based on how much they use the road, regardless of their miles per gallon or type of fuel (California). • People are driving more fuel-efficient vehicles and consuming less fuel in the case of electric vehicles, thereby paying less than fuel tax, yet their vehicles put as much wear on roads as other vehicles (Oregon).

Evidence-Based Messaging and Communications to Address Public/Stakeholder Concerns

It is important to develop adequate responses to concerns about privacy, data security, and the complexity of an RUC system relative to fuel taxes. The responses should aim to provide evidence-based reasoning to address public concerns. Some of the key concerns that Phase I sites encountered during their outreach initiatives are described below:

- **Equity:** Most resistance to RUC is due to concerns around the equity of this approach. Some of the common themes are that RUC is expensive for people who have to drive a long distance and have low incomes, and it is inherently unfair because it disincentivizes fuel efficient vehicles while giving “refunds” to “gas guzzlers.”¹⁰ In addition to the table above, Chapter 7 provides additional information on addressing some of the equity related concerns through evidence-based reasoning.
- **Charging accuracy and data security:** According to Washington State Transportation Commission’s (WSTC’s) Public Opinion Report, the most critical questions about RUC pertained to system accuracy, how users would report their miles, whether it would replace a gas tax or be levied in addition to the existing tax, and whether their PII would be kept safe and not used for other—primarily commercial—purposes. System accuracy is especially critical with respect to the reporting methods available to the public and their ability to choose between them.¹¹ The pilot sites have yet to develop simple and effective messaging that addresses accuracy and data security. It may be noted that conducting pilots is one of the significant ways to both test and demonstrate the accuracy and security aspects of reporting methods.
- **Privacy:** The Minnesota Department of Transportation, in its interviews with stakeholders, found that privacy was a key concern of elected officials and advocacy organizations. These stakeholders, in turn, reflect the concerns of the general public in that tracking of individuals and their travel habits is looked upon poorly. While the sites progressing with pilots have high-level measures in place to protect drivers’ location data privacy, they have yet to develop simple and effective messaging that addresses this concern. Developing messaging around this concern may involve carefully translating highly technical information regarding data-handling procedures to simple and direct messaging that is accessible to a non-technical audience as well.
- **Why a complex system is needed if no one is significantly worse-off:** Oregon focus group participants did not see the need to implement what they saw as a complex, invasive system if it is not going to significantly increase transportation funding.¹² The ODOT Focus Group Report recommends that the sustainability and adequacy of RUC would need to be illustrated through graphics to address this concern.

Effective messaging is targeted, simple, and transparent. For instance, in the interest of transparency, messaging about pilots would make it clear that the revenue-neutral mileage rates being used during the demonstrations are for test purposes only and the actual mileage tax rates would be likely different.

Multi-Pronged Approach to Outreach and Communication

As part of STSFA Phase I, several sites conducted limited outreach to stakeholders and the public or engaged consulting companies specializing in marketing, communications, and public outreach to recommend potential outreach approaches. Table 11 presents the approaches explored by Phase I sites or those recommended to them by their consultants for future public and stakeholder engagement.

Table 11. Multi-pronged approach to outreach explored by or recommended to Phase I sites.

Type of Outreach	Target Audience and Goals	Examples of Outreach Explored by or Recommended to Phase I Sites
Public Affairs	Educating key local- and State-elected officials, regulators, and other policy makers; leverage their support to continue educational efforts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach to target audience at: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Regional infrastructure tour. ◦ Conferences and seminars. ◦ Legislative caucus retreats. ◦ Local press conferences. • Support letters to local policymakers and stakeholders. • Involve target audience in Steering Committees. • Develop fact sheets, flyers, and frequently asked questions (FAQs) lists. • Pilot participation.
Stakeholder outreach	Educate stakeholders with the necessary information and materials for continued awareness around need for alternative transportation funding solutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a stakeholder management team. • Conduct stakeholder interviews. • Involve key stakeholders in the Steering Committee. • Pilot participation.
Public outreach	Increase the level of awareness among the general public and widespread education about transportation funding challenges and solutions through community-level engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct outreach at community-based organizations and events, including youth and civic organizations, business associations, ethnic groups, faith-based organizations, educational institutions, and advocacy groups. • Targeted outreach to specific communities. • Conduct surveys.
Media-based outreach	Outreach to a wide audience using a variety of media platforms for marketing and messaging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize social media platforms. • Posting fact sheets, FAQs, and promotional videos on website. • Utilize blogs, newsletters, and email blasts. • Utilize earned and donated media.

Source: FHWA, adapted from Caltrans Road Charge Communications Research STSFA Final Report 2018-2019.

Developing a Framework for Regional Communications Support

Regional coalitions (e.g., RUC West and the Eastern Corridor Coalition) provide the framework for regional communications support. For Phase I, several pilot sites engaged in outreach efforts on a regional and/or national level. The FHWA has continued to foster collaboration among the pilot sites through annual workshops conducted in Washington, D.C., in 2018 and 2019 concurrently with the Transportation Research Board annual meeting. Additional collaboration is taking place outside of the STSFA Program under the RUC West umbrella between Phase I and Phase II sites and through the Mileage Based User Fee Alliance. These forums provide an opportunity to the entities engaged in pilots to share lessons learned from different approaches, improve understanding, and determine the equity concerns that will need to be addressed. They also provide an opportunity to develop common arguments and language when communicating with stakeholders.

Accounting for Political Considerations around Transportation Funding

Political considerations, particularly concurrent actions around transportation funding such as an increase in gas tax, can impact the scope and approach of public outreach. California, Washington State, and Oregon legislatures passed gas tax increases in the recent past. This has a specifically pronounced effect in the case of the California pilot. Senate Bill 1 passed in the California legislature in 2017, which created the Road Maintenance and Rehabilitation Program to address deferred maintenance on the State highway system and the local street and road system, and was funded through an increase in the gas tax. Additionally, the bill imposed a new transportation improvement fee imposed under the Vehicle License Fee Law, with a varying fee between \$25 and \$175 based on vehicle value and with an inflation adjustment, and a new \$100 annual vehicle registration fee applicable only to zero-emission vehicles model year 2020 and

later with an inflation adjustment. Given the backdrop of this legislation and the associated increases in the current tax and fee structure, prior to the vote, Caltrans contacted FHWA staff to inform them that they were asked to postpone the start date of the outreach campaign until after the vote. It was deemed risky to conduct a broad-based education and outreach campaign in the State of California regarding RUC, which was projected to be widely perceived as an additional tax.

Significant Phase I Efforts Exploring Outreach, Messaging, and Communication

Table 12 summarizes significant outreach and communication activities that Phase I sites undertook.

Table 12. Significant outreach, messaging, and communications efforts undertaken by Phase I sites.

Phase I Pilot Site	Significant Outreach, Messaging, and Communication Efforts	Recognize Need for Public/Stakeholder Education and Outreach	Develop and Execute A Targeted Communications Strategy	Develop a Framework for Regional Communications Support
Minnesota	Conducted extended interviews with stakeholders, including elected officials, government employees, and representatives from special interest organizations.	✓		
Missouri	Supported policies that would have promoted further analysis of its registration fee structure based on a vehicles' miles-per-gallon rating.	✓		
Eastern Corridor Coalition	Conducted a limited pilot with participants who could potentially become project champions: high-level executives from participating State Departments of Transportation and Departments of Motor Vehicles, State legislative aids, metropolitan planning organization staff, and members of the media.	✓		✓
Eastern Corridor Coalition	Conducted surveys of the pilot participants to gauge public acceptance of a mileage-based fee before and after the pilot.	✓		
Washington, Oregon, California, Eastern Corridor Coalition	Conducted significant research into public reaction to messaging efforts, typically using more than one research method including focus groups and online and/or telephone surveys.	✓	✓	
California	Prepared a communications strategy to support future pilot outreach efforts. These strategies identified target audiences, their key concerns and reactions to road usage charges (RUCs), and communication approaches likely to work with multiple audiences.	✓	✓	
RUC West	Member States engaged in development and refinement of the communications resources, including subject matter folios, a communications plan, media kits, and a website.	✓	✓	✓
	Developed a communications plan focused on the goal of increasing public awareness of national transportation funding and the need for a sustainable transportation funding solution. The plan mirrored the three tiers of participation among member States, from those actively promoting road usage charging to those monitoring trends at this time.	✓	✓	✓
Washington	Engaged in pilot recruitment activities including e-newsletter blasts, website updates, earned media, paid advertising, and demographic survey. They also developed "How it Works" videos and frequently asked questions and used incentives as a pilot recruitment tool.	✓	✓	
Oregon	In September 2017, Oregon Department of Transportation conducted an RUC Forum in Salem, Oregon, whose panelists included representatives of industry and government to provide an array of considerations about the topics, which included privacy protection, technology options, and compliance. Several pilot sites and Federal Highway Administration staff participated in the forum.	✓		✓
	Launched a marketing campaign.	✓	✓	

¹⁰ Oregon Department of Transportation. 2017. *OReGO—Oregon's Road Usage Charge Program, Focus Groups Report*. n.p. [Return to [Return to Note 10](#)]

¹¹ Washington State Transportation Commission. 2017. *Washington Transportation Funding Public Opinion Assessment Report*. n.p. [Return to [Return to Note 11](#)]

¹² OReGO website has an online calculator (<https://www.myorego.org/how-it-works/>) for users to compare what they pay in fuel tax to what they would pay in road usage charge. ODOT RUC focus group participants who used the calculator all concluded that those who pay more would pay just a little more, and those who pay less would pay just a little less. However, this raised the question as to how a road usage charge could significantly increase funding for transportation. [Return to [Return to Note 12](#)]

