



WASHINGTON STATE ROAD USAGE CHARGE PILOT PROJECT

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

REVIEW DRAFT October 28, 2016

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OVERVIEW

Introduction

This document is the umbrella communications plan for the Washington Road Usage Charge (WA RUC) pilot project implementation plan. This communications plan provides overall guidance on the goals, principles, audiences, and platforms for communication efforts in the pre-launch period of the pilot project (October 2016 through fall 2017). More detailed work plans are under development, including:

- Brand and Tagline
- Website
- Media Strategy
- Pilot Project Participant Recruitment Plan
- Outreach Strategy

Background

The Washington State Transportation Commission (WSTC) has been conducting an assessment of a road usage charge since 2012 at the direction of the Washington State Legislature. A 25-member Steering Committee and consultant team has conducted detailed work on this topic and has been advising the WSTC from the start. With the assistance of the Steering Committee, the WSTC has:

- Determined road usage charging is feasible and adopted guiding principles
- Developed a business case and a concept of operations
- Examined key policies that continue to be refined
- Drafted a pilot project proposal

A detailed pilot project implementation plan is now being developed. This communications plan is part of the implementation and builds on the work completed since 2012. A report on the recommended pilot project implementation plan and schedule is due to the Governor and Legislature by January 2017, with the intention of implementing the plan in 2017.

Pre-launch Milestones

2016

- November: Steering Committee Meeting
- December: WSTC Meeting to review Pilot Project Implementation Plan

WINTER
2017

Report due to the Governor & Legislature

- January: Legislative presentations

SPRING
2017

Participant recruitment begins

- March/April: Potential announcement of full FHWA funding for pilot project
- Mid-April: WSTC Meeting to review Project Status Report

SUMMER
2017

Selection and open enrollment of volunteers

- July: End of active recruiting period for volunteers
- August: End of Open Enrollment

FALL
2017

Participants begin one-year test drive

COMMUNICATION GOALS



Inform and educate the public on the following topics:

- Why the gas tax will no longer be sufficient to fund roads, and why an alternative is needed to ensure continued maintenance and operations.
- What a road usage charge is, what a road usage charge is not, and how it works.
- How the pilot project will be an opportunity to engage with Washington drivers in testing a road usage charge and providing feedback about different ways to record mileage.
- Washington is not the first state to test this funding approach. Oregon has a small pilot program in place and California is currently testing road usage charging. Washington is one of eight states to receive a federal grant to test a road usage charge funding option.



Recruit participants into the pilot project from across the state that represent diverse populations.



Generate broad understanding for the pilot project among stakeholders, including the general public, the private sector and businesses, and other agencies and organizations.



Cultivate balanced and accurate media coverage about road usage charging and the WA RUC pilot project.



Assess public opinion before and throughout the course of the pilot to evaluate changes in perspective and acceptance regarding road usage charging and different ways to record mileage.

COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES

Be consistent and clear.

Use the full term “road usage charge” until your audience knows what you mean; only then refer to RUC. Emphasize that this is a pilot project. Always use the brand and tagline. Use key messages and reference the website, which serves as the information hub.

Stay proactive.

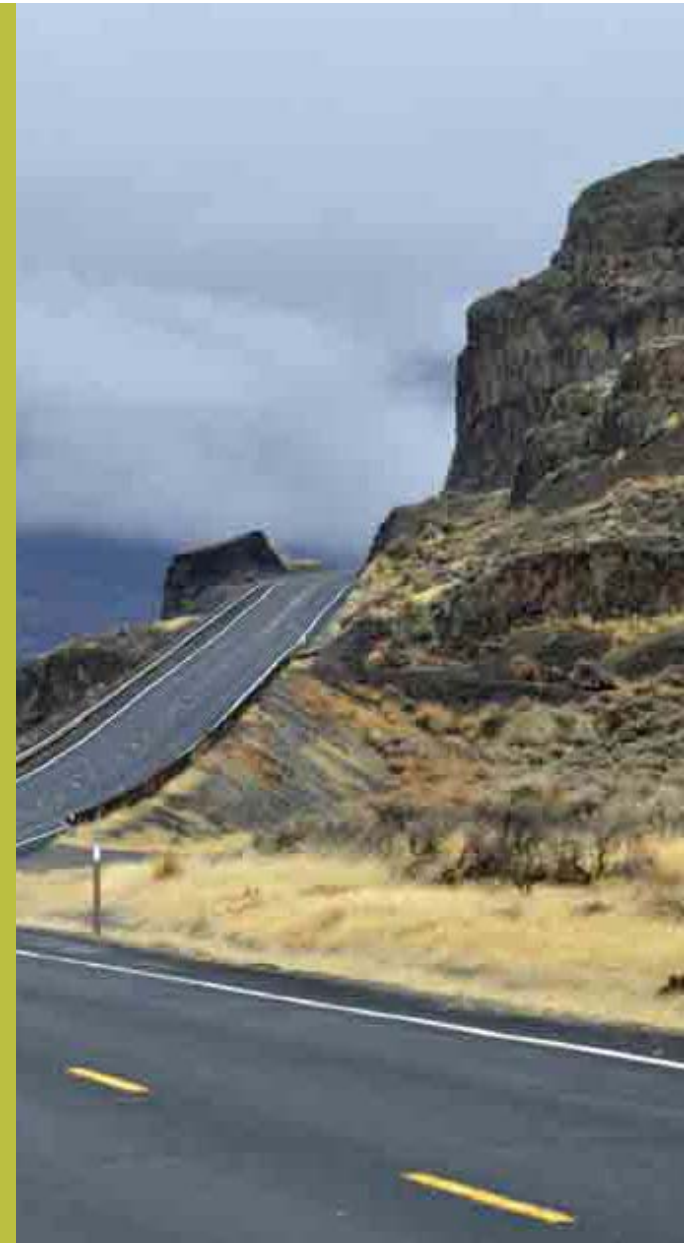
Anticipate questions, volunteer to make presentations, and share information. Identify spokespeople.

Adapt and learn.

Test messaging; respond to feedback, whether through focus groups, media stories, or other input; and adapt based on what is learned.

Keep it brief, use visuals.

Resist the temptation to over-explain in print; use video and infographics.



KEY MESSAGES

Inform and Educate Messages

TOPIC	MAIN MESSAGE	TALKING POINTS
What is a road usage charge?	Pay-per-mile rather than by the gallon to fund roads.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A road usage charge is a per-mile charge drivers would pay based on how much they use Washington State’s road system, as opposed to having drivers pay by the gallon of gas purchased. This approach is similar to how people pay for their utilities, including electricity or water.
Why a road usage charge?	As vehicles evolve to be more fuel-efficient or use no gasoline, our system of funding roads needs to evolve as well to raise sufficient funds and be more equitable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A road usage charge system could provide a more stable source of transportation funding than the gas tax, since drivers would pay by the mile instead of by the gallon. This is important as auto manufacturers build cars to meet higher federal fuel-efficiency requirements, and as new hybrid and electric vehicles continue to become more popular and affordable.• “User pays” is a time-tested and familiar principle, used by utilities like electricity, water, and cell phones whereby those who use the roadway network and benefit from it are also the ones to pay for it. The pilot project will test how this strategy could be applied to roadway usage in Washington.• The current gas tax funding system is becoming unfair. For the same miles driven, drivers pay widely different amounts for their roadway use based solely on their vehicle’s MPG. This inequity is expected to grow each year as vehicle MPG continues to increase.
Will this be an additional tax?	No.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This pilot project is testing the road usage charge only as a replacement to the gas tax, not as an additional tax.
What work has already been done?	Four years of research and policy analysis, with pilot planning now underway.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Washington State Transportation Commission and a 25-member stakeholder committee have been researching, assessing, and analyzing this potential replacement for the gas tax since 2012 in close partnership with the Washington State Department of Transportation and the Department of Licensing.

KEY MESSAGES

Participant Recruitment Messages

TOPIC	MAIN MESSAGE	TALKING POINTS
What will the pilot test?	Participants will “test drive” a per-mile charge system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The pilot is a chance for the public to “test drive” a per-mile charge system and provide feedback.• Volunteers will choose from four ways to record mileage for their use of the roads.• High-tech, low-tech, and no-tech options will be tested during the pilot, ranging from manual reporting of a vehicle’s odometer once a year, to using smartphones or in-vehicle technology to report miles driven.
Who will be involved?	Up to 2,000 volunteers from across the state.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This will be a statewide test – including the Central Puget Sound area, Northwest Washington, Southwest Washington, Central Washington, and Eastern Washington.• We will recruit up to 2,000 volunteer drivers to participate in the test.• Drivers from Surrey, British Columbia and Oregon will also be asked to help test how a per-mile system works when traveling between Washington and Canada or Oregon.
When will it start?	The planned start date is fall 2017.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Once federal funds are received and legislative input is gathered, preparations and setup will start. The live pilot is planned to begin in fall 2017.
How long will the pilot last?	The live pilot will last 12 months.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• From initial set-up to evaluation and final reporting, the total pilot effort will last about 30 months: fall 2017 to spring 2019.• The live pilot test is planned to last 12 months starting in fall 2017.
How do I participate?	Details and website address to come.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Details and website address to come.

AUDIENCES

Key audiences are broken down into three groups – the general public, stakeholder groups, and the media – with specific strategies for each. Messages can be tailored to address specific issues and informed by the media audit, which assesses themes and trends in media coverage.



AUDIENCES

The General Public

Who

Focus on reaching people from all regions of the state, all racial and ethnic groups, a variety of age groups, genders, income levels, and owners of different vehicle types.

Goals

Inform and educate, with a focus on recruiting a representative sample of the state to participate in the pilot program (see **Recruitment Plan** for more details).

Key Issues and Questions

- How are roads funded?
- What is a road usage charge and why are we talking about it?
- How would a road usage charge change how much I pay in taxes? Will I pay more?
- How will my miles be recorded? Does the road usage charge affect my privacy?
- Is a road usage charge fair and equitable?

Strategies

- Focus on paying the fair share.
- Promote the opportunity to test it out and provide input.
- Focus on how it affects people personally, and focus on the future funding shortfall and fairness to provide motivation for those that will pay more with a road usage charge.

AUDIENCES

Stakeholder Groups

Who

Local, regional, and statewide professional, affinity, and business groups, and elected officials and agency heads.

- **Business Interests.** For example, the Association of Washington Business, Washington Roundtable, Chambers of Commerce, and mobility and car sharing services.
- **Transportation Professionals and Advocates.** For example, Regional Transportation Planning Organizations, Spokane Area Good Roads Association, Transportation Choices Coalition, AAA, transportation technology groups, etc.
- **Elected Officials and Agency heads.** This includes legislators, mayors and council members and directors/leaders at state agencies; Washington State Transit Association; and city and county departments of transportation.

Goals

Inform and educate, broaden support, and recruit as participants. Some groups will already know about the pilot project and others will need more information.

Key Issues and Questions

- How could a road usage charge affect my business expenses?
- How could a road usage charge improve the transportation system?
- How would this fit in with my agency's goals and operations?
- How could a road usage charge impact my city/county revenues?

Strategies

- “Go to them.” Present at standing and/or scheduled events and meetings, supply content.
- Opportunity to spread the word and build support.
- Promote the opportunity to test it out and provide input.

AUDIENCES

The Media

Who

Print, digital, and broadcast media.

Goals

Inform and educate about the WA RUC pilot project, generate accurate coverage, and spread the word about the pilot project to help with recruiting efforts.

Strategies

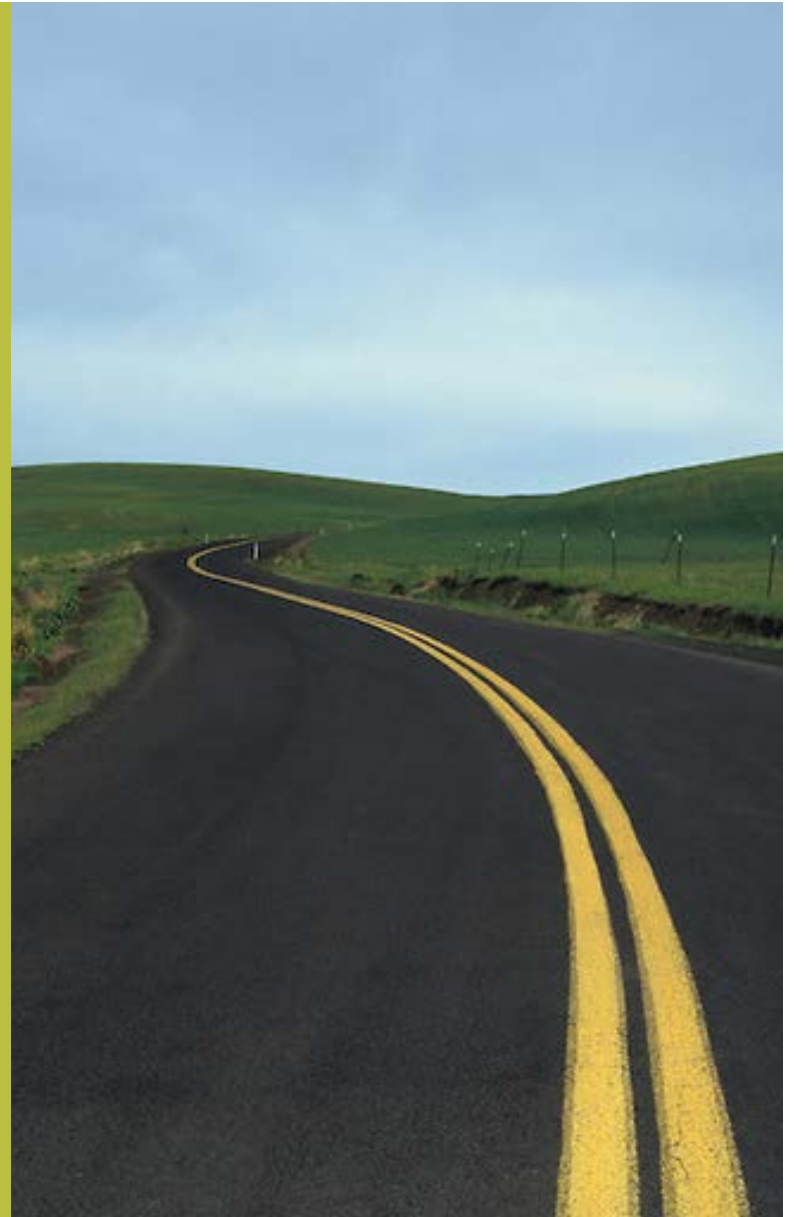
- Proactively meet with reporters and journalists to inform, educate, and provide an opportunity to ask questions.
- Monitor digital and social media for trends.

Key Issues and Questions

- How is transportation funded?
- What is a road usage charge and why are we talking about it?
- Will drivers pay more?
- How will miles be recorded?
- Is a road usage charge fair?
- How is the pilot project funded?

COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS

Communication about the WA RUC pilot project will be through a variety of platforms, with key messages delivered in-person, digitally, and through the media. This section focuses on the **what** and the **why**. Work plans will provide more details on the **how**.



COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS

Digital



WA RUC Website

Why: The website provides a “home base” to learn about the WA RUC and get updated, consistent information. Spokespeople can send reporters and others there to learn more about the pilot project. The website will provide information such as Frequently Asked Questions, a calendar of upcoming events, a sign-up for email notifications and the pilot project, contact information, and a comment form.

See the **Website Communication Plan** for more details.



Online Survey – Voice of Washington State (VOWS), random surveys

Why: VOWS is a survey panel used to gather public input on transportation policy, taxes, and funding issues. It could be used to gather baseline opinions about the RUC that can be reassessed during and after the pilot to understand if and how public perception changes. Random online or telephone surveys could also be employed.



Email Lists – VOWS, WA RUC website, stakeholder groups

Why: Email lists can help spread the word, increase understanding, and reach potential pilot participants who might not go to the website or hear about it through the media.



Social Media, including video

Why: Social media tools and video content can broaden awareness and recruitment efforts. Videos and links to press coverage can be shared easily through Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and other platforms and embedded in the WA RUC website. Website pages can be configured to share via these platforms. To start, there will not be standalone WA RUC pages on any social media platforms. Information will go from the website out to social media via share buttons.



Webinars

Why: A webinar provides an opportunity for stakeholder groups to learn about the WA RUC pilot project remotely. It is a useful tool to convene a virtual meeting when presenters and potential attendees are far apart from each other.

COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS

In-Person



Focus Groups

Why: Focus groups allow for exploration of messaging and other elements in more depth than is possible through surveys or online/paper comment cards. Focus groups can be targeted (for example, language spoken, age, professional drivers) or broadly representative.



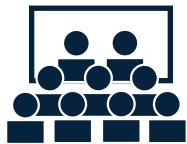
Briefings

Why: State and local elected officials and transportation and state agency heads could get questions from the media or others about the RUC and how they (or their agency) view it. Individual briefings are a good tool to prepare them, allowing time for in-depth discussion and the ability to ask questions in a less formal setting.



Stakeholder Meetings/Events

Why: Many groups with standing meetings are open to adding agenda items, and these provide a good venue for presentation and discussion. This would help raise awareness about the WA RUC and could assist recruitment efforts.



Public Meetings

Why: Public meetings could be held in conjunction with WSTC meetings around the state in 2017-2018 to provide another opportunity for residents, business owners, and other members of the public to learn about the WA RUC pilot project, and engage with commissioners, staff, and consultants.



Community Events

Why: Tabling at community events could help raise awareness and assist recruitment among targeted groups, such as seniors in a rural community or the Latino community.

COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS

Media



Why: Media coverage can help reach individuals who might not otherwise hear about the WA RUC pilot project or road usage charging. Identifying spokespeople allows the media access to informed individuals who can help explain what a RUC is, how it works, and the objectives of the pilot project.

See **Media Strategy** for more details.
















Print Materials














Postcards, FAQs, and Posters

Why: To reach people who might not have access to digital platforms mentioned above. Physical paper materials can be translated into several languages and placed in public libraries or community centers in communities where we hope to recruit pilot project participants. Materials can also be used at in-person events for people to take home and refer back to or share.

SUMMARY OF COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Tools	Target Audiences	Goals	Schedule
DIGITAL			
Website <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FAQ page • Infographics and articles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General public • Stakeholder groups • Media 	  	Update weekly
Online Survey (VOWS and Random Surveys) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather opinions related to the WA RUC to help inform messaging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General public, potentially targeted by zip code to areas where the pilot project is occurring or where we want to recruit 	  	Periodically leading up to and during the pilot
Social Media <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website parts will be configured to be easily shared via share buttons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General public 	  	Update weekly
Email Lists <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email with updates, information, links to website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General public (on VOWS email list) • Stakeholder groups 	  	Send monthly
Webinars <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informational presentations with opportunity for Q&A and live polling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General public, potentially targeted by zip code to areas where the pilot project is occurring or where we want to recruit 	   	Periodically leading up to and during the pilot
IN-PERSON			
Public Meetings & Community Events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations, information booths, interactive activities at open houses or community events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General public 	   	Hold throughout pre-launch period, with at least one in each pilot project region (NW, SW, NE, SE)

SUMMARY OF COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Tools	Target Audiences	Goals	Schedule
<p>Focus Groups & Stakeholder Meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus groups: explore topics in more detail Stakeholder meetings: Give presentations, distribute materials, and answer questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business groups Transportation professionals and advocates Targeted populations (ethnic, geographic, age, etc.) 	   	<p>Focus Groups: Round 1 – spring 2017; Round 2 – winter 2018</p> <p>Stakeholder Meetings: Ongoing as of October 2016</p>
<p>Individual Briefings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less formal setting to ask and answer questions preparing them for requests for comment from the media and others Media strategy will also reach out to these groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected officials State agency directors Transportation agency directors Member based organizations (Chambers, NAIOP, AWB, Washington Roundtable, etc.) 	 	<p>Ongoing as of January 2017</p>
MEDIA			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coverage of pilot project, RUC basics, and call for participants TVW will be utilized along with other media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General Public 	 	<p>Ongoing</p>
PRINT MATERIALS			
<p>Postcards, FAQs, and Posters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place materials at public locations and distribute at in-person events to reach a wider audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General Public Targeted groups, such as by location or demographics 	  	<p>Periodically throughout pilot</p>

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Commission Staff and Commissioners

Assist with pilot project implementation and serve as the lead state agency on the WA RUC. Executive Director and one or two Commissioners will serve as spokespeople.

Steering Committee Members

Used strategically related to their experience and affiliation. Four to six members will serve as spokespeople. Other roles TBD at November 9 meeting.

Consultant Support

Take the lead on various communication platforms. Staff events, meetings, and focus groups.

MEASURES AND OUTCOMES

Public Opinion

Public opinion will be assessed periodically to measure general public awareness and support of the WA RUC. An online survey can be used for this assessment. The survey link should be distributed widely, using the communication platforms described in this report, including the WA RUC website, social media, the VOWS email list, and outreach materials.

Media Coverage

Media coverage during the pre-launch phase of the WA RUC pilot project should be periodically analyzed to review themes and trends. Findings may suggest the need for changes to key messages and other content.

APPENDIX A: Lessons Learned

The following are lessons learned based on experience in other states and other countries related to communications on the topic of road usage charging and specific to a pilot project.

Public Understanding of Transportation Funding is Mixed

Context:

- The public's understanding of transportation funding is minimal, and includes two common misconceptions:
 - The public is skeptical of the need for a road usage charge due to transportation-related taxes and fees already in place.
 - The public does not know or doubts whether road-related taxes are actually spent on roads.
- Much of the public will have initial reservations about per-mile charges. Per-mile or road usage charges are not entirely unknown, but they are misunderstood, particularly due to confusion with gas taxes, congestion charging, weight fees, tolling, and managed lanes.
- Many do not understand the fixed cost per gallon underpinning the gas tax and perceive it to be like sales taxes or other proportional taxes. As a result, a perception of high gas costs translates to higher tax revenue in the mind of the public.
- Without a good understanding of the actual gas tax collected, the public perceives the amount of tax collected to be much higher than the actual average per vehicle per year.
- Taxpayers understand the purpose of gas taxes.

Solutions:

- Craft communications to take public understanding of transportation revenue into account — be clear and concise — and increase the overall level of understanding.
- Make sure everyone delivers the same message — consistency across all messaging gives communications optimal impact — and ensure responses to questions are updated.
- The discussion of road usage charging as a potential solution should leverage existing communications about the revenue situation.
- Emphasize parallels with gas taxes. Be clear that drivers would pay gas tax or a road usage charge but not both.

APPENDIX A: Lessons Learned

Communications Strategies

Context:

- The timing of public outreach and communications efforts is important:
 - Communications on a pilot project should not begin before details have been worked out, because doing so could produce doubt and confusion among the public.
 - If an agency waits too long to communicate, it could create suspicion among the public that the policy is decided rather than to be explored through a pilot project.
- Planning for pilot project evaluation is an important step to reassure the public. Regular program evaluation based on policy objectives helps to reinforce the linkage between objectives originally presented and achievements of a per-mile road usage charge system.
- Policy uncertainty breeds apprehension in the public.

Solutions:

- Engage stakeholders early in the process to help guide policy and pilot project development, and identify information needs for public engagement and communications.
- Engage stakeholders by identifying, prioritizing, and focusing on key influencers.
- Use existing opportunities/venues to reach key audiences.
- Emphasize a broad range of alternatives for reporting miles driven during the pilot project and that this is a pilot project and not a program.
- Communicate results of the pilot project evaluation.
- Make sure all public inquiries receive a timely response.
- Provide many opportunities for feedback.