

Miller Road communications effort wins PR Award

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Flint, Michigan. ---

The Genesee County Road Commission has received another prestigious award related to the reconstruction of Miller Road in Flint Township last summer. Last month the project received the Award of Excellence from the Asphalt Paving Association of Michigan for the quality of the reconstructed roadway. This time, kudos come in the form of a “CRAMmy Award” for Best Public Relations from the County Road Association of Michigan (CRAM), given at the CRAM Annual Highway Conference in Lansing on Thursday March 5th.

“The ‘CRAMmy Awards’ highlight exemplary public relations activities carried out by road commissions throughout the state. They acknowledge and encourage excellence and creativity among our member agencies,” Association Director, John Niemela said. “The efforts of the Genesee County Road Commission kept commerce moving on this busy road despite a major reconstruction. The consistent effort to educate motorists and business owners has been recognized as a best practice for other road commissions to reference during future construction projects.”

The challenge in the Miller Road project was how to accommodate over 2 million shopper-motorists while calming the fears and gaining the trust of over 300 retailers that generate over \$2 billion revenue in one of the most depressed economies in the nation, during the \$10 million reconstruction of Genesee County’s key commercial corridor, which was in immediate need of repair. Motorists feared the nightmare of negotiating the County’s busiest shopping corridor during five months of reconstruction. Many business owners expressed concern that the project would put them out of business.

To address these fears, the Road Commission undertook a multifaceted communications and outreach program, spearheaded by Robert Slattery, the Road Commission’s director of Information Systems and Planning, and public relations consultant Michael Dach, long before the first shovel was turned. This included a series of public input/information meetings held during the design phase; distribution of 10,000+ brochures; an emailed “Weekly Reconstruction Update”; press interviews; electronic message signs, partnerships with business groups, and actively seeking input through individual merchant visits.

A dedicated web page was constructed to outlet up to the minute information, including latest news, timetables, phasing plans, presentations, FAQ, background information, links to merchants in the corridor, maps, the brochure and an automatic email notification service.

According to Manager-Director John Daly, the intended message was ‘we know this is going to

be difficult for you as merchants and motorists, but it is necessary, it will be better for all when finished, we are all in this together, we are asking for your input and we will do everything possible to minimize the impact on you'. The intent was to change the perception from 'this is going to close my business, this will be a terrible hassle, the Road Commission really doesn't care', to 'it wasn't nearly as bad as I feared, they do care, and the end result is worth the effort.' We think we achieved this."

Fear gradually gave way to trust and a realization that the Road Commission is sensitive to motorists' and merchants' needs and is doing everything it can to minimize the impact on them. Merchants and motorists became actively engaged and provided helpful suggestions and supportive comments through personal contacts and via email to the dedicated website.

"We believe that this effort has increased the trust in the Road Commission's sensitivity to the concerns of its customers and in its ability to mitigate the impact of major projects. We will use similar public relations campaigns on all future major projects, seasonal programs (i.e. chip-sealing or winter maintenance) and in general to let people know that we are out there working for them, that we hear them and we do 'get it', and that we want to partner with motorists and residents to improve our roads."

While GCRC monitors its roads closely, it welcomes calls from the public regarding dangerous conditions such as large potholes or severe gravel road problems. Motorists can report road issues to GCRC by calling (810) 767-4920, sending an email to rslattery@gcrc.org or clicking on the "Pothole Report" icon on its website, www.gcrc.org.

For more information about CRAM and these awards contact Monica Ware, Public Relations Specialist at the County Road Association of Michigan at 517.482.1189 Ext 17, or mware@localroads.net.