

# Washington State's Effective Communication of Performance Drives Results

## Gaining Public Trust through Transparency & Effective Communication

For the past decade, Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) has used performance measurement and reporting to inform policy makers and citizens about the agency's work and accomplishments. In 1999 and 2000, just before WSDOT began incorporating performance reporting into its culture, the agency was well regarded by its national peers as a high performing organization. However, the public, media, and State Legislature questioned the agency's credibility and performance largely due to an information asymmetry. The causes for the information asymmetry were:

- Ineffective communication from the agency to the citizens, not the inability of citizens to comprehend information.
- Most people get their information from the media which rarely cover substantive issues in political reporting.
- Agencies are the exclusive sources of their performance data, creating an information monopoly.

The lack of trust in the agency's work contributed to the repeal of transportation tax funds in 1999 (Motor Vehicle Excise Tax). WSDOT realized performance communication with the public must be easy to comprehend, sincere, and legitimate. As a result, WSDOT began publishing "Measures, Markers and Mileposts," which was later called the *Gray Notebook*, a quarterly report on WSDOT's performance measures and program results. These efforts have helped the public gain a better understanding

### KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Developed strategic communication and reporting.
- Conducted effective communication regarding funding needs.
- Increased transportation funding as a result of voter approval.
- Improved public perception and trust.

Accomplished performance based investment decisions.

standing of how transportation dollars are spent, which resulted in greater public credibility and support. In 2003 and 2005, the Washington State Legislature approved two transportation funding packages (a 5-cent gas tax increase in 2003, followed by a 9.5-cent gas tax increase in 2005.) Later in 2005, Washington voters rejected a ballot initiative that would have repealed the 9.5-cent gas tax increase, demonstrating that the public's confidence in WSDOT's ability to deliver had improved.

### Bridging the Information Gap Between Agency & Citizen with Performance Journalism

WSDOT uses a set of principles, collectively called "Performance Journalism," that have proven successful in gaining public support. These principles include communicating with candor and transparency, using "plain talk," making performance related information accessible to the public and the media, and being current and timely when communicat-



