

POLITICAL CLIMATE ASSESSMENT

The Task Force recognizes that there are political forces at work at the local, state and federal levels that for better or worse, impact the WCHA. A realistic assessment of political forces at work is necessary to understand what strategies need to be employed in order for the interests of the membership of WCHA to be represented effectively.

Public Perception

Task Force members established public perception as a core value for measuring Highway Department performance. Yet, the Task Force recognizes that public opinion of Highway Departments is mixed. Task Force members believed that Highway Departments get high marks from the public for responding to emergencies and performing winter maintenance, but the public is generally ambivalent about most of the work Highway Departments do. There continues to be skepticism about the value and work ethic of public employees working for Highway Departments. There is no ground swell of public support for Highway Department operations and it is doubtful there will be any in the foreseeable future.

County Government

The level of support for Highway Department operations at the County level varies greatly from county to county. While each County has committed Highway Committee members, that represent Highway Department interests to the County Board, support for Highway Department operations are in competition with other priorities such as Human Services, Law Enforcement, etc. County transportation interests are often the first affected when budget constraints require reductions. The delay of highway improvements is often seen as having a low or no impact by County Board members not familiar with transportation issues. The economic and legislative constraints being put on counties make county transportation interests vulnerable at the County level. Tax levy constraints continue to force tough decisions on County governments.

State Legislature

As can be seen from the 2011 budget process, the State Legislature does not rely on the WCHA alone to develop legislation effecting County transportation interests. In some cases WCHA has not been allowed input and other interest groups have been allowed to take the lead in formulating the legislation affecting our membership.

At present, there are a number of problems that have been identified by the Task Force as follows:

- Current economic conditions have focused legislative efforts on "private" job creation. There is bipartisan agreement that private sector job creation is the highest priority even if it results in the loss of public sector positions. Private sector job creation trumps all other concerns
- Hostility towards public employees. The loss of work for public employees is seen as positive
- Many Legislators view transportation as a low priority or believe that transportation is a "fat cat". Their areas of interest are in other government sectors

- Special Interest Groups who are effective in using political contributions to gain access and influence in the Legislature. Counties do not make campaign contribution and therefore must rely on arguing “public interest” only.
- Many Legislators do not understand the Counties role in providing transportation services

Stakeholders and Partners

The Task Force recognizes that there are Stakeholders and Partners the WCHA must engage both in the public and private sectors. Stakeholders are parties that have an interest in County transportation, which can be supportive or in opposition to WCHA platform and positions. Partners are parties that can be counted on to work with the WCHA on a particular issue or who share WCHA's interests in general. The Task Force recognizes that stakeholders and partners cannot be ignored and must be engaged.

Wisconsin Transportation Builders Association (WTBA)

The Wisconsin Transportation Builders Association (WTBA) represents primarily private sector highway construction contractors. The WTBA generally supports the enhancement and preservation of Wisconsin's highways and road system. However, the WTBA sees private sector forces as the primary mechanisms for improving the system. While the WTBA seems willing to accept the County's roll in system preservation (maintenance), there is opposition to almost any type of improvement work being done by County forces.

The Task Force recognizes there are a number of beliefs within the WTBA and its memberships that is driving a legislation agenda to constrain Counties from doing certain types of highway work as follows:

- Counties are a competitor for scarce resources
- Counties are “unfair” competition and have certain advantages private sector operations do not have
- The WTBA believes the private sector is always the most cost-effective approach
- The WTBA believes they provide higher quality improvements
- The WTBA believes improvements should be exclusively private sector, while maintenance can be a public sector function
- The WTBA uses “worst case” examples to impugn all county work
- The WTBA believes all state and federally funded projects should be let to private contract without any public sector opportunity to perform work

The Task Force also recognizes that there are a number of beliefs within the WCHA that gives rise to hostility towards the WTBA and its membership. While all Counties perform highway maintenance, there is a range of county operations performing improvement work. Some counties rely solely on private sector contractors for improvement work. Other counties do not rely on contractors at all and perform all of their improvement work in-house. Clearly, those counties who view themselves as competitors for WTBA are more inclined to oppose the WTBA's positions. Most counties, however, view the artificial legislative constraints promoted by WTBA as unnecessary interference in local control. Briefly, here are some of the perceived reasons for opposition to WTBA:

- Counties are more "cost-effective" and cost the taxpayer less than the private sector
- WTBA does not understand that many counties have to have a mix of improvement and maintenance work, where improvement work provides stable employment levels for workers needed at prime maintenance times such as during the winter or for emergencies
- Relying on the private sector means loss of local control, especially with budgeting
- WTBA wants to cherry pick, taking "good" work and leaving counties with labor intensive work only
- Counties believe the marketplace is not working to constrain costs, because of monopolistic tendencies of the industry
- Counties resent WTBA's political influence and self-interest
- Counties believe they do high quality work and are more accountable than the private sector

Can and should the WCHA attempt to work with the WTBA, given our mutual antagonism? The Task Force believes that the WTBA is an important stakeholder with considerable political influence. To ignore the WTBA or its influence would leave the WCHA in a very vulnerable position and would more than likely be very unsuccessful from a legislative standpoint.

While it may seem the WTBA has little or no need for the WCHA, it is not true. Counties are a major customer of the WTBA membership. The well being of counties directly affects the bottom line for WTBA members. Counties also play a major role in promoting statewide transportation interests. The recent referendum on the Constitutional Amendment for a Segregated Transportation Fund could not have been done without County leadership. The future of the WTBA rises or falls with Wisconsin's commitment to its transportation system. If the only support for that transportation system is a self-interest group, it will become very difficult to generate public interest for the endeavor. The WTBA needs the WCHA as a customer and a partner in promoting transportation, which gives the WCHA an opportunity to advocate for its interests. The WTBA will, no doubt, continue to aggressively pursue its vision.

The WCHA needs to be able to defend its interests and reach common ground with the WTBA, where possible. Stakeholders that cannot be considered partners must still be engaged.

WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION (WIDOT)

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WIDOT) is the agency that oversees the state transportation system. Counties have a long history of partnership with WIDOT and its predecessor the State Highway Commission. Counties were actually the entities that constructed the original state highway network. Counties have also been the sole source of maintenance service for the state highway system since it was created.

The Task Force assessment of the current WCHA / WIDOT relationship was one of deterioration from historic norms. The Task Force believes there is hope for improvement given the new leadership at WIDOT, but that recent trends have been negative. Overall, the Task Force believes the relationship can be rated as Fair to Poor at present. The following are a list of problems or barriers that need to be addressed for the Counties and WIDOT:

- The relationship depends heavily on WIDOT leadership, good or bad

- Increasingly counties are being treated as just a "contractor", not as a partner. WIDOT shows little interest in the sustainability of the county operations.
- Flat State Trunk Highway Maintenance funding is compromising service levels and forcing counties to subsidize state operations
- WIDOT acts like a "State Highway Department" rather than a "Department of Transportation. It seems like county and local transportation system are not a priority and self-interest is the focus
- WIDOT is not acting like an independent transportation advocate, but seems to be basing policy on political expediency
- WIDOT does not understand what counties do and seems uninterested in what they need to do it
- WIDOT continues to complicate, programs Counties participate in
- There is a disconnect between the regions and central office. Regional staff generally have a better understanding of County operations, but policy is being driven by central office
- A general feeling that WIDOT and the WCHA are no longer communicating

As stated previously, The WCHA is hopeful that changes can be made that will restore some semblance of the historic WIDOT / WCHA partnership. The WCHA needs to begin discussion with WIDOT leadership to explore how our relationship can be improved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Counties have a long tradition of working with other local government units. Wisconsin has long promoted intergovernmental cooperation. Counties provide a broad range of services to other local governments, especially in the area of transportation. Among the local government associations that the WCHA regular partners with are:

- Wisconsin Counties Association (WCA)
- Wisconsin Towns Association (WTA)
- League of Wisconsin Municipalities (LWM)

The Task Force believes that the relationships with all local government association are good, but it should be strengthened. Combined efforts and initiatives should be undertaken. The enrolled budget bill restricted Counties ability to work for municipalities, yet there has been little opposition or concern voiced by LWM over this constraint. It is difficult for the WCHA to make a case against this legislation, if those effected are mute or apparently don't care.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING POLITICAL CLIMATE

Public Perception

- The WCHA counties need to promote its operations to the public, especially emergency response and winter maintenance
- Spotlight cost-effectiveness of County highway department services
- Spotlight intergovernmental cooperation and savings
- Explore current legislation's constraints on intergovernmental cooperation
- Use the media
- Stress a positive image and promote strengths
 - Cost-effectiveness
 - Commitment to public service
 - Emergency responsiveness
 - Intergovernmental cooperation
 - Taxpayer dollars saved
 - Value of services
 - Wise budgeting / wise decisionmaking
 - Improvement projects completed

County Government

The WCHA needs to enlist County Highway Committee Members in supporting its efforts. The County Highway Committee Members are a resource that can raise the priority of transportation issues to their own County Board, the WCA and beyond.

State Legislature

- The WCHA needs to repair damage that may have been done in the 2011 Budget process
- The WCHA needs to work hard to keep a place at the table and gain more recognition by the Legislature
- The WCHA needs to enlist County Board members in lobbying the Legislature to support County positions
- The WCHA needs to educate Legislators on what County Highway Departments do; why we're important; and what our problems are
- The WCHA needs to develop data that would counteract case histories or bad examples promoted by special interest groups
- The WCHA needs to collect data on how County operations "save taxpayer dollars"
- The WCHA needs to collect data on reduced work forces and budgets that have held the line
- Stress positives (see public perception)
- Promote local control
- Promote intergovernmental cooperation as prudent and cost-effective

- Give credit to Legislature for state funded or support county transportation projects

Stakeholders and Partners

WTBA

- The WCHA needs to gather data on private sector contracts let by Counties
- The WCHA needs to collect data on cost-effectiveness of County operations vs. private sector operations
- The WCHA needs to address previous concepts discussed with WTBA and the reasons for WCHA resistance to the recent budget proposal
- The WCHA needs to spotlight common interests and the need to work together
- The WCHA needs to collect data showing monopolistic tendencies within the industry
- Keep the door open for communication and agreement

WIDOT

- The WCHA leadership needs to meet with WIDOT leadership for direct discussion on how to improve relationship
- The WCHA needs to develop a list of recommendations for improving WIDOT programs and delivery of services
- The WCHA needs to ask WIDOT to take responsibility for maintenance services provided by Counties
- The WCHA needs to ask WIDOT to become an advocate for local road interests
- The WCHA needs to educate WIDOT leadership on what we do
- The WCHA needs to ask WIDOT to "decentralize" operational oversight
- The enrolled bill requires WIDOT to work with counties to assess their needs in the area of STH maintenance. The WCHA should make sure this is done.

Local Governments

- The WCHA needs to take advantage of the members they share with other units of government to unite our Associations
- The WCHA and individual counties needs to alert our local government to the services counties can provide and explore intergovernmental cooperation
- The WCHA and individual counties need to communicate better with local governments and rally their support for county positions