

NEW JERSEY ROUTE 495 BRIDGE REHABILITATION PROJECT: COMMUNITY OUTREACH EFFORTS TO MINIMIZE TRAFFIC CONGESTION

By: New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT)

IN THIS CASE STUDY YOU WILL LEARN:

1. How a bridge rehabilitation project led to increased community outreach and advanced traveler information strategies to obtain buy-in from the traveling public.
2. Why dedicated bus lanes were essential in mitigating increased travel times during a major project.
3. Why traffic incident management is a key strategy to reducing congestion during construction.

BACKGROUND

Route 495 is a 3.45-mile-long, divided urban freeway in Hudson County, New Jersey connecting the New Jersey Turnpike to the Lincoln Tunnel. The road was built as an approach to the Lincoln Tunnel and the first section opened to the public back in December 1937 when the first tube of the tunnel was completed. When the Route 495 Bridge was rated as structurally-deficient and functionally obsolete, the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) developed a bridge reconstruction plan to extend the useful service life of the bridge for an estimated 75 years and eliminate the need for potential emergency repairs. The reconstruction plan was estimated to take approximately two and half years.

Route 495 traverses through four New Jersey municipalities: Secaucus, North Bergen Township, Union City and Weehawken Township. Drivers from Jersey City and Hoboken rely on this road to travel in and out of New York City. The impact of the project on an already heavily congested area is expected to be significant since there are no parallel roads and the local streets are narrow and already congested. The only possible alternatives routes for travelers are the Holland Tunnel or the George Washington Bridge, which aren't ideal for commuters since they would have to drive several miles out of the way and significantly increase their regular commute time.

NJDOT developed a public involvement plan to effectively communicate and coordinate with local officials, public agencies, law enforcement and the general public before and while construction is in progress to keep them informed during each phase of this project.

TSMO PLANNING, STRATEGIES AND DEPLOYMENT

NJDOT placed significance on getting the local municipalities, public agencies and businesses involved in the development of transportation management plans, construction communications, traffic management and incident management outreach strategies. In 2010, NJDOT's Community and Public Relations Outreach Team developed a strategy to:

- Work with County and Municipal governments, other government and non-government agencies as well as law enforcement to evaluate proposed mitigation strategies to help reduce congestion in the corridor and the surrounding road network during the bridge rehabilitation.
- Deploy effective strategies to inform and obtain feedback from the public who might be affected by the construction – including commuters, residents and business owners.

COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING AND EXECUTION

Since 2010, more than 100 outreach meetings have been organized in coordination with public agencies such as the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, NJ TRANSIT, the New Jersey Turnpike Authority, New York Waterway and TRANSCOM to address the operation of the exclusive bus lane (XBL) along Route 495 from the New Jersey Turnpike to the Lincoln Tunnel that is considered one of the busiest and most productive bus lanes in the



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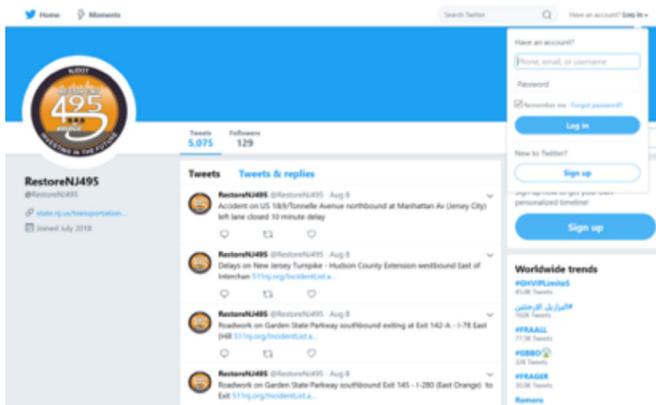
nation. Each day, more than 1,850 buses carry more than 63,000 passengers across Route 495. It is imperative to maintain the full operation of the XBL lane during all stages of construction.

The 495 Incident Management and Operations Task Force was formed in 2017 to coordinate the response to traffic incidents. The Task Force, comprised of various agencies (transportation, fire, EMS, law enforcement, etc., that operate along Route 495), meets regularly to discuss the efficient and coordinated response to incidents during all stages of construction. Specific incidents that occurred at Route 495 in the past were analyzed and after action reviews of the response plans were developed.

The communication between different agencies during incidents was identified as an issue since most of the agencies used different equipment. Based on this analysis, a communications plan was developed to enhance communications among all first responders and identify the protocol that agency dispatch centers should follow when responding to any incident. In order to assist with day-to-day operations, a video wall is available to each agency to monitor traffic. Additionally, an agreement between the NJDOT and local law enforcement agencies was implemented to monitor several major intersections during the construction.

The outreach team organized and developed a dual approach to inform and obtain feedback from the public. The first approach included in-person meetings with local major employers/employment centers, schools and appropriate bus agencies that were held through coordination with the local Transportation Management Associations. The second included disseminating information to all stakeholders via press releases, public information center meetings, community group meetings, radio and television announcements mailings, outdoor advertising (billboards), etc.

NJDOT created a project-specific website – www.RestoreNJ495.com – where the general public can sign up for project alerts. The department has established a project hotline telephone number, 201-408-8495, and email, DOTOutreachRT495@dot.nj.gov, to address questions and concerns. NJDOT is also using social media to communicate with the public and a Twitter account @RestoreNJ495 has been created to post project related news and alerts in real time.



A dedicated web page, www.511nj.org, has also been created to display real-time information about traffic conditions in the Route 495 area.

OUTCOMES, LEARNINGS AND PUBLIC BENEFITS

All stakeholders from local townships and public officials, various agencies as well as affected commuters and residents are well aware of the need for this construction project and the inconvenience it creates for the region. As the construction began, the impact on traffic was not at the level that had been predicted. The travel time increased but not at the rate that was expected. Since September 1, 2018, NJDOT's Daily Traffic Monitoring Reports revealed that some of the travelers adjusted their travel patterns and departure times and utilized public transit as well. The outreach has been effective due to the timeliness of providing information to the motoring public and urging them, whenever possible, to adjust their travel patterns and modes of travel.

NJDOT is also in the process of initiating a discussion with appropriate parties to work together to develop an operations and maintenance plan that will be utilized during adverse weather conditions.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Route 495 Bridge Rehabilitation Project Website: www.RestoreNJ495.com

Route 495 Area Traffic Conditions Website: www.511nj.org