



# PREPARING FOR STREETScape CONSTRUCTION

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As a commercial district professional, you know that the improved appearance and residual enthusiasm of a streetscape enhancement project will create a thriving business environment. On the other hand, once the digging commences, business owners will suddenly be faced with the reality that the project is under way and will probably dread the actual construction process because they are concerned for their bottom lines. There are many things a Main Street program can do to help all stakeholders avoid that sense of panic, and most of it comes down to being prepared.

In this series about streetscaping, Durant, Oklahoma, has been sharing the step-by-step process driving its sidewalk reconstruction. Durant is currently completing Phase III of its downtown streetscape project and has already seen the results of Phases I and II add vibrancy to its thriving downtown. Previous articles have explored securing a funding source, selecting a consultant to design your new infrastructure, and managing the design phase of your project. This installment will focus on the planning phase.

The planning phase can be divided into three aspects: timing, bidding, and preparing both the customers and business owners. These elements of the planning phase can take place between the end of designing the project and the start of construction. Taking advantage of this time can make all the difference in your construction experience.

## TIMING

The timing of a sidewalk construction project is critical. Although this is addressed during the design phase, it should be re-evaluated both



includes an estimated length of construction. Project completion is normally divided into *substantial* completion and *final* completion. Although definitions vary, substantial completion is when the area can be opened to pedestrian traffic again. The time between substantial and final completion is when remaining tasks are addressed, such as adding railings, installing flagpole holders, painting curbs, and finishing other incomplete items.

Depending on where you are located, seasonal inclement weather might be a factor that determines when work can actually begin. Keep in mind that “weather days” can add to the length of a project. Project documents should specify how many days are allocated for different occurrences. For instance, an inch of rain can extend construction by two days. The project manager keeps this calendar up to date.

It is essential to work with the utility companies from the beginning. Notify them of the schedule early so that they have an opportunity to coordinate their work with your project. They may be involved in the actual streetscape construction, or they may take advantage of the fact that the utility corridor will be opened and plan a few projects of their own.

## BIDDING

At the end of the design phase, the consultant will deliver documents that include a set of construction plans, a project manual that depicts a list of items for which bids must be obtained, and an advertisement for bidding that can be provided to interested parties. An engineer’s estimate of cost is also included, but this should be kept confidential to prevent potential contractors from adjusting their bids to meet cost estimates.

Normally, a municipality has policies for bidding on a project. If the project is

federally funded, the funding agency will also have procedures that must be followed. As discussed in previous articles, many streetscape projects use Transportation Enhancements funds, which flow through state departments of transportation (DOT). Guidance is often provided in the form of a manual that outlines specific steps for the bidding process.

After getting DOT approval of plans and bidding documents, a governing body, such as a city council, generally approves the bid advertisement, which is then placed in local, regional, and/or statewide publications. The advertising medium is determined by policies and industry practices. For projects that receive any kind of federal funds, which DOTs refer to as “Federal Aid Projects,” advertising must occur 21 days before bidding starts.

Although your project must be publicly advertised for competitive bidding, you may contact companies to solicit their participation in this process. This will increase your chances of attracting a

sufficient number of bidders, which in turn should increase competitiveness.

The state DOT can provide a list of funded projects and contractors who recently worked on projects similar to yours. Contact with nearby municipalities that have conducted similar construction projects can also be helpful. A reference check is critical in determining if you wish to solicit a company’s participation. When you contact other communities that hired a company to work on their streetscape projects, ask them these types of questions:

- What was your project and what did it entail?
- Was Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance involved?
- Would you hire the company again?
- Did it complete the project in the prescribed time frame?
- How did it work with the businesses?
- What did the company do well?
- What areas of its work would you like to see improved?

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Pedestrian “boardwalks” that help shoppers get around the commercial district as safely as possible can be invaluable in keeping the downtown “open for business” during streetscape construction.

before and after the bidding process. A number of factors, ranging from annual festivals to weather, could affect the scheduling of the project.

Depending upon the mix of businesses in your district, you need to start construction at a time that will have the least impact upon the regular course of business. For example, in a district dominated by retail, planning around the Christmas shopping season is a necessity. You will need to time the construction to end before the start of the holiday shopping season. It is always a good idea to allow for unforeseen occurrences as well. By adding a “cushion” of time to the project, you will have a bit of wiggle room between the projected end of construction and an important event or shopping season – just in case something unexpected happens or something goes wrong.

The design consultant hired for your project should provide a construction schedule that

(right) Be sure to plan ahead by finding alternate parking areas for customers and putting up signs that make these spaces easy to find.

Look for contractors who have worked on streetscape enhancement projects in traditional or historic commercial districts. Companies that have done work similar to your project in communities similar to yours will know what to expect and will be better able to plan for it. They can help you anticipate and deal with common issues. A contractor adept at building roads may not be the best choice to install new sidewalks in your district.

ADA regulations are a key factor in constructing new sidewalks. A lack of experience with ADA compliance can be very costly to everyone involved as the learning curve can lengthen the time of construction and increase probability that sections may have to be torn out and reinstalled because they do not meet ADA standards.

Many contractors subscribe to services that advertise construction projects on a regional level. Some of these services provide construction plans and documents for online bidding so their customers can readily access the information. Your design consultant and state DOT can point you to such services in your area. It is in your community's best interest to notify them of your project. As a general rule, the more competition, the lower the bids.

We were required by our DOT to hold a pre-bid conference. This conference familiarizes potential bidders with the rules and forms that must be completed as well as discusses when the project will start, when paperwork is due, how work will be coordinated, the scheduling of progress meetings, and the circumstances surrounding the project. DOT representatives, potential contractors, the project designer, project manager, representatives from utility companies, local officials, the inspector, and other important individuals involved with the project attend.

The conference is then followed by the bid opening. This type of meeting is helpful not only to ensure that contractors follow the process but also to give you an idea of how many companies plan to bid on your project. It is common for subcontractors to attend these meetings and make connections with prime contractors.

During Phase I of our project, only one contractor attended the initial mandatory pre-bid conference. Theoretically, with only one bidder, construction



## QUESTION FOR THE MAIN STREET LISTSERV:

What have you learned that would be good to share with business and property owners to ease their construction concerns?

prices could be higher than if multiple companies bid. Officials in Durant agreed that the initial bidding process should be terminated and the project rebid. In the interim, potential contractors were identified and encouraged to participate in the process. When bids were ultimately accepted, the prices were competitive and a winning bid was approved.

Occasionally, all bids come in significantly over budget. Deductive or additive alternates can be factored in to bring the project within budget. If alternative bids are not employed and the bids exceed the project budget, the project owner or municipality must determine if it is beneficial to rebid the project. The likelihood of obtaining more reasonable bids must be weighed against the probability that further delays will result in increased construction costs.

The project owner or municipality must identify the lowest responsive bid. When a DOT is involved, bid tabulations must be prepared and concurrence must be sought before the contract is executed.

Finally, all parties involved must agree on a start date, after which a "notice to proceed" with construction activities is issued to the contractor. The next step is to hold a pre-work

conference, which all entities involved in the construction process should attend.

The project owner may have staff qualified to manage and inspect the construction. If not, the services of a professional inspector or construction manager must be secured. A qualifications-based selection process, identical to the process utilized to hire a design consultant, can be used to secure construction management professionals.

## PREPARING CUSTOMERS AND BUSINESSES FOR CONSTRUCTION

No matter what role your Main Street program plays in a streetscape project, communication with business owners is extremely important. Extensive involvement in the process will give you the knowledge to provide informed answers to people's questions. In Durant, the Main Street program was



The Durant Main Street program developed a slogan, "Paving for the Future," designed signs, and planned promotions to keep the public interested in the downtown during construction.

(below) Property owners who are planning improvements and/or maintenance to their buildings should be encouraged to delay the work until construction is complete to prevent work crew conflicts.



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allowed to work with the city and guide the process. This proved to be a valuable arrangement as our goal was to maximize benefit and minimize inconvenience to the businesses. However, if your revitalization organization is not as heavily involved, you can still play a role as an advocate for the businesses.

The Durant Main Street program's goal was to make the construction period as painless as possible for downtown business and property owners. We designed signs and planned activities to keep the public involved and interested in downtown during construction, and we developed promotions for businesses throughout the construction process.

During Phase I, Durant formed a committee to put together promotions, a theme, a slogan, and a logo. Make sure, however, that you don't plan more than the average business owner can keep up with. Based on Durant's experience and that of Barracks Row Main Street in Washington, D.C., as detailed

in the January/February 2007 issue of *Main Street News*, it can be difficult to inspire merchant participation if you plan too many promotions.

Durant received feedback from business owners who felt there were too many promotions. We amended our activities calendar to include only one main prize giveaway throughout construction. We also used a central theme with an accompanying logo throughout construction phases I, II, and III: "Paving for the Future."

T-Shirts, polo shirts, stickers, construction cones, and signs designed with the logo were some of the items offered as marketing opportunities for the businesses.

Signage was placed in the Main Street office, along with a poster-size set of site plans and color sketches. These visual aids were also put on our website and in press releases.

Utilization of rear entrances was a very popular promotion tool during construction. Customers continued to use back entrances afterward because it provided easier access to many of the businesses. We promoted this by telling customers to "Sneak in the Back Door for a Steal of a Deal," complete with a mobster graphic. Many businesses found that their customers responded to this promotion and decided to continue using it after construction.

If your local business owners ask how they should modify their purchasing plans during construction, you may want to advise them not to change a thing. Durant Main Street polled its merchants who decided not to change their ordering habits. Thriving businesses felt that the shelves needed to look fully stocked to prevent a "going out of business" look.

These same merchants did whatever was necessary to keep customers satisfied. This included helping shoppers navigate through the construction zone and carrying merchandise to the customers' cars as well as opening up rear entrances, which allowed customers to use off-street parking. They also enthusiastically presented Main Street's promotions to customers. As a result, these store owners felt their sales were unaffected by construction. Their customers purchased what they needed no matter what the circumstances. Not all businesses will experience the same results, but the aforementioned ideas should be helpful.

Durant Main Street provided business and property owners with a "survival" tool kit that served as a comprehensive source of information. The kit included a disclaimer, which noted that the details of the construction process could change. We disseminated the best information available and gave updates as quickly as possible when the situation changed. Any facts and hope you can give business owners can get your project started on the right foot.

If you can prepare your merchants by showing them what the construction will look like and telling them what is likely to occur, they should deal with the process more positively. We found that photographs of typical construction zones in downtowns helped our business and property owners get a sense of what our district would look like once the digging began. Pictures that show how orange cones will be placed everywhere and where pedestrian "boardwalks" will be set up so people can still get around as safely as possible can help prevent any misconceptions.

A prototype "newsletter" with regular updates was included in the initial toolkit. It gave recipients a first glimpse of the construction newsletter. During busy times, information distributed to businesses can be overlooked. Printing every newsletter on the same color paper helped make the important information noticeable.

The toolkit included:

- A site plan of the construction area;
- A color sketch/drawing of an aspect of the project;
- Ordering information for marketing materials;
- Information on promotion(s);
- Details on who to contact for issues/information;
- Basic construction information;
- Proposed sequencing of construction; and
- A goody bag.

This information can also be given to property and business owners at a public meeting. Questions should be encouraged. When leading this meeting, don't make promises you can't keep.

Anyone planning construction and/or maintenance to their building should be encouraged to delay work until construction is complete to prevent work crews from running into each other. Building maintenance can be scheduled before or after the streetscape construction is complete.

Getting the word out to customers that the district is still in business during construction is essential. It can give them confidence that you will go the extra mile to make their shopping experience convenient. Of course, property and business owners depend on their customers and will be anxious to see how you plan to keep them coming to the district.

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Keeping customers informed can start with a groundbreaking ceremony, which can be used as a media tool to increase public awareness and enthusiasm. When the project is completed, a celebration should be in order.

Use all sources of media to let the public know what to expect. Durant utilized newspapers, radio, regional television stations, the local high school television station, the Main Street website, direct mail (using a combined customer list from businesses), and notes on city utility bills to inform people about the upcoming construction. For more tech-savvy individuals, a blog and YouTube are also useful tools.

Parking can be a headache during construction. Use signs to direct customers to additional parking locations. Educating the public on alternative parking areas and using back-door entrances can ease this burden.

## CONSTRUCTION IS IMMINENT

Once all of these issues have been addressed, you're ready to begin construction. Photographs and other information should have business and property owners as prepared as possible. Enduring the inconveniences of the next few months will surely present wonderful opportunities for growth in the future.

Construction activities present challenges for business owners, and you should be prepared to deal with criticism. The light at the end of the tunnel is that the streetscape enhancements will encourage redevelopment and revitalization of your district.

Adequate planning can go a long way toward making streetscape construction run more smoothly. From bidding to final inspection, various issues come into play. Even though the process isn't painless, much can be done to alleviate many burdens.

*Donna Dow, the program manager of Durant Main Street, has been with the organization since it began in 1997. She received the Oklahoma Main Street Manager of the Year award in 2001 and became a Certified Main Street Manager in February 2002.*

*During her tenure, the downtown has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and the Main Street district was selected as one of the top three in Oklahoma in a statewide poll in 2006.*

*Donna coordinated her first streetscape project for downtown Durant from July 2001 to December 2004. Phase I was three blocks along Main Street (a state highway). Phase II, which was completed in December 2006, encompassed service entrances and putting electrical lines underground. Phases I and II cost \$1.5 million. Phase III should be completed in the summer of 2008.*



From left to right: Robert Shears, the streetscape project designer; Brian Nusbaum of the Oklahoma DOT; and Jerry Yandell, Durant's public works director, conduct a preliminary walk-through of the downtown.

# Shop Talk



This month, we offer the fourth in our series of columns by Margie Johnson, president of Shop Talk, a retail consulting firm that specializes in showing organizations how to become

leaders in their marketplaces and industries through customer-centered training. Over the past 15 years, Margie has worked in many Main Street towns throughout the nation. She is passionate about helping small business owners become more successful.

## Listen for Success

BY MARGIE JOHNSON

In this fast-paced retail world, good communication is essential to foster a healthy and happy environment. A team with high morale begins with a leader or manager who has mastered the art of listening to co-workers and customers.

Communication is the cornerstone of business. A manager must have good listening skills. Too often as we conduct interviews with associates, we hear their chronic cries: "I told my manager but

he never listens" ... "I know she heard me but she didn't understand" ... "I felt he/she was only half-listening and just trying to pacify me. I know what I said won't make a difference."

*Question?* How would your staff or your customers score you as a listener? One of the greatest motivational acts that we can exhibit is to actively listen to someone. Active listening involves your undivided attention.