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ONcall

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Don't forget to share your facilities updates

The students and teachers have gone away for the summer, but the schools are not quiet. The sounds of summer work fill the buildings and the grounds. Summer facilities work is the reason our school buildings last for decades and change to meet the new demands of modern education. Some of the work is routine maintenance and some is exciting new construction, but all of it is important to tell your community about.

Bond construction

When you pass a bond measure, you don't start building right away. It takes time to plan the work and make the site ready. In the case of new construction, the weather and the plans often converge to make summer the time to cut ribbons and turn dirt. And in the case of renovations, the absence of kids is an opportunity to dig in and get the work done.

The voters need to know right away when work has begun. And they need to know the major milestones as construction progresses. Some people are tuned in during the summer, so immediate updates are necessary. But other people will be in a better frame of mind in the fall to learn about all the summer building activity.

Perhaps the best thing about new construction is that there is always something to show, not just tell. Photo and video opportunities abound every day on a construction site — it is always visually interesting when you build something. Movement makes for good video. Colors, shapes and faces make great photos. And it is not always major milestones that make the most interesting posts and updates. Showing video of the trucks of drywall arriving, with a narration, can be just as exciting as showing the finished product.

Each new job site should have its own presence on the web, where photos and text are consistently and regularly updated throughout the summer. Consider using social media and the web to get the word out. Twitter is great for showing a few photos or a short video with a link to more information on the website.

Web cams are low-cost and can provide interesting footage. Time lapse photography and drones can make for very interesting video of work in progress. Check with your contractor before recording any video or setting up any web cams. Everyone on the site needs to be in the loop if you are taping. Nobody wants to be surprised that cameras were rolling if an accident or safety violation is caught on tape.

Not everyone wants their information digitally. Consider an end-of-summer newsletter or report to go out in the mail to district patrons.

In the case of renovation, it is always helpful to let the public know how the people in that school are adapting to the work that needs to be done. Did the school office move to an

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For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

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alternate location for the summer? Is the schedule affected in the fall? Will the entire project be finished by the first day of school or will the school need to live with some construction activity still taking place? All of these considerations put a human face on the bond work and help remind voters why they supported the measure in the first place.

Routine and deferred maintenance

While perhaps not as exciting as new construction or renovation, routine or deferred maintenance jobs can be just as important for schools. Landscaping, roof and parking lot replacements, gym floors and plumbing upgrades are the reason school buildings last through the ages, protecting the investment your community has made over generations. These projects do not need to be part of a bond measure to be important. Regular spending on maintenance is often reduced in tough times and the public needs to know why it matters.

The problem with maintenance is that it is not generally as photogenic as new construction. This is where the communications team has to be a little creative in developing the visual potential of what might normally be considered rather mundane operations. Photos of a new roof will not be appealing, unless they are shown right next to close-ups of the old roofing coming apart. New pavement is just new pavement, unless it is shown next to photos of the old crumbling parking lot and hazardous sidewalks. The old pipes may have looked fine, so show the brown water coming out of the drinking fountain next to the shiny new ones.

In many cases, the best photos and video of routine maintenance are those that show people working. The taxpayers enjoy seeing that not only are the buildings being taken care of, people are being put to work doing jobs that will benefit generations of students to come.

Timing is everything

The time to take photos and interview project managers is when the work is going on. And many updates should be in real time as well. There are plenty of people tuning in during those sweltering summer days.

Summer is not the best time to reach everyone with updates. Many people take summer vacations or otherwise break up their normal routines in the summer. And some community groups skip a few meetings in the summer due to spotty attendance.

So use the summer months to get ready for fall, when people are back into their normal routine and the community groups are back on their normal meeting schedule. When those things happen in the fall, you should have a summer's worth of photo, video and project reports to share.

Take the updates on the road

A highly effective communications technique is to go where people are already meeting to share your summer work updates. Service clubs and business leaders are usually eager to have someone from the district come to their meetings to provide brief presentations. Check with each group to get on their calendar and find out how much time you will have to present. If they leave it to you, generally 10 minutes of slides or speaking with five minutes for questions is a good starting point.

Since you are already going to gather all of your visuals and updates for various groups, don't forget your own school board. Give a presentation to your board in August or September. This presentation can be rather extensive for the board, but tell them that you would like to be invited to give a shorter presentation to any community groups they have connections with.

Facilities matter to your community

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Whether you recently passed a bond measure or not, there is bound to be an abundance of facilities work going on in your district this summer. Your community needs to know what is happening and why it is important. By sharing updates about work and the benefits to students, you will help your community feel more connected and more supportive of your stewardship of the investment they have in your buildings and grounds.

Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant