Legislative Communications Plan

Situation Analysis
Current communications between the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG) staff and legislators representing the North Texas region lacks consistency and regularity. Communication efforts are typically more frequent during the legislative session, but are less frequent during the interim.

Communication between NCTCOG staff and state legislator offices currently consists of emailing monthly publications and making phone calls on an as needed basis. Two publications, the North Texas Transportation Connection and Mobility Matters, are sent to keep legislators and their staff informed of RTC actions and transportation planning projects in the Dallas-Fort Worth region. Progress North Texas, the annual state-of-the-region publication, was also recently mailed to all legislative offices.

In early 2011, as the 82nd legislative session began, the RTC legislative program with fact sheets was sent to legislators’ offices. These fact sheets outlined the legislative program with the problem and legislative solution. During session, phone calls and emails were exchanged with legislators’ staff members, usually dealing with specific legislation. NCTCOG staff also helped draft legislation that was carried by members of our legislative delegation and provided testimony as a resource witness during committee hearings.

In the past, office visits by NCTCOG staff have also occurred when a significant regional transportation issue arose, such as the Rail North Texas Initiative. RTC members have also made office visits and placed phone calls to legislators to discuss vital regional transportation items with legislators. However, there is a need for more consistent and coordinated communications among NCTCOG staff, legislators, partner agencies and RTC members that will aid efforts to help meet transportation and air quality needs for the entire Dallas-Fort Worth region.

Audience
- North Central Texas legislative delegation (49 members)
- Staff of the North Central Texas legislative delegation
- Partner agencies, legislative affairs staff

Key Messages
- Explain what the RTC, NCTCOG is - Regional transportation planning in North Central Texas is conducted by the federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), comprised of the North Central Texas Council of Governments Transportation Department, NCTCOG Executive Board, Regional Transportation Council and several technical committees.
- Explain what the RTC, NCTCOG does - NCTCOG assists local governments in planning for common needs, cooperating for mutual benefit and coordinating for sound regional development.
- How partnerships can help the region - The RTC and NCTCOG Transportation Department work with elected officials, state and local governments, transportation partners and the region’s citizens to plan coordinated transportation systems, projects and policies to meet transportation and air quality needs for the Dallas-Fort Worth area.
Objectives

- Increase communications and build better relationships with legislators and their staff resulting in a partnership for a mutual benefit
- Educate legislators and their staff about what the RTC and NCTCOG is and what they do by establishing regular points of contact before the next legislative session begins
- Coordinate with partner agencies – RTC + DART, DCTA, NTTA, The T, TxDOT – to plan for common needs and sound regional development

Tactics

Increase communications and build better relationships with legislators and their staff resulting in a partnership for a mutual benefit

- Place additional phone calls to legislators’ offices to build better rapport with staff
  - NCTCOG staff will update contact information more frequently and provide the information to the RTC
    - Update NCTCOG legislative contact database for better accessibility
  - Visit a returning member’s district office and send correspondence more often
    - Visit offices to build rapport, visit key offices, also visit new members
    - Be proactive with visits, do not wait until the legislative session begins
    - Send correspondence to offices more often
      - Hand write address on envelopes to help get noticed
      - Send hand-written notes for an old-fashioned feel
  - Invite area legislators to monthly RTC meetings with lunch provided
    - Email monthly RTC meeting agenda to offices and encourage legislators to attend to improve communication with RTC members
      - Provide lunch to encourage early arrival and interaction
      - Staff to follow up with offices to ensure a good turn out

Educate legislators and their staff about what the RTC/NCTCOG is and does and establish regular points of contact before the next legislative session begins

- Conduct a “new-member orientation” consisting of special communications including letters, notes, publications and visits aimed at educating legislators
  - Send new-member correspondence and hand-written notes
    - Send welcome letters with recent publications and information about projects (NCTCOG project fact sheets) or funding initiative information
    - Include information about regional transportation efforts, history of transportation with major initiatives, funding revenue options
  - After new-member correspondence is received, make office visits to meet staff
    - Discuss the current funding initiative, regional projects, why it is important and how legislators can get involved, seek input on whether the legislator would support or oppose the various initiatives or revenue options
- NCTCOG staff will provide the RTC legislative agenda, fact sheets and additional publications to legislative offices
  - When a new fact sheet for a project is created, email to legislator offices
  - Monthly and quarterly publications (Local Motion, It’s Your Region) are created but not sent to legislative offices, these publications can be emailed to legislative staff
• Inform legislators and their staff of the services NCTCOG can provide
  o Continue to draft bills based on RTC legislative agenda
  o Continue to provide testimony as a resource witness during committee hearings
  o Begin to send legislative analyses of bills from an MPO perspective

Coordinate with partner agencies – RTC + DART, DCTA, NTTA, The T, TxDOT – to plan for common needs and sound regional development

• Contact partner agencies to identify issues and legislative positions
  o Before session begins, exchange RTC legislative agenda and fact sheets with partner agencies and gather their legislative agendas in return

• Provide RTC members with legislator/legislative information
  o Create a list of RTC members and their corresponding area legislators
  o Create maps/lists of all districts for RTC members and partner agencies
  o Identify key legislators for RTC members, create multiple contact lists with tiers and encourage meetings
    ▪ Key legislators – chairs, vice chairs on specific committees
    ▪ First-tier legislators – North Central Texas legislators who have supported transportation/air quality legislation in the past
    ▪ Second-tier legislators – remaining North Central Texas legislators

• Plan county-by-county meetings
  o Invite RTC members, partner agencies, legislators and their staff to meetings before the legislative session begins to discuss upcoming legislative issues
    ▪ Meetings can be held in RTC member’s district
    ▪ Involve public

Budget
• Additional phone calls – Minimal cost, aim to make additional calls to district offices
• Mailing additional publications/correspondence
• Semi-annual lunch, twice as much as regular RTC lunches
• RTC Note Cards

Evaluation/Measurement
In an effort to build better relationships with the North Texas legislative delegation, RTC members and NCTCOG staff must increase communications with legislators. This can be accomplished by making additional phone calls to create rapport, visiting legislators’ district offices and inviting legislators to RTC meetings.

Another goal is to educate legislators and their staff about what the RTC and NCTCOG is and does. This will be accomplished through new-member orientations and more frequent communication efforts including welcome letters, hand-written notes and office visits. The RTC legislative agenda with fact sheets, project fact sheets and additional publications will also be sent to legislators.

The last goal is to coordinate with partner agencies, DART, DCTA, NTTA, The T, TxDOT and RTC members, for sound regional development. This can be done by contacting partner agencies to identify issues and positions, providing RTC members and agencies with legislative/legislator information and hosting additional meetings.
The key message in these communication efforts is the emphasis on partnerships and cooperation between NCTCOG, RTC, legislators and partner agencies in order to meet transportation needs for the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Over time, the objectives of this communications plan can be measured through legislative scorecards. Comparing carried and passed legislation to previous legislative sessions will show if the additional communication strategies are working. An increase of regional transportation legislation carried or passed during the session can reflect success.

Additional communication efforts can be completed at zero to minimal cost. Emailing supplemental publications and more frequent phone calls to legislator’s district offices can be completed at no additional cost. During the legislative session, phone calls will be placed to Austin but the cost would not greatly exceed current costs of phone calls to the Capitol.

Mailing hand-written notes and other correspondence can be completed at low costs. Providing annual lunches can also be completed at low costs. RTC lunches cost about $300 for 50 people or approximately $6 per person. Better lunches should be provided if legislators attend. An estimate of a nicer lunch may double the cost. The need for more consistent communications between the RTC, NCTCOG staff and legislators, along with the overall benefits, clearly outweigh the minimal cost of additional efforts.