The Congress of Neighboring Communities [CONNECT] brings together the City of Pittsburgh and the 38 surrounding municipalities to identify common public policy challenges and advocate for collective change on behalf of the urban core. We measure our success by our ability to advocate for public policy change; engage municipalities and develop and maintain effective partnerships with stakeholders to implement policy goals.


Executive Summary

The sheer number of governments in the Pittsburgh metropolitan region (130 municipalities in Allegheny County alone) poses many unique challenges. Regional solutions require creative and innovative cross boundary and cross organizational planning. With 130 municipalities, dozens of utility companies, and numerous authorities all operating in Allegheny County — and a network of aging infrastructure in constant need of repair — avoiding costly duplication and inefficient investment in construction and reconstruction is a daunting task. The importance of “getting it right” is highlighted by the observation that over $3 billion in infrastructure investments is currently planned between the governments and utilities over the next several years.

How can this multitude of governments and public utilities better coordinate construction and digging in Right of Way grounds? What steps have been taken, and what recommendations are given to aid in this area of critical collaboration? This policy brief seeks to answer these questions through the narrative of the efforts of Pittsburgh’s urban core led by the Congress of Neighboring Communities [CONNECT] to establish a mechanism that allows for coordinated planning and investment.

Nearly 20 major utility companies (including gas, electric, water and sewer, telephone, and cable) serve 39 municipalities and 690,000 people within Pittsburgh’s urban core. Coordination across boundaries between all of these key players has historically been inefficient and wrought with conflict.

In response to this pressing need, CONNECT served as host of two Utilities Summits convened in the spring and fall of 2015. The focus of those summits was to identify ways to reduce duplication of road repair and to lessen the hardship not only to local governments and utility companies, but also to residents and business. The convening of relevant players in this regional issue set the stage for planning processes and relationship-building with discussion that set the groundwork for future collaboration and coordination.
strapped municipalities, external funding should be sought so that barriers to participating can be eliminated.

Recommendation #2: 
Particularly as it relates to financially

The infrastructure under the Right of Way pavement is in need of constant upgrade and restoration — coming with an estimated price tag of over $1.5 billion in spending in Allegheny County by the utility companies in the next three years alone. Coordination across those institutions is as complicated as it is critical to assuring that the overall system serves its intended purposes.

A municipality spends a significant portion of their budget repairing, resurfacing, and rebuilding streets and curbs. Once a street, curb, or sidewalk is constructed, the only way to repair or replace the utility company hardware found under the roadway is by removing resurfacing work. To plan their budgets and repaving priorities, each municipality develops a list of roads that need to be resurfaced within a given time period. At the same time, utilities also develop a list of pipes, lines or other hardware that need to be replaced in each municipality. These efforts are typically done in silos, and are not coordinated, often resulting in duplication of effort — with roads being paved and then torn up a short time later by a utility company that needs to reach the infrastructure underneath. This duplication causes high, unnecessary costs and frustration for both parties.

Other issues and concerns that arise due to a lack of communication and planning prior to street work include:
- Incomplete or unsatisfactory restoration work;
- Unclear lines of responsibility to deal with problems;
- Loss of or damage to irreplaceable or expensive amenities (i.e. old growth trees);
- Lack of uniform street excavation permitting and common fees for permitting and inspections; and,
- Unmet street restoration standards.

Not only are these costs accrued due to non-communication, but there are savings not fully realized. If common projects are found in the same area of pavement, then utility companies and local governments are able to capitalize on opportunities of cost-sharing.

Background and Analysis

The Current Coordination Landscape

The municipalities of CONNECT and local utilities face a grueling challenge of developing a plan for the effective and efficient construction, maintenance, and operation of the infrastructure [streets and utility lines] that serve the 650,000 people who live in the region’s urban core. This important responsibility is shared between a multitude of local governments, public authorities, and private companies. Importantly, most of the utility infrastructure lies underneath streets that are owned by state and local governments, creating what is known as Right of Way areas that utility companies must acquire a permit to dig into and access for project work.

CONNECT Utilities Summit, March 2015

In early 2015, CONNECT member municipalities raised this pressing issue as a common policy concern that needed to be addressed. In an effort to begin this conversation about reducing duplication of road repair and lessening the hardship to residents and businesses, CONNECT held a Utility Summit in March of 2015 that brought together nearly 140 attendees, including representatives from municipalities and utility executives, with the goal of developing a collaborative partnership between the utility companies, authorities, and municipalities wherein road projects could be coordinated prior to commencement. With resounding agreement, it was echoed throughout the Summit that the establishment of formal, consistent communication and coordination of activities between municipalities and utilities would foster partnerships that could result in massive savings to communities and tax payers, utility customers, and businesses.

CONNECT Utilities Summit, November 2015

The following November, CONNECT hosted a Second Utilities Summit as a continuation of the conversation that began at the first Summit in March. The November Summit was facilitated in an effort to continue to foster relationships, address concerns and issues, and create a process for future collaboration. The Summit aimed to refine the region’s vision of what successful planning and collaboration looks like when materialized in Pittsburgh’s urban core — all while validating the need for continued coordination amongst key players.

Though many boroughs and utility companies shared success stories of increased meetings, opportunities in partnering on construction projects, and realized cost savings through cross-boundary collaboration, the Second Summit affirmed the need for a common data platform as an essential next step in how all parties can effectively communicate. In the same vein, the need to explore emergency permitting and fee coordination was largely discussed during the two panels and subsequent regional breakout groups.

“...the establishment of formal, consistent communication and coordination of activities between municipalities and utilities would foster partnerships that could result in massive savings to communities and tax payers, utility customers, and businesses.”
Recommendations for Next Steps

The two utilities summits identified the following as goals that should be the focus of ongoing efforts:

• Procurce and utilize a common data platform of all planned infrastructure investments;
• Provide financial assistance for financially strapped municipalities;
• Coordinate capital priorities and plans across local governments, authorities and private utilities; and,
• Coordinate common permitting and develop common restoration standards.

The following recommendations and strategies are designed to address and meet those goals.

Recommendation #1

Local governments, public authorities, and utility companies should procure and maintain a common data platform that houses each participant’s capital investments scheduled over the short and medium term. This platform, at a minimum, should track and compare construction plans, identify scheduling conflicts, and facilitate cost-saving/cost-sharing opportunities.

This recommendation comes as the greatest need voiced by all players of road repair and construction. Using a single platform for systematic sharing of infrastructure plans would provide the means by which conflicts and opportunities could be readily identified. Currently, software packages exist that provide cloud-based tracking of data in order to manage public Right of Way projects for more efficient scheduling and facilitation of communication.

Strategy 1.

Acting as a facilitator and convener, CONNECT should work with local governments, authorities and private companies to identify, compare, evaluate, and recommend to all stakeholders an appropriate common data platform(s) that could be adopted and procured by those governments, authorities, and companies.

Strategy 2.

Acting as a facilitator and convener, CONNECT should work with local training organizations such as the Local Government Academy (LGA) to provide training in the selected data platform software and in capital budgeting development to smaller local governments.

Recommendation #2

Particularly as it relates to financially strapped municipalities, external funding should be sought so that barriers to participating can be eliminated.

Several CONNECT municipalities already use some type of common data platform, but it is often too expensive for smaller communities and utility companies to fit into their budgets. This unequal access has caused conflict, since some municipalities can see, and plan around, the projects of some major utility companies while others cannot. Financial assistance in the form of temporarily subsidizing the cost of data platform membership fee and training would contribute immensely to streamlined coordination and cost savings.

Strategy 1.

Funding for a multi-year program should be procured that would support software investment costs, aid municipalities in incorporating the software in their operations, and support improvements in capital planning/budgeting practices in local governments.

Recommendation #3

Local governments, authorities, and utility companies should convene to assess current coordination efforts and how those efforts can be improved.

Data sharing on an online platform is not the only form of necessary communication; the coordination of in-person, consistent meetings are essential to communicating priority areas of capital development, and addressing schedules and plans in the short term.

Strategy 1.

CONNECT and interested Councils of Governments (CoGs), or CoG-like organizations, should work together to convene regular face-to-face meetings of local governments, authorities, and private companies.

Strategy 2.

These intergovernmental cooperation organizations should serve as conveners of quarterly meetings for their members in order to analyze data where all parties can discuss/resolve potential conflicts; identify cost saving/sharing opportunities; and consider expansion of the common software platform to interested local governments not currently utilizing the software.

Recommendation #4

Local governments, authorities, and utility companies should work together to coordinate common permitting (including emergency permitting and fees), in addition to developing common restoration standards.

Common Data Platform

CONNECT should convene semiannual summits to bring local governments, authorities, and companies together to assess progress and identify new initiatives that could be undertaken to enhance coordination.

Conclusion

Although the efforts of coordinating activities must be conducted at the governmental and utility level, the benefits of successful collaboration will be felt by many. Cost savings to tax and rate payers, and business development with better roads and sidewalks, will be just a few significant outcomes realized by ongoing dialogue and strong working relationships between local governments and public utilities.

The interconnectedness of Pittsburgh’s urban care, despite its many governments, emphasizes the need for governmental cooperation and coordinated activities across municipalities. Utility coordination is an opportunity for the region to demonstrate its ability to coordinate cross-boundary for the benefit of its governments and residents. With CONNECT’s mission to increase capacity of local governments and public utilities, each municipality is positioned to thrive as they pursue efficiency in coordination of the management of public infrastructure.
About the Center for Metropolitan Studies

A research center that is part of the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, the Center for Metropolitan Studies facilitates activities that connect the University of Pittsburgh and our students to the resolution of important public policy issues confronting our region, our state, and our country. The Center houses a variety of initiatives that address a wide range of public concerns including the Congress of Neighboring Communities (CONNECT), the Metropolitan Power Diffusion Index, the Interactive Bibliography on Metropolitan Regionalism, the National Database on Innovations in Regional Governance, model practices in Pennsylvania local and regional government, and research on multi-jurisdictional issues.

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