

# How to save 25% on a wayfinding program

Does your council want to spiff up your city's image with fancy signage? Not involving public works from the beginning will increase costs.

**O**ver the last 10 years, hundreds of cities and counties have launched wayfinding programs to enhance tourism and community development. Once reserved for expansive urban landscapes, communities of all sizes are investing in sophisticated signage to create a positive experience for visitors and residents.

A wayfinding program consists of gateway features, entrance signage, vehicular and pedestrian signage, public art, and exterior furniture. Since these are all very visual things, how they'll look often dominates discussions. Committee members show up with pictures of signs, eager to discuss logo standards and other graphic elements and find out how long it will take to get concepts.

There's much more to a successful program than how the signs look, however. Communities spend 7% to 10% of the project's total cost every year to maintain these assets, yet almost none address what happens after installation.

Without proper planning, maintenance, and repair will become a burden on the city's budget. That's why public works must be involved from inception through completion as a member of the project's steering committee.

## Planning protects your city's investment

Relatively speaking, conceptualization takes very little time. Design development and planning strategy lasts up to a year, but the assets will be in service roughly 10 times longer. Therefore, adequately budgeting for maintenance and replacement, activities that are assigned to public works 80% of the time, is crucial for full return on investment.

Design consultants require specific insights to ensure the program meets the client's initial and long-term expectations. We have found that the best way to become educated is to learn from those who work and live there, including public works employees.

The amount of information a consultant will request can be vast. Don't let that discourage public works from getting involved, though. The steering committee's work is intermittent and usually revolves around project milestones.

After the kick-off meeting, the designer typically spends six to eight weeks conducting field research and developing "challenge statements," or environmental, financial, and/or participatory issues that could negatively impact the finished project. A common challenge statement, also



**Public works saved Nacogdoches, Texas, \$20,000 on the city's \$215,000 wayfinding project by installing all 77 signs. The project was paid for by hotel occupancy tax revenue allocated to the convention and visitor's bureau.** Photo: National Sign Plazas

## FRIENDLY TOWN MAKES IT WORK

While often not considered during development, the public works department provides critical insight into all aspects of wayfinding design and planning strategy. From materials analysis to real world limitations to installation and maintenance, public works is perhaps the most versatile member of a program's steering committee.

The City of Nacogdoches, Texas, perfectly illustrates the value of department involvement.

The Convention & Visitors Bureau uses the city's 1779 founding to market Nacogdoches as "the oldest town in Texas." The community of 33,000 has been nominated one of the Friendliest Towns in America; its downtown district Best Historic Venue.

About 35,000 people visit every year for a film festival and half marathon, shop for antiques, tour landmarks, and visit Stephen F. Austin State University. The 27-square-mile city has just two entry points, which created confusion as well as congestion. The city needed to drive tourists downtown and keep students and commuters on exterior roadways.

In 2012, the Austin office of Denver-based National Sign Plazas Inc. (NSP) designed and planned a multilevel program for the community. Founded in 1997, the company provides a design/build process for implementing wayfinding systems nationwide.

Multilevel means vehicular and pedestrian. Each time you transition someone from one type of transportation to another, another "level" is added to the planning process.

### Serving residents and visitors

NSP's challenge was to provide information for two user groups, visitors and residents, without redundant sign placement. An additional challenge: The historic downtown was developed as a staging point for tourist information, but the streets provide limited space for new sign placement.

The finished system comprises 77 locations and four sign types: large and small vehicular directionals, pedestrian directionals, and pedestrian kiosks. In addition to planning and design, NSP ensured components were designed and fabricated with materials and options familiar to public works. This decision was made during the company's first conversation with the project steering committee, which included Public Works Department Manager Cary Walker.

The department's 16 streets employees saved \$20,000 on the \$215,000 project by installing the entire system. At 7% to 10% of total project cost, the city will spend \$15,000 to \$22,000 a year on maintenance, which is expected to come from general funds rather than the department's budget.

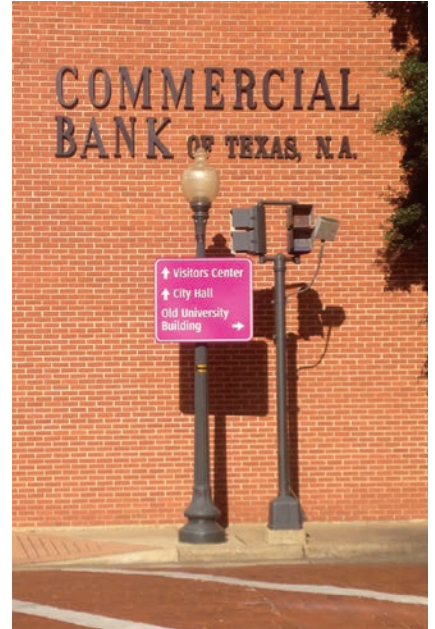
sometimes called a problem statement, might address how a limited right-of-way will require specific design criteria to meet the required setbacks. Many committees appoint a single member to answer consultant questions during this stage to avoid bringing the entire committee together.

Assembling the right group of stakeholders from the start ensures a program flourishes. These are the basic skills that must be on a steering committee.

**Project Champion.** The person whose

passion moved the wayfinding concept to formal project status and who understands the overlapping areas of interest the project will affect. It's usually the city manager or head of the planning or community development department.

**City Planner.** Important because their job is to envision the city's future landscape. Their tendency to focus on route continuity and planning strategy rather than feature design also helps ensure any proposal meets real-world regulations. Finally, their knowledge of the



**Nacogdoches was the site of battles between settlers and Mexicans who felt Texas belonged to Mexico. So why choose pink signs? It's the predominant color of azaleas, one of the flowering shrubs that earned the city Garden Capital of Texas status in 2013.**  
Photo: National Sign Plazas

city's existing plans prevents the designer from overlooking the potential impact of ongoing projects.

**Community Development.** Wayfinding programs can be used to manage housing development and attract new business. This department can help plan for future phases by shedding light on how the wayfinding strategy can reach in to proposed development(s). Usually one of the committee's most creative resources.

**Convention & Visitors Bureau.** Key to ensuring the program appeals to an important audience. Provides much-needed insight on how the system can build upon existing marketing efforts.

**Residents.** Often overlooked because most programs focus on attracting new visitors or managing those who are already visiting. But residents own businesses in your city. They drive/walk/ride through your city every day. Their input produces a program that's embraced by the entire community. They are also the people who will be most affected by the change in the civic environment.

## Public works can trim costs on all project aspects, from materials analysis to real-world limitations to fabrication and installation to maintenance.

### Where public works saves money

Design is a crucial part of every way-finding project, but focusing on things like logo, color, and other visual features prevents committees from considering factors that negatively impact long-term financial and physical viability.

Things like minimally available right-of-way, state roads, and alternative traffic patterns will require the consultant to develop a design that fits the regulations and limitations of the city's natural environment. A public works presence maintains focus on the real world application of any proposed design and ensures the committee doesn't lose sight of the overall goal: a functional system.

Public works also understands what upkeep, an ongoing expense that should be budgeted for annually, will entail. Even if the money for maintenance isn't run through the department's budget, public works employees will be responsible for what happens after installation.

Those same employees will provide excellent insight into how well the system is working. They drive city streets every day and see firsthand impact on traffic flow.

### Two ways to save on upfront costs

Many public works departments have the tools and machinery necessary to fabricate signs. If yours is one, your city won't have to outsource this expense.

Department participation ensures proposed designs incorporate materials city employees are familiar with and are fab-

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ricated in a way that allows for in-house repairs and maintenance.

Having public works handle installation, in part or as a whole, can save an additional 15% to 18%.

Even if your city chooses a design that's out of the scope for in-house production, installation requirements generally follow the same regulations as every other traffic control device. Any feature designed to be placed in the right-of-way must conform to crash-testing and

breakaway standards. Getting state DOT approval for a new foundation design is a long and expensive process, so virtually every sign a designer suggests will use existing foundation models.

Public works feedback during development ensures that any proposed design uses the foundations and break-away systems the department prefers. Let's say employees are familiar with a triangular base system, but have never worked with a base-plate friction system. If so, don't let your designer propose a system that uses anything other than the triangular base.

### Budget stretching via project phasing

Another common hurdle committees must overcome is scheduling project delivery to accommodate budget limitations. Quite often, the available funds don't meet the total funding requirements and projects must be built step by step.

Project phasing, deciding what elements will be built and when, is tricky. The consultant must find a way to deliver the entire program without inhibiting the effectiveness of individual phases. Does it make sense to ask public works about these decisions retroactively, or is it better for them to learn about the proposed structure during the developmental process? In our experience, the latter is the best practice.

If your city is considering or developing a program, make sure a member of the public works department is present throughout the entire process. **PW**