

Case Study: Metropolitan Transit Authority–Houston, TX

Access and Information Crucial for Success of Transit Expansion

With a \$2 billion dollar price tag, the METRO Solutions expansion plan was the most ambitious in Houston transit history. As such, they needed a quick and efficient way to communicate with key stakeholders throughout the project’s existence. METRO chose PIER to meet their immediate and changing needs.



Overview

Customer Profile

METRO has been improving transportation in Harris County, TX since 1979, and has a goal of taking mobility to an even higher level of efficiency by 2014.

Business Situation

Throughout the major expansion of the new lines, METRO knew they would need a quick and efficient way to communicate information to key stakeholders.

Solution

METRO chose the PIER Control Center as a complete solution that met their communication needs.

Key Benefits

- Immediate access to project information for Houston residents
- Fast issue identification
- Accurate stakeholder tracking
- Accessibility to all stakeholder information for public affairs staff
- Ability to create and post information in a timely manner
- Targeted and timely newsletter distribution

Customer Profile

The Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, or METRO, has been in operation since 1979, when the first bus lines were approved by the city. Over the last 27 years, METRO has been striving to improve transportation and mobility for the communities within Harris County, including the city of Houston.

As a result of their commitment to improving transportation, METRO has planned and received approval for a \$2 billion expansion project for bus lines and light railways, aimed at increasing public mobility by the year 2014.

The first phase of this project involved meetings, approvals and contractor selection. Phase I was completed in 2004 (the 7.5 mile redline), making way for the largest part of the project – the construction of the new rail systems.

The Phase II expansion, approved by voters and the city, will have an undeniable impact on the residents and businesses in the surrounding areas. Citizens are concerned about tracks coming through their neighborhoods, and business owners anticipate disruption of their livelihoods. Public accessibility to detailed information regarding the project will be crucial, along with timely responses to questions.

Business Situation

With a goal of involving the entire community in both the designing and building of the new transit system, Vice President of Communications George Smalley knew that he would need to communicate the various stages of the project in a clear and concise manner. Residents and local businesses would need to be informed of planning meetings, the possible impact upon their properties and the timelines of the project. They were also going to need to have a central place to go to ask their questions and post concerns.



Smalley knew that the communication system already in place was not going to be able to handle these requirements. He needed a communications tool with the ability to not only distribute information outwardly, as well as the ability to efficiently handle inquiries and information requests from a variety of interested parties.

Smalley's key goals consisted of the following:

- First, METRO needed a way to communicate meeting locations and agendas to the key stakeholders.
- Second, the Public Affairs staff needed the ability to quickly create and post project information on a timely basis, making all necessary information readily accessible to the public.
- Third, and perhaps most important, METRO's strict adherence to public involvement as mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) required a way to effectively respond to and track questions and concerns from the surrounding community.
- Finally, the system chosen would need to be up and running in a very short timeframe, as the project was already in the planning stages and was garnering huge amounts of interest from the general public.

The Solution

Knowing that communication was crucial and that their current solution wouldn't work, Smalley turned to PIER Systems, Inc. for their proven solution, establishing a PIER System to meet the dynamic needs of the project.

Coming from a former position at Shell Oil, Smalley was familiar with PIER, and proposed its usage to the decision makers at METRO. The proposal was accepted, and PIER Systems, Inc. quickly went to work.

In the case of Houston METRO, 'quickly' was an understatement. Due to the changing needs of the project, what normally would have been a 4 to 6 week implementation phase was compressed into 2 weeks. Knowing that meeting this request was critical, PIER Systems, Inc. provided rapid implementation and www.metro-solutions.org went live within 10 days.

In those 10 days, PIER Systems, Inc. created a PIER center that not only met METRO's key communication goals, but also maintained the look and feel of the METRO home site so that users would have a familiar and seamless experience when accessing information between the two sites.

Since PIER gives users the ability to communicate via website, email, fax and even telephone with a few clicks of a mouse, the Public Affairs staff was able to utilize PIER functionality in several different ways:

To drive communication regarding the planning meetings, they were able to send via email an ongoing newsletter to a registered list of interested people. By organizing these people within PIER by where they lived and what particular section of the project they were concerned with, each person received information specific and relevant to them.

PIER also allowed for quick posting of the newsletter, news releases, maps of the project sites, environmental impact documents, and other important information. Quick content creation and approval process are built-in features of PIER, and both allowed the PA staff to work with ease and efficiency.

Accurate tracking of and response to stakeholder inquiries became a streamlined effort, so much so that Sandra Salazar, Media Relations Specialist, implemented a new communication strategy using the PIER inquiry forms for fielding inquiries regarding all aspects of the rail expansion project, including procurement management.

Key Benefits

- Using the PIER contact database, the METRO Public Affairs staff was easily able to distribute specific and relevant information to stakeholders via an ongoing newsletter
- Capitalizing on the security of the web-based PIER System, information was quickly generated, posted and accessed by all interested parties at any time, creating a dynamic and current website
- Restricted use web-pages facilitate internal communication
- Responding to stakeholder questions and concerns was handled in a timely and efficient manner thanks to PIER's inquiry management functionality
- Tracking capabilities greatly helped in keeping the administrative records for the federal mandated environmental impact process
- Condensing a 4 to 6 week process into 10 days, PIER Systems, Inc. exceeded Metro's expectations in meeting an aggressive timeline
- Streamlining resources allowed deadlines to be met and processes to be improved

With the help of PIER, the Metropolitan Transit Authority is successfully managing the communication of its Houston expansion project, exceeding its goal of involving the community in both the design and build of the new transit system.

Contact PIER Systems, Inc.

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Additional Information

For more information about The Metropolitan Transit Authority and their commitment to improving transportation, visit:

www.ridemetro.org.