

AI and the Future of Right of Way Public Engagement

How artificial intelligence is helping ROW professionals build stronger community connections

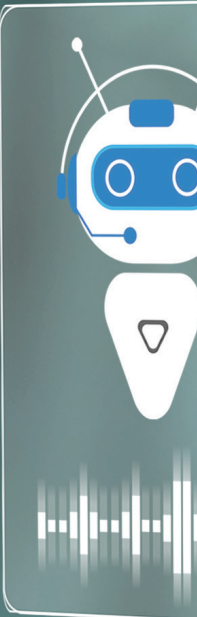
BY JEN BERRY, R/W-NAC

Keeping communities informed and engaged has always been at the heart of Right of Way (ROW) work. Whether it's acquiring land for a new highway, relocating impacted landowner and businesses or getting support for major infrastructure projects, public involvement is essential — and often complex. Organizations are finding more and more that their right of way team needs to work closely with their public outreach team to create a comprehensive plan that has the greatest community reach. Traditional outreach methods like mailers, town halls and door-to-door meetings can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. And even with the best intentions, they don't always reach the people who need to be heard the most.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is already being used in many industries, and now it's redefining how organizations across all industries, including right of way, connect with the public. From chatbots answering questions 24/7 to smart tools analyzing public sentiment, AI is bringing a whole new level of interaction, personalization and insight.

For example, The Arizona Supreme Court introduced AI-generated avatars, named Victoria and Daniel, to make judicial rulings more accessible to the public. The avatars' appearance and names were chosen to represent diverse demographics, and developers are exploring various delivery styles, pronunciations and language translations to improve how they connect with audiences. These avatars provide summarized video explanations of court decisions, which were developed following public backlash relating to a ruling, prompting the Court to find better ways to engage the public through digital media along with demystifying complex legal proceedings.





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And, according to Deloitte's report, "AI-powered Cities of the Future," more than half of cities surveyed now actively use AI, with 35% piloting or planning to use it. The top 10 most effective AI use cases as ranked by cities are:

1. Traffic management
2. Public safety
3. Energy management
4. Customer service
5. Predictive maintenance
6. Waste management
7. Decision-making and analysis
8. Urban planning
9. Cybersecurity
10. Fraud detection

How AI is Making Public Involvement Easier and More Effective

Public involvement is all about making sure people's voices are heard when big decisions — like infrastructure projects or policy changes — are being made. Traditionally, this process involves in-person meetings, mailed notices and lengthy surveys. But AI is helping make it all easier, faster and more inclusive.

1. AI-Powered Chatbots: Always Available to Answer Questions

One of the biggest game-changers in public outreach is AI-powered chatbots. Love them or hate them, we've all interacted with them — sometimes without even knowing it because they're that good! These digital assistants can answer questions at any time, making information about projects more accessible. Imagine a transportation department planning a new highway project — residents can hop onto a website and chat with a bot that provides clear, easy-to-understand answers about construction timelines, traffic impacts and alternative routes. Since chatbots are available 24/7, users don't have to wait for office hours or town hall meetings to get information. Plus, they collect valuable data on what concerns people the most, helping decision makers address issues early on.

2. Understanding Public Sentiment with AI

One of the biggest challenges in ROW is ensuring outreach reaches everyone affected — not just the most vocal. AI can help here, too. AI-powered sentiment analysis can sift through thousands of public comments, emails and social media discussions to get a sense of overall opinion. Are people excited? Concerned? Angry? AI can quickly sort through feedback and highlight the biggest landowner and community concerns.

For example, if an agency is working on a right of way acquisition, AI can analyze public responses to see if concerns are more about environmental impact, property values or traffic congestion. Knowing this helps organizations tailor their messaging and outreach to address the concerns that they are seeing over and over, which are likely the most pressing.

Most people nowadays are familiar with ChatGPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer) and other AI "bots" and use them to find and generate information or create content. Custom GPTs can be trained to focus on particular topics, industries or areas of expertise. You can "train" your GPT to reflect your company's brand values, tone and communication style and ensure that the AI responds in a consistent way every time. In a nutshell: the more you use it, the better it gets at giving you what you need.

For example, Burns & McDonnell has created a custom GPT to help them gauge a variety of public sentiment issues on projects. If the project is a proposed project, it uses similar projects and the overall area to predict public sentiment and concerns. Burns & McDonnell's Stakeholder Management Solutions Manager Steve Haler put it this way: "AI is saving us a ton of time on research we used to have to do by hand. Instead of spending hours digging through documents and tracking down info, we can now get what we need in minutes. It's like having a super smart assistant who's always available and just handles the grunt work, so we can focus on the bigger stuff."

Some of the suggested prompts for custom GPT include:

- *Create a safety and sentiment report regarding an upcoming public meeting. Include current and past unrest and possible safety concerns when attending a public meeting in the report.*
- *Create a report that summarizes recent changes in local regulations that could affect the project. Please cite exact examples of the changes and the specific way this can affect the project.*
- *Provide a list of local leaders, key environmental organizations and NGOs in the project area. Also provide each an analysis of the sentiment regarding the project from each. Please explain how you concluded their sentiment.*

Making Public Outreach More Inclusive

Public outreach sometimes struggles with reaching all the communities and stakeholders that are impacted by projects. AI is making it easier to connect with diverse communities in a way that feels more personal and accessible.

3. Personalized Outreach: Reaching the Right People with the Right Message

I think we can all agree that a road widening project in urban St. Louis might need a different communication strategy than a gas line build in rural Tennessee. AI can analyze demographics, past engagement and community preferences to help agencies reach different groups more effectively. For example, AI can help identify which methods — whether it's social media, email or in-person meetings — will work best for each audience.

4. Breaking Language Barriers with AI Translation

Not everyone speaks English as their first language, and that can be a big barrier to public engagement in areas where there may be small or large pockets of non-native speakers. AI-powered translation tools make it easier to provide multilingual materials, from project updates to meeting transcripts. Some AI tools even offer real-time translation during virtual public meetings, letting more people participate and understand what's happening.

Public engagement is just that... for the public. And by making outreach materials available in multiple languages, organizations can truly engage with their entire community — not just a select few.

5. Virtual Public Meetings with AI Enhancements

The shift to virtual meetings during the pandemic showed how technology can improve accessibility, and AI is making these meetings even better. Real-time transcription, automatic summarization and interactive Q&A sessions make it easier for participants to engage and understand key points.

AI can even analyze participation levels and identify which topics are generating the most interest, which helps organizers improve future meetings.

AI's Role in Smarter Strategic Communications

Strategic communication is all about getting the right message to the right people at the right time.

6. Predicting Public Reaction Before Issues Arise

Perhaps one of AI's most promising applications in ROW is its ability to anticipate problems before they arise. By analyzing trends from similar projects and current public sentiment, AI can forecast potential objections, hotspots or misinformation before they make headlines.

For example, if AI predicts a new transmission line project might be controversial, you can start your public outreach activities early, emphasizing benefits like reduced congestion or economic growth.

7. AI-Generated Content for Public Awareness

Creating press releases, newsletters, social media updates and email campaigns can be time-consuming, but AI offers a way to streamline and accelerate the process. AI tools can generate clear, engaging content very quickly based on public sentiment and project updates. This ensures that outreach messages stay relevant and timely without overwhelming communication teams.

How AI Is Supporting ROW Public Engagement

A quick look at how artificial intelligence is already making an impact in right of way outreach efforts.

Virtual Outreach Assistants (Chatbots)

What it does: Provides instant answers to common questions about project timelines, property impacts and acquisition steps.

Why it matters: Available 24/7 for property owners who prefer digital communication or can't reach out during office hours.

Sentiment Analysis on Community Feedback

What it does: Uses AI to analyze public comments from social media, surveys and meetings.

Why it matters: Helps identify emerging concerns or misunderstandings in real time — before they grow into larger issues.

Predictive Engagement Tools

What it does: Forecasts which communities may need more targeted outreach.

Why it matters: Enables ROW teams to proactively adjust strategies, reducing delays and improving public trust.

Misinformation Monitoring

What it does: Flags misleading content or rumors circulating online.

Why it matters: Helps maintain project credibility by allowing fast, accurate corrections across communication channels.

AI-Powered Communication Support

What it does: Assists with drafting notices, FAQ, and multilingual outreach materials.

Why it matters: Saves time while ensuring clear, consistent and accessible messaging for diverse audiences.



For example, if your analytics indicate that public sentiment is shifting on a transit project, AI can suggest updates that better address community concerns, keeping messaging effective and responsive.

8. Fighting Misinformation with AI

ROW professionals know how quickly misinformation can derail a project. AI tools can monitor online conversations and flag inaccurate claims about property acquisition timelines, compensation or impacts. As ROW professionals, we know that landowners all talk to their neighbors. And with social media like Facebook and NextDoor, information (true and false!) spreads like wildfire. So, when those rumors start circulating (and they will), ROW agents and project teams can respond with factual, timely information to set the record straight.



A Word of Caution: Use It Wisely

Of course, AI is not a one-size-fits-all solution. It comes with real challenges, especially around data privacy, transparency, and equity.

- **Privacy Concerns:** AI relies on data, which means organizations need to be careful about how they collect and use public information.
- **Transparency:** People want to know how decisions are being made, and AI shouldn't feel like a "black box." Organizations need to explain how they're using AI and allow for public oversight.
- **Bias in AI:** If AI tools are trained on biased data, they can unintentionally favor certain groups over others. Agencies need to make sure AI is being used fairly and equitably.

As ROW professionals, we deal with sensitive issues — people's homes, land and livelihoods. It should enhance — not replace — the human touch that makes ROW work so impactful.

The Bottom Line: AI Is Here — and ROW Professionals Are Ready

AI is already changing how public outreach is done — and for ROW professionals, that's a good thing. It's helping us become more proactive, more transparent and more community-focused in how we approach engagement. It doesn't mean doing less — it means doing better, faster and with greater impact.

For those in ROW, embracing AI now means staying ahead of the curve — and leading the charge toward smarter, more inclusive public involvement. ★



Jen Berry is an associate right of way + public involvement specialist at Burns & McDonnell, bringing more than two decades of experience in real estate and public engagement. Her diverse roles include project manager, public outreach strategist and efficiency improvement program lead.