

Celebrate public works by engaging and enhancing communities

“Building for Today, Planning for Tomorrow”

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Across North America, public works and local governments gather together in May to celebrate the 2014 National Public Works Week (NPWW) highlighting the stewardship of infrastructure as an important part of the public works profession. This year’s theme “Building for Today, Planning for Tomorrow” focuses on the community and public works, in which “building” points out the day-to-day aspect of public works contributions to quality of life, and “planning” refers to the sustainable practices that ensure quality of life for future generations.

In Washington, D.C., the Department of Public Works (DPW) has already been hard at work building awareness of public works in the local community and in the media by showcasing their equipment and staff, and creating new ways to revitalize the city corridors.

“MuralsDC”

One project of the D.C. DPW has creatively turned infrastructure into art. The “MuralsDC” graffiti prevention initiative creates murals that have replaced graffiti in the District with original works of art since its pilot in 2007. Seven years and nearly 50 murals later, the project has been extremely effective in ending the cycle of repeat tagging on participating walls, while bringing an arty and “hip” energy to several of the city’s revitalized corridors. It has also brought unique stories forward to revitalize the neighborhoods. “We’re not just helping to keep the city clean from graffiti, we’re giving local artists experience and exposure and documenting the city’s rich history beyond its iconic monuments and buildings,” said DC DPW Director William O. Howland, Jr.

“MuralsDC” has also generated media attention, and the murals have been covered by local, national and international media including National Public Radio, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and InterTV, Ukraine’s top broadcasting station. It also caught the attention of the Smithsonian, which invited the department to present to the museum’s curators last year. Several months later, the Smithsonian’s Latino Center collaborated with “MuralsDC” on a mural to celebrate a local musician in conjunction with an ongoing exhibit.

“What started out as a way to help local business owners save money, and hopefully curb the number of graffiti abatement requests our agency responds to, has turned into something more meaningful than we could have ever imagined,” said Howland. “Through creative sanitation efforts, we’ve bolstered a growing recognition of public works with street art that is essential to enhancing the vital impact of public works as we continue to shape our public framework.”

Truck Touch initiative

Another DC DPW initiative makes equipment and staff accessible to residents. The city’s annual citywide Truck Touch, which the agency coordinates, brings thousands of residents to RFK

Stadium where families can meet the city workers who operate the vehicles that maintain the city's infrastructure and where children can play with life-size trucks.

The DC Truck Touch program features vehicles and equipment from a host of city agencies, including the Metropolitan Police Department, Fire & Emergency Medical Services and the DC Department of Transportation as well as Public Works. City employees explain how they operate their equipment to put out fires, clean sewers, fix potholes, trim trees, collect trash, clean streets, clear snow and more. They also help citizens onto the vehicles so they can explore and have fun. "It's like a monster truck Disneyland," said Director Howland, who has watched the event's attendance grow from a couple hundred to over 5,000 since it began in 2008. "The adults are just as excited as their children and this year I think they will be even more so."

For the 2014 Truck Touch event, public works employees will work with a professional choreographer to develop a performance where workers will interact with their equipment and tell their stories in dance and song. Think "Stomp" or "Trash Dance"—a 2013 documentary where a choreographer found a way to literally make Austin, Tex., Public Works truck dance. "Right now we are just trying to get our employees pumped up about it and figure out what talents everyone can bring to the table," Howland said. "It may not be a performance worthy of a movie, but it will give us a one-of-a-kind opportunity to show our residents that our workers are everyday human beings who enjoy what they do and are proud of what they accomplish. That's all that matters."

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