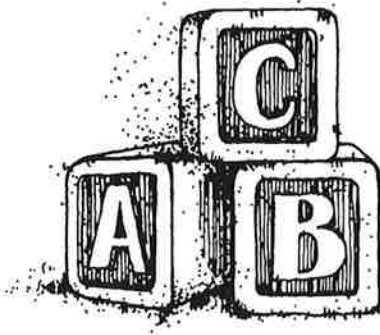

A Crisis in the Organization



Governmental response to a thruway disaster, resulting in maximal effectiveness in a minimal time frame

■ DAVID LAYNE, SR/WA

During the first week of April 1987, as the spring runoff crested in streams causing localized flooding, the New York State Department of Transportation (DOT) closed a bridge in upstate New York, locally known as the Mill Point bridge. The closing, made for safety reasons, affected through traffic, but its major impact was on area residents and farmers. On April 5, 1987, a New York State Thruway bridge, also over the Schoharie Creek, collapsed and four cars and a tractor trailer fell into the water 80 feet below. Ten people were killed. On April 7, the DOT, after inspection, closed the Fonda-Fultonville bridge that carried Route 30A traffic across the Mohawk River. It reopened a few days later, with weight limitations. Finally, on April 11, a section of the Mill Point bridge collapsed. In just 8 days, the state and interstate highway systems in upstate New York had been dealt near crippling blows with major impacts extending throughout the entire state highway system.

The Plan

Governmental bureaucracies in particular sometimes have reputations for being

slow moving and unresponsive. In this case, nothing was further from the truth. The normal table of organization and the normal work flow gave way to what Peters and Waterman called, in *In Search of Excellence* (Harper & Row, 1982), "organizational fluidity." The two principal organizations, DOT and the N.Y. State Thruway Authority, were able to "cultivate the right people getting into contact with each other. . . ." There is no doubt that this informal network resulted in maximal effort in a minimal time frame.

The crisis helped to create an organization that was classic Peters and Waterman:

fluid, informally organized, open, and with a bias for action. This bias for action was achieved through commitment of the people involved.

Although there was no conscious effort to subscribe to the "theory of chunks," (again referring to Peters and Waterman), that was exactly what happened. ". . . the key success factor in [government] is simply getting one's arms around almost any practical problem and knocking it off—now." The theory goes, make each problem manageable and then blitz it.

Initially, DOT identified and established detour routes and distributed announcements outlining alternate routes. In addition, to facilitate the dissemination of information on the detours, the Traffic Information Project (TIP) was reactivated. Third, emergency bridge inspections were conducted on more than 300 bridges in the flood area.

Next, it was necessary to start the bridge restoration process as soon as possible.

The Fonda Fultonville Bridge

At the time the bridge closed and subsequent weight limitations were imposed, DOT was designing a replacement bridge and acquiring the necessary right of way to let a construction project. The work continued. That took care of "Chunk" number 1.

The Mill Point Bridge

Work immediately began to design a temporary structure to reconnect Route 161 that now ended on both sides of the



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Schoharie Creek. Rights of entry were obtained from property owners to allow the state and its contractors to enter on the area before the property acquisitions. The design and initial right of way work were completed in only 33 days to meet a May 14, 1987 contract letting. The removal of the collapsed span and construction of a Bailey type bridge was completed and opened to traffic on June 18. The time from the start of design through construction was approximately 2½ months. The normal completion for this type of project would have required 1 to 2 years: "Chunk" number 2.

The Thruway Bridge

This "chunk" was the largest, most difficult, and, eventually, the most controversial one. The first problem was to establish immediate detour routes using existing state highways. At the same time, DOT and the Thruway Authority began to develop shorter detours and to prepare design plans for the permanent Thruway bridge replacement.

The first detour bridge involved the construction of a new Thruway toll plaza and ramp from Route 5S to the Thruway. Located just east of the collapsed bridge, it shortened the distance for eastbound travelers by approximately 3 miles and reestablished westbound Thruway traffic to Amsterdam, New York. Again, the time from project inception through design, right of way acquisition, and construction was amazingly short, a total of 19 days.

On April 24, the same day the first detour opened, the state announced the location of the proposed "permanent" detour. Once again, activities moved quickly. A contract was let on April 30, with completion of the \$5.7+ million project scheduled for the July 4th weekend. The detour actually opened on June 29, a few days ahead of schedule.

One project remained: the design and construction of a new permanent Thruway bridge over the Schoharie Creek. The new structure was designed to correct the probable contributory factors in the collapse. As the bridge would be replaced on existing alignment, there was no need for right of way acquisitions. Preliminary plans were announced by the Thruway on April 23, with the completion of the first two lanes scheduled for December 1987 and the remaining lanes scheduled for completion in May 1988.

That was it. In an extremely short span



View of the collapsed New York State Thruway bridge looking west.

of time, the N.Y. DOT and the state Thruway Authority responded to a catastrophic assault on the road system. Bridges and roadways were designed, right of way acquired, contracts let, and construction

and the letting of the construction contract for the replacement of the collapsed Thruway bridge. The local citizens believed that the decisions and actions were necessary to preserve the people's safety and to restore the highway network to normal as quickly as possible.

There were adverse comments, however, on one aspect of the overall plan. Some of the local officials and citizens were critical of the decision to construct a second detour to maintain Thruway traffic, citing economic and safety factors.

On April 23 at a public information meeting, state officials disclosed their plan. The detour would place eastbound Thruway traffic over the existing Route 5S bridge and the westbound traffic over an adjacent former Penn Central Railroad bridge. Four lanes of traffic, two in each direction, would be reduced to one in each direction as the Schoharie Creek bridges were crossed.

The reasons for the detour as stated by the Thruway Authority's Chief Engineer, Daniel Garvey, were to improve safety and to end congestion on local roads.

The reactions of some of the area residents to the plan were quick and negative. Approximately 100 people attended the meeting, and only one individual commended state officials for their decision. The criticisms could be categorized in two general areas. First, many people criticized the plan because although it would restore the Thruway to as near normal as possible, it would be done at the expense of the local road system and area residents. The state

Bureaucracies are at times reputed to be slow moving and unresponsive. In this case, nothing was further from the truth.

started on contracts totaling millions of dollars.

There is absolutely no question from a technical point of view that the projects started, those in progress, and those completed were total successes. But was that, in fact, it? A picture perfect operation that was universally hailed by all people and groups alike? Hardly.

The Reaction and Re-Reaction

Generally, there were few adverse comments to the closing and later weight limitations on the Fonda-Fultonville bridge, the replacement (even by a temporary Bailey bridge structure) of the Mill Point bridge, the construction of the first detour to the east of the collapsed Thruway bridge,