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Building a Story, Literally

By [Kirsten Ballard](#)   February 1, 2017

Transportation is not a sexy topic.

Caitlin Johnston of the *Tampa Bay Times* is very familiar with that fact.

"It's really hard to get people to sit down and read a 60-inch column about a bridge, it's hard to get people on board for a project that does matter," the transportation beat writer says.

So when handed a 182-page plan about the Tampa Bay Express, she knew it was time to explore alternative story telling methods. What came out of it was a stop motion animation using Legos to illustrate the story online.

The idea of Legos came from Adam Playford, director of data and digital enterprise and mediaXchange Top 30 Under 30 winner.

"You use Legos to build something, and that's what this project is doing," Caitlin said. "We're always looking for ways to tell new stories."

The project started in June, with Adam, Caitlin, and intern Eli Zhang in a room with notecards trying to storyboard the project. "We were trying to figure out what the story is, to tell the right version," Caitlin said.

Originally, they planned to illustrate how the plan worked, with special attention to the new lanes on the Howard Bridge.

Eli had experience with stop motion animation, but building with Legos was new territory for him. "I grew up in China," he said. "I never played with Legos, I had heard about them, but I never played."

He was intimated at the beginning of the project, having signed on for an internship of data visualization, not building with Legos. Caitlin, on the other hand, was thrilled. She grew up playing with the plastic bricks. "I thought 'this is the coolest thing ever, we get paid to play with Legos,'" she said.

Then, in September, as they neared publishing, Caitlin got a call from a source telling her they had the story wrong. It was not the plan people thought they were getting.

She reread the plan and realized the source was correct. Instead of adding a lane to the Howard Bridge as promised, the plan would convert a preexisting lane and put a toll on it. The team hit pause on the project as she started calling transportation experts and politicians who voted on the plan and listened to it for three years. Seventy-five percent of them did not know.

There was a story there, and it trumped the story they had planned on telling.
The team decided to interview officials and use Lego people to add interesting graphics and a new dimension to the story.

"It is hard to find somewhat normal Lego people," Caitlin laughed. There isn't a set that fit our needs exactly.

They found a lot of Batman and Star Wars Lego people. "To represent the officials, these were too wacky," Eli said. They sent an email to the newsroom, asking to borrow Lego people.

It took 19 Lego people and 200 Lego bricks to build the bridge.

"I call 2016 my year of Lego," Eli laughed.

To announce the digital project, they ran a graphic on A1 with a short paragraph telling people to go online.

"We didn't tell the whole story [in the paper]," Caitlin said. "We let readers know where to find it."
On the first day, between 175 to 200 readers were on the story at any point. The average read time was two minutes.

Between the Legos and other print stories, city officials canceled all hearings on the plan indefinitely. A new plan won't be available until June at the earliest.

Caitlin said she had readers say they wish every story was told in Legos.

"It's getting at that desire to have complex stories that matter be told in an understandable way. A lot of readers have issues they want to care about but they are so nuanced, and tacked with jargon that it can be hard, even with the desire to understand. It's hard to break it down."

Kirsten Ballard

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