

PROPOSED STRATEGY FOR PUBLIC HEARINGS

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*SINCE the passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1968, highway agencies throughout the country have placed increased emphasis on citizen participation in public hearing processes. This new concern for community feedback coupled with the growth of a society that is well versed on avenues available to block highway projects has required road agencies to reexamine the basic methods of presenting proposed projects to the community.

Formerly a highway department based its route-location decisions largely on economic, engineering, and aesthetic considerations that were supplemented by evaluations by local elected officials. Today, however, there is increasing evidence that local officials do not always reflect the "community values" of all of their constituents. Recognizing these facts, the Virginia Department of Highways approved the proposal of its research council to study the public hearing process and to suggest a possible new strategy for conducting public hearings.

The remarks offered in this paper are based on the results of a survey conducted at 25 public hearings of the Virginia Department of Highways. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed at all of the public hearings held by the department between May 25 and July 15, 1970. The evaluation included 15 hearings in urban areas and 10 in rural areas. The extent of coverage might be summarized as follows: A total of 1,170 persons attended the 25 hearings; 978, or 83.6 percent, returned the questionnaire. The overall average attendance was 46.8 citizens. The urban attendance averaged 56 and the rural attendance, 32.9.

The researchers enjoyed two major advantages in the conduct of the study that added greatly to its value.

1. The receptive attitude of the department created a favorable climate for the study. The support of the department's top management, including the district and resident engineers, ensured the researchers full freedom to examine every detail of the highway hearing. Department personnel freely shared their personal opinions and openly discussed the department's philosophy of public hearings, for the study had been endorsed by the commissioner's staff.

2. The researchers were not involved in conducting the hearings and, thus, served as impartial observers. This "nonpartisan" observation of the current strategy enabled the authors to evaluate the department's present policy with relative objectivity.

EVALUATION OF PRESENT STRATEGY

The initial phase of the research has revealed that the problems existing in the highway hearing process are to a large degree the result of an outmoded strategy. Public hearings were originally employed to inform the community of proposed projects. However, today it is no longer sufficient to inform the community, but rather it is desirable and necessary to establish real two-way communications between the highway decision-makers and the community. As a result of this investigation the authors have concluded that the public hearing process must again be updated as it was in 1956 when the department started on the Interstate Highway program. It is believed that perhaps the

department is entering the second generation of public hearings, which will require some modifications in order to meet the changing needs of the community.

FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

1. Plans for the proposed project are not generally easily accessible to the community. The legal notice, which is distributed to groups such as PTA's, posted in conspicuous places, and published in newspapers, indicates that the plans are available in the city or county engineer's office and the highway residency and district offices. However, these offices are open to the public only during working hours. To examine them, many people must take time off from work. If the average citizen has not examined plans in detail prior to the public hearing, how can he contribute informed feedback at the public hearing? One can only expect to receive his initial reaction, which is often confused and defensive. The researchers observed many occasions when citizens actually saw the plans for the first time during the public hearing.

2. Highway hearings as currently conducted are too formal and technical. The general pattern of a hearing starts with 20 to 30 minutes of official rhetoric, which is required by the Federal Highway Administration. This is generally set forth in technical terms that are basic to the engineer's vocabulary but are not understood by the layman. In addition, there is required information, such as project number, that must be included in the manuscript.

3. Current procedure for receiving testimony tends to intimidate some citizens. The usual format for a highway hearing in Virginia is to have a table in the front of the room at which 2 or 3 somber highway engineers are seated, with a tape recorder and a microphone placed in front of the table. On numerous occasions it appeared to the researchers that the citizen was intimidated by the fact that he had to walk to the front of the room (in some cases to a stage) to speak, and then, in addition, a tape recorder and at least one stenographer were recording his comments. The necessity for an exact transcript of the hearing is recognized. Perhaps the participation could be encouraged if microphones were placed in the aisles for the public's convenience. In addition, the recording could be made on a small tape recorder, which would assist transcribing and might not intimidate the citizens as does an imposing array of recording equipment. In addition, the use of a small dictating recorder would facilitate the transcription in that the stenographer could transcribe directly from the tape.

4. Visual aids should be upgraded again. Just as it was necessary in 1956 with the advent of the Interstate Highway System to upgrade visual aids, it is the opinion of the authors that the department should again consider more imaginative visual aids. At many of the hearings attended, the citizens were oriented with the type of visual aid shown in Figure 1. In other hearings, the type of visual aid shown in Figure 2 was used. While some people attending highway hearings are familiar with engineering plans and aerial mosaics, many citizens seem to have difficulty orienting to the exact location of the project. The addition of eye level color photos showing the before-and-after views at key points would help them visualize the road in familiar surroundings. These would not have to be expensively mounted photographs but could be inexpensive 35-mm color slides. The before slides could be taken at the time of the preliminary engineering survey. Properly exposed color slides are easily visible when shown by modern projectors. In some hearings, small-scale line drawings of the proposed facility were used. A much more effective map, or at least an aerial mosaic with a proposed route shown in some color, would greatly improve the citizen's orientation to the project.

5. Less than 9 percent of the citizens responding to the questionnaire indicated that they learned of the public hearing by legal notices placed in the newspapers. Publication of the legal notice in the newspaper appears to serve little practical purpose other than to comply with statutory requirements. Conscious of this fact while the study was in progress, the department changed from a small classified advertisement to a 2-column, 6-in. display type of legal notice. However, the preliminary findings indicate that even this type of advertisement will have little impact on better informing the public. The researchers were unable to measure the impact of letters to civic groups such as

PTA's. They noted that the hearings having the largest attendance appeared to be the ones in which civic associations had actively encouraged participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NEW STRATEGY

The public hearing process can be optimized by demonstrating to the public that its feedback is an integral part of highway planning. Based on observations of the citizen participants at public hearings, the researchers conclude that basically the citizens believe that highway hearings are pro forma and few changes will result from the opinions expressed. The authors' premise is that a major overhaul of the current modus operandi could enable highway departments to enhance their planning by maximizing citizen feedback.

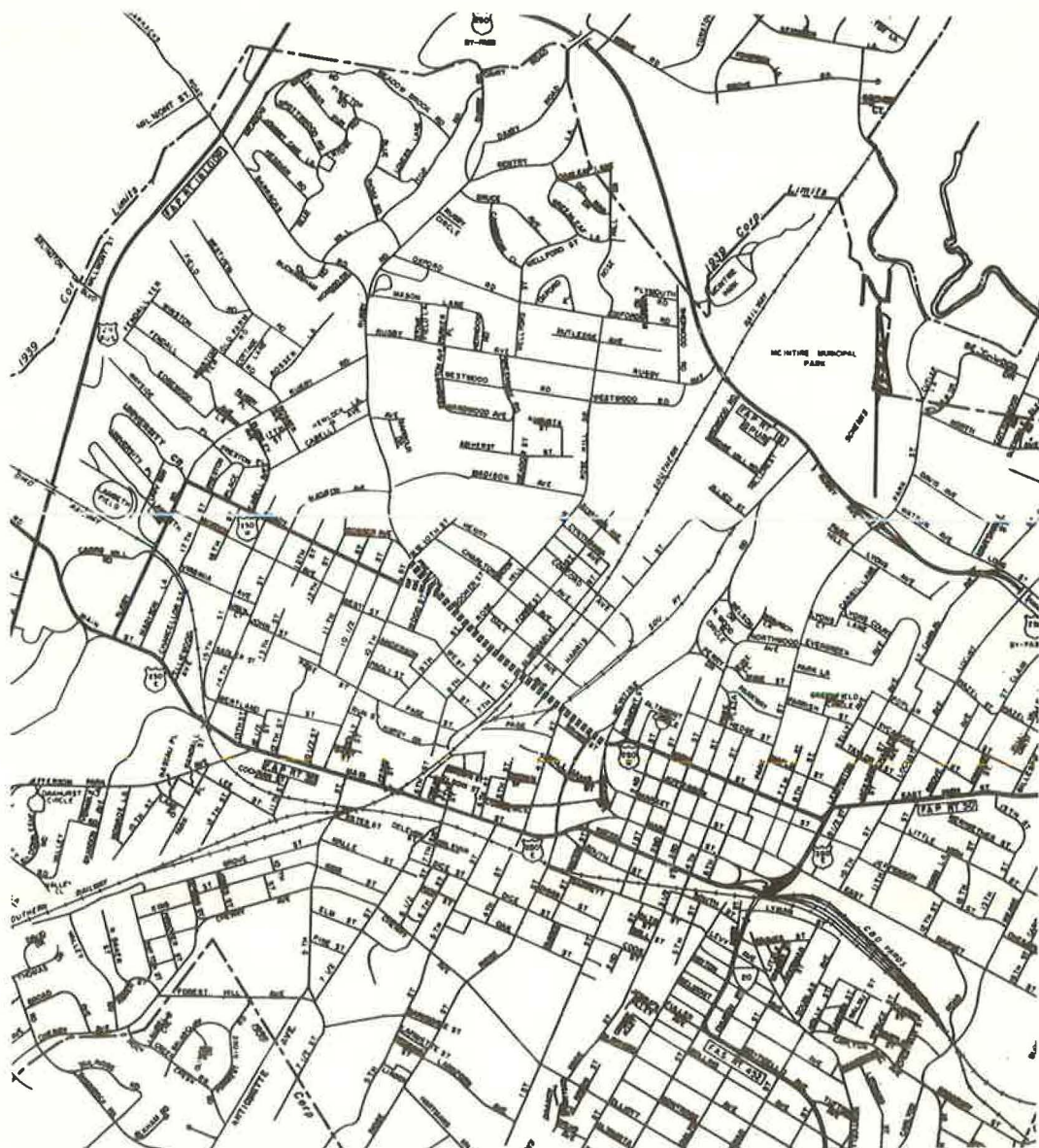


Figure 1. Visual aid used in public hearing on proposed project in Charlottesville.

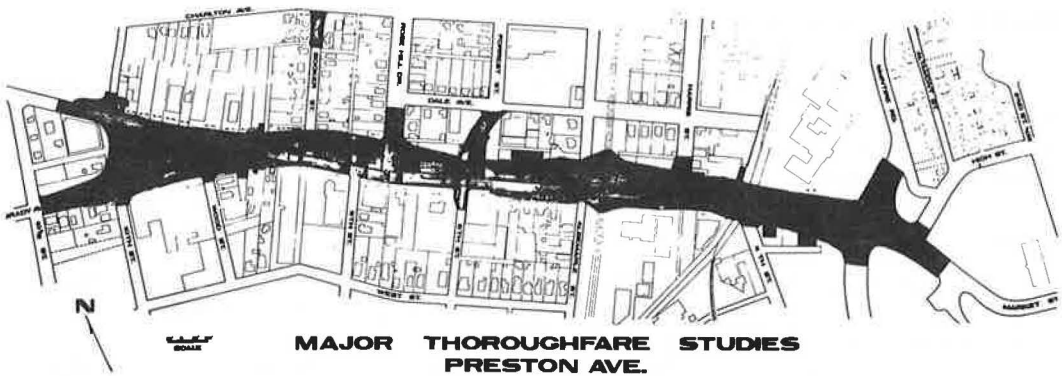


Figure 2. Visual aid used in public hearing on proposed widening of Preston Avenue in Charlottesville.

The new strategy suggested in this paper should not be considered as a panacea, and its effectiveness should be evaluated in follow-up studies. Part of the problem with the present process is that highway departments appear to have complied with Federal Highway Administration directives as if they were edicts instead of adapting them imaginatively to meet the needs of the department and citizens alike.

The proposed strategy recommended in this paper is divided into 3 phases: prehearing strategy, formal hearing strategy, and post-hearing strategy.

Prehearing Strategy

If the highway department is to receive the maximum benefit from citizen feedback, then citizens must be well informed on the problem, the alternatives, and the solutions. One possible shortcoming of the present procedure is that it does not consider the fact that engineers work with the plans for several years and yet citizens are expected to evaluate the project after a 15-minute technical presentation.

Based on the study observations, it is apparent that most citizens attending public hearings in Virginia may have very limited knowledge of the proposed facility. Those citizens who do understand the proposed project have gained the knowledge through their own hard work and initiative. In addition, there were instances in which the department engineers were unaware of some community values. For example, at one hearing, citizens objected to sidewalks; but it was later found that their opposition was to the width of the sidewalk, which would have required destruction of handsome shade trees.

These comments are meant not to be merely negative but to emphasize that highway engineers are too involved in day-to-day operations to develop an effective outreach program of community relations. The recommendations in this paper may be implemented by assigning additional responsibilities to present personnel, but this action would not be as effective as assigning the responsibility to personnel employed and trained for such tasks.

The following recommendations for organizational strategy should considerably increase citizen feedback at highway hearings.

1. Establish a special public hearing unit in the central office to handle all matters pertaining to highway hearings. This unit should be staffed with professionals who are well versed in public speaking techniques and diplomacy. This group should either be part of an environmental unit or work very closely with those persons conducting environmental studies for the department.
2. A public relations program should be undertaken to demonstrate to the public that citizen feedback is not merely tolerated but actually desired by the department.
3. The public hearing group should be prepared to tour the proposed project areas with interested citizens.

The following are recommended prehearing activities:

1. Schedule all urban project hearings 90 days in advance.
2. Mail letters to all local groups, such as civic associations, garden clubs, PTA's, and churches, 60 to 70 days in advance of the hearing date. The letters should express the desire on the part of department personnel to discuss the proposed project prior to the scheduled hearing.
3. Mail letters to all owners and occupants of properties within a half mile of the proposed project. The department might consider entering into a contract with a professional mailing service to handle this task.
4. Arrange for project plans to be readily available at times and locations convenient for the citizens in the immediate community. Department personnel should always be available to explain plans to the citizens.
5. Issue news releases whenever department personnel discuss the proposed projects with citizen groups. This practice should help ensure press coverage and, therefore, inform more people and perhaps improve the department's image.
6. When possible, arrange for frequent 30-second announcements on radio and TV 3 or 4 days before the hearing, particularly in prime times.
7. Routinely schedule all hearings at night, unless another time is considered better for a specific community. An analysis of daytime versus evening hearings indicates that attendance is significantly higher at evening hearings. Therefore, because the department sincerely wants public feedback, evening hearings appear to offer a better opportunity to get it.
8. Erect 4 by 8 ft signs at both ends of the project. These should show the time, date, and location of the hearing. The signs could be made reusable by just changing the time, date and location. These signs would be similar to the ones currently used and entitled "Your Highway Taxes at Work." An example of the proposed wording is shown in Figure 3.
9. Announce that engineers will be present several hours prior to the hearing to informally answer questions. Based on the researchers' observations, this is a critical point in the development of a successful strategy for highway hearings. Some of the advantages of this approach were demonstrated by an experiment conducted by the department during the course of this study. An experimental hearing was scheduled for 2 nights instead of the usual one. The first night was set aside for the highway engineers and the citizens to attempt to establish a meaningful dialogue on the proposed project before the formal hearing was held. The researchers talked informally with many of the citizens who, while objecting to some of the alternatives, were appreciative of the department's efforts to present the facts as viewed by the engineer. The experimental hearing was the largest and one of the most controversial meetings analyzed by the researchers, yet more than 59 percent of the persons answering the interview questionnaire indicated they believed that the hearing was conducted in a good manner by the department. While this approach appeared to be useful, perhaps a separate night might not be necessary and a question and answer session prior to the hearing might serve to establish the desired dialogue.

THIS SECTION OF HIGHWAY BEING CONSIDERED FOR IMPROVEMENT	
PUBLIC HEARING	
OCT. 1, 1970	7:30 P.M.
MANCHESTER HIGH SCHOOL	
YOUR ATTENDANCE AND VIEWS ARE SOLICITED	

Figure 3. Suggested wording for sign announcing public hearing.

Formal Hearing

If the prehearing strategy has been effective, then the hearing should be largely a formality. Nevertheless, the department should plan the agenda as soundly as the prehearing activities.

1. The district or resident engineer should preside, but a representative from the public hearing unit should present the engineering and environmental considerations and field most of the questions. The

district or resident engineers should be used as moderators only. The district or resident engineer should not present the proposed projects because he is involved on a day-to-day basis with the local people and might lose some of his effectiveness if involved in unnecessary controversy. Most adverse comments about proposed projects were directed at the central office in Richmond and not the local engineer. However, when the local man is asked to make the formal presentation, he then becomes part of the controversy instead of remaining neutral.

2. A 20-minute time limit should be established for testimony from individuals, and this limit should be stated when the meeting is opened. If anyone requires more time, he should be encouraged to submit a written statement.

3. The audience should be welcomed and given the explanation that the primary reason for the meeting is to receive the views of the community on the proposed project.

4. Each person should be requested to complete a registration card. It should be explained that the cards will be used to determine those desiring to testify and to advise them of the department's decision on the project.

5. Microphones should be provided in the aisles for the convenience of persons testifying.

6. Presentations should be in layman's terms and not in technical jargon.

7. The professional team should briefly explain traffic counts, origin and destination studies, traffic forecasting, and impact on existing streets if no action is taken. A number of citizens expressed ignorance of how the department arrived at its projections and expressed disbelief in the traffic counts used to justify the proposed project. A brief explanation might minimize these objections.

8. Self-addressed envelopes should be provided for persons submitting written statements. This practice should make it easier for the public to respond and would demonstrate that the department is sincerely seeking opinions.

9. Arrangements should be made to have representatives from the following agencies present after the meeting for individual conferences: Relocation Section, Small Business Administration, and Virginia Employment Commission (to provide employment counseling with relocatees if necessary).

10. More imaginative visual aids should be used.

Post-Hearing Strategy

The post-hearing strategy is as important as that for the prior phases. The department should impress on the public that its views are essential to highway planning and will be seriously evaluated. The following recommendations are minimum and should be expanded to fit local needs.

1. Department personnel should be available after the meeting to discuss individual problems.

2. Any important feedback from citizens should be followed up. Suggestions made in the meeting should be explored, and the disposition of each suggestion should be explained in writing to the individual or group making it.

3. A letter from the resident engineer should be sent to all persons attending the hearing to inform them of the department's decision on the project. This would be good public relations and would tend to minimize the citizens' feeling that highway hearings are pro forma.