

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN TRANSPORTATION PLANNING: A NEW APPROACH

Kenneth M. Travis and Stanley C. Plog, Behavior Science Corporation

It has become increasingly clear in recent years that urban transportation planners must consider the multilateral impact of their decisions on the communities that they serve. In more and more instances, affected communities have demanded that these considerations be made. Most attempts involving communities in the transportation planning process have typically met with undistinguished progress. In this paper, the usual approaches to community involvement are subjected to a critical analysis in terms of their sociopsychological implications, and specific shortcomings are identified. The authors outline a new method of community involvement that has proved itself in practical applications. Basic concepts of the method are described, including non-advocacy and intellectual honesty. Specific techniques are offered, including a method for identifying the individuals and community groups to be included in a study, the determination of their concerns and their integration into the planning process, the appropriate use of a community survey, the proper dissemination of information to the community, and the development of a continuing and constructive relationship with the community.

•IN THE past decade, it has become increasingly clear that urban transportation planners must consider the multilateral impact of their decisions on the communities they serve. Indeed, in many recent transportation projects, affected communities have demanded that these considerations be made.

Most attempts at involving communities in the transportation planning process have typically met with undistinguished progress. In this paper, a new approach to community involvement is offered, one that has been used by the authors with considerable success.

HISTORY OF PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS AT COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Before discussing the fundamentals of the new program, it is well to examine some of the previous attempts at involving affected communities in transportation projects. By and large, these attempts have met with failure, and, across the country, unfinished freeways, overpasses, and other structures stand as silent although constant reminders of the power of a disenchanting citizenry.

The Public Hearing Method

A frequently utilized method of dealing with communities in transportation projects, and one that often is prescribed by law, is that of the public hearing. The goals of this approach are to provide an opportunity for all interested citizens to become aware of plans that are being made, to question those who are making the plans, and to present their opinions on the plans. Although this method appears to be an entirely acceptable

one, and one that is in keeping with the highly valued principles of a participatory democracy, it all too frequently degenerates into an arena of conflict. There are numerous examples of hearings being prematurely closed or, worse, not even allowed to begin because of the unmanageable uproar or threat to the personal safety of those presiding!

What sociopsychological dynamics can explain this bizarre behavior on the part of so many who, outside the meeting hall, often are models of appropriate behavior? Some of the causative factors are discussed in the following, and the reader may note that many of them have a "common sense" ring.

A most frequent problem is that the public remains in an information vacuum until the time of a community meeting. They know only that plans for a project will be presented to them and that they will be given the chance to indicate what they think should be done. Often, the project involves an emotional, anxiety-producing topic, such as a freeway. Operating without benefit of more complete information, residents feed on one another's anxieties, and antipathy for the project becomes solidified.

Often, well-established groups such as service clubs or church groups focus their energies on the proposed project and begin formulating an attack against it. Other times, concerned individuals group together specifically to deal with the threat posed by a particular project.

In all cases, these groups have definable leaders whose actions can be anticipated on the basis of what has been learned about individual and group behavior through psychological and sociological research. These leaders have achieved their status because of strongly stated positions. The fact that their leadership roles have been either tacitly or formally awarded on the basis of their aggressive stand reinforces their behavior. They quickly decide that they have a role to play both within the group they represent and outside as spokesmen.

As the time of the public hearing approaches, general antipathy in the community grows and the leadership of the protest groups becomes clearly defined; the stage is thus set for confrontation. Attendees arrive at the public hearing in a belligerent and uncompromising mood. There often is an aura of tension preceding the meeting, and the impression is that the people are waiting for the "action" to start. The psychological setting of the hearing room itself also often accentuates the problem. For example, those who are presiding, and presenting their case to the people, are seated at the front of the room facing out toward the audience. Thus, there literally are two opposing sides at the outset.

Often, individuals in the audience interrupt the presentation before it is completed with provocative and accusatory statements and questions, for which they are rewarded with immediate applause from their fellows. Moreover, once the hearing is opened to participation from the audience, a parade of individuals presents increasingly acrimonious and aggressive statements to the planning team. These too are rewarded with immediate applause from the audience.

Also, many citizens who speak out at such meetings are not accomplished public speakers and, as such, read long written statements. These previously prepared papers are delivered with little or no regard to what has been said throughout the meeting. In essence then, the citizen speakers do not respond to the information they have received from the planners, and no true two-way discussion occurs at all.

Citizen speakers who are not tied to prepared statements also suffer from pressures that militate against their flexibility. Because of their own prior statements, either in private or in public or both, they feel compelled to hold fast to their original positions regardless of the proposals of the planning team. This self-defeating phenomenon, which often occurs in other confrontation situations, has been termed "the traitor treat," in that the individual feels that he is betraying himself to those who have supported him if he acquiesces in any degree to the opposition.

Another psychological phenomenon that is applicable to this situation is what social scientists refer to as "behavioral contagion." When an individual engages in an activity in the company of others who also are engaged in that activity, the intensity of his behavior can dramatically increase. Common examples of this are eating and laughing. In a public hearing setting, the expression of aggression toward the planners is mutually reinforcing, and initial antagonism can heighten to an unexpected level of disruption.

Working With Prominent Citizens

The second most common approach to dealing with the community involvement aspect of a transportation project has been to work with a small group of prominent individuals assumed to be representatives of the community, such as local public officials, business community figures, and/or other "leading citizens." This method often is tantamount to excluding the public from participation in the study.

The basic flaw of this approach is its simplistic view of the community. One does not identify the attitudes and gain the approval of the community by discussing a project with a handful of leading citizens. It has frequently been the case that the opinions and feelings of select groups diverge widely from those of the community as a whole. This is not surprising, since it is quite common for a group of leading citizens, such as a Chamber of Commerce, to have members who do not even live in the community but simply operate businesses there.

Thus the risk involved in resorting to such an approach is substantial. People in the community who are concerned about the impact of the project feel ignored and alienated. They feed on one another's anger and frustration until the antipathy toward the project becomes well established. This often grows to the point that an active anti-project group becomes formalized, dedicated to the goal of stopping the project through petitions, demonstrations, and the like.

BASIC PHILOSOPHY

Before describing the specific techniques utilized in the execution of the new approach, it is appropriate to discuss the basic philosophy of the overall method. The philosophy is a humanistic one. It recognizes and respects the basic dignity of all persons. It holds that man's constructive tendencies far outweigh his destructive ones and that, if placed in an appropriate environment, his behavior will be in accord with the common good of all. Although these statements are, to an extent, out of character with a technical report, they nevertheless describe the basis on which an effective method of community involvement can be implemented.

In addition to and based on this philosophy, certain other concepts help to guide the implementation of the approach. One of these is the concept of non-advocacy, and the other is that of intellectual honesty. The concept of non-advocacy simply means that the behavioral scientist working with a team of planners acts as a totally neutral figure when engaging the community and makes every effort possible to convince those he is working with of this neutrality. In no case does he offer his support to any involved party, whether it be a highway department, the study team, or elements of the community itself. This neutrality serves as a catalyst for open communication among all concerned. The concept of intellectual honesty means that the same message is given to all sides, and no information is withheld or distorted to give one group any material advantage over another.

The two concepts of non-advocacy and intellectual honesty are used to remove all surprise from a situation. It is the unknown and the unexpected that cause anxiety, frustration, anger, and mistrust. Thus, by keeping all parties informed of the interests and activities of all other parties, a stable, predictable, and productive interaction can be maintained.

PRINCIPAL METHODS OF THE NEW APPROACH

The specific techniques that make up the approach may be grouped under two major headings: community organization work and a community survey. The data provided by the survey, when combined with the data acquired during the community organization work, can provide planners with an adequate and accurate composite picture of the community's goals and desires relative to a project. These tasks are discussed in detail in the following.

Community Organization Work

In order to engage the community in the active dialogue necessary for its effective participation in the project, a specific sequence of steps has to be followed. First, the

appropriate individuals and groups to be contacted are identified. Second, these persons are contacted to determine the basic focus of their concerns. Third, situations are developed wherein information can be exchanged between the community elements and the planners. As the study team reaches decisions, the content of these decisions is released to appropriate persons in the community. Initial reactions are noted and brought to the attention of appropriate study team members for their action.

Identification of Individuals and Groups—The identification and selection of individuals and groups to be contacted from perhaps the tens of thousands of residents in a study area is an important consideration. To this end, the team behavioral scientist must conduct both a leadership and a group profile.

Leadership Profile—Individuals occupying positions of formal leadership within the community have, by definition, a significant impact on the attitudes and actions of the community at large. Thus, their inclusion in a study is critical, and a major effort must be made to identify them and to obtain their suggestions and opinions. Within the study area, the persons who qualify as leaders number in the hundreds. Thus, the initial problem is to ensure that those included are representative of the leadership structure as a whole. Fortunately, in recent years advances in sociopsychological theorizing have created an approach that seems particularly relevant to the solution of this problem. This approach and its theoretical orientation are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Basically, the community can be conceptualized as a conglomeration of organizations. These organizations can be categorized into four groups: (a) productive or economic organizations; (b) maintenance organizations; (c) adaptive organizations; and (d) managerial or political organizations.

Productive or economic organizations are concerned with the creation of wealth, the manufacture of goods, and the provision of services to the general public or its specific segments. For the society as a whole, they provide an instrumental integration, i.e., they provide the food, clothing, and shelter. They also provide the rewards that induce persons to keep the system functioning.

Maintenance organizations are devoted to the socialization of persons for their roles in other organizations and in the larger society. Organizations such as the school and the church are maintenance structures of the social order. These types of organizations are responsible for the integration of society.

Adaptive structures create knowledge, develop and test theories, and, to some extent, apply information to existing problems. Colleges, research organizations, and planning groups provide an adaptive function for the society as a whole.

Finally, within the managerial or political function, i.e., the organizational activities concerned with the adjudication, coordination, and control of resources and people in the society, are found the elected offices and formalized pressure groups.

The task, then, is to choose individuals who are leaders of the various types of organizations. Moreover, the selection has to be made in as balanced a manner as possible so that leaders from one type of organization will not be over-represented.

Group Profile—Among those deemed important for inclusion in the community organization work are anti-project protest groups and other groups who previously have shown an interest in transportation planning. There are a number of sources of names of such groups, such as the local news media, professional highway department and similar agency personnel, and local legislators.

Perhaps the greatest resource for identifying groups is the initial group meetings themselves. At the close of each of these meetings, those attending are asked what other groups of which they are aware would wish to participate in the study. To be sure, many groups are likely to be identified through more than one source. In fact, the frequency with which a group is named provides some indication of its relative importance; thus, the priorities for contacting groups can be rather easily established.

Determination of the Concerns of the Leadership—Meetings with individual leaders usually take place during working hours, typically at their place of business. The team behavioral scientist must be experienced in the use of counseling and interviewing techniques when conducting these meetings, which usually consume about an hour's time. Interviews are loosely structured so as to give leaders a maximum amount of freedom in expressing attitudes and opinions concerning transportation issues in the area.

Questions must be asked as unobtrusively as possible so as to cover all essential topics. Among the topics to be included might be the following:

1. Awareness of any controversy over the transportation plan;
2. Assessment of what should be done to meet present and future transportation needs in the area; and
3. Appraisal of the citizen groups that have been opposed to the project.

Determination of the Concerns of the Citizen Group—Perhaps the most sensitive area of the entire community involvement effort is the interaction with protest and other citizen groups. It is here that the battle to achieve effective community participation is waged.

Initial efforts to arrange meetings with community representatives are often met with mixed reactions. Some community groups appear happy to have a neutral outsider hear their grievances first-hand. However, many others consent to a meeting only hesitantly, feeling that it is simply a new ploy to gain acceptance for the unwanted project.

The primary characteristics of the group meetings are small size and informality. Typically, the team behavioral scientist requests that the number of persons attending be between six and eight. This is a very manageable size and, in fact, is derived from such widely divergent fields as group therapy, business management, and sensitivity training, where research has shown that group size has a significant impact on the quality of the communication that occurs.

The degree of formality of a meeting also influences the quality of communication. The more relaxed the atmosphere is, the more likely that unguarded, open communication will occur. Group meetings are held during the evening hours and usually at the home of one of the group's members. In these comfortable and familiar surroundings, any initial mistrust and hostility rather quickly gives way to meaningful conversation. Frequently these sessions last many hours, often past midnight. This time is spent fruitfully, however, in that the basic concerns of the people are presented and further small group meetings are made possible. These are quite critical since they involve bringing the members of the study team into contact with the citizen groups.

These subsequent meetings comprise the very crux of the approach: true face-to-face dialogue between community members and the technical team responsible for performing the tasks and making the decisions. As a matter of procedure, prior to every community-study team meeting, the team behavioral scientist indicates to each of the team members what, on the basis of initial group meetings, he understands the concerns and questions of the community group to be. This procedure allows the team members to consider the concerns of the group, to be ready for the questions that might arise, and to prepare their own questions. Thus, the surprise characteristics of the situation are reduced, lessening tension and facilitating a healthy interchange of ideas and questions.

In terms of size and informality, community-study team meetings are similar to the initial meetings; they also are held in the private homes of group members during the evening hours. Typically, these encounters are quite effective in achieving their purpose. The problems and concerns of both sides are aired, and the planners are able to gain data useful in the conduct of their work.

The Information Release Network—As the study progresses, numerous in-house meetings must be held by the study team to discuss the direction taken by each of the members, as well as to determine the direction of the study as a whole. During these meetings, it is the sociologist's task to temporarily put aside his position of non-advocacy and act as spokesman for the community in evaluating the various alternatives presented.

The series of in-house study team meetings ultimately lead to a number of highly significant interim decisions regarding the major conclusions and recommendations of the study. To continue to maintain the desired community involvement during the decision-making process, initial, tentative decisions must be passed on to the community. The vehicle for achieving this objective is an information release network. Essentially, this network involves the establishment of appropriate channels for releasing critical decisions. In executing the network, certain tasks have to be accomplished, including the following:

1. Ensure release of the correct information to the people;
2. Properly phase the release of information;

3. Acquire the initial reactions of the people; and
4. Assure due consideration to the opinions and alternatives offered.

The first consideration, ensuring the release of the correct information, is perhaps the most difficult. To prevent the release of biased or erroneous data, information is released to significant individuals and groups in the area by personal conversation, telephone calls, and letters. After dissemination of the information in this matter, the data are made available to the media. Three objectives can be accomplished by proceeding in this manner:

1. The message is not distorted;
2. No one is surprised by stories that ultimately appear in the news media; and
3. The procedure ensures the maintenance of a personal touch, a sense of personal involvement that is so characteristic of the earlier phases of the community organization work.

The proper phasing of information releases also constitutes an important consideration. Protest groups display the sociopsychological dynamics exhibited by all groups, i.e., they have their own internal status hierarchy. During the initial and subsequent meetings with these groups, their internal leadership structures are identified, and it is possible to distinguish between those group members with more and less influence.

In passing team decisions on to these groups, it is important that the status hierarchies not be violated. Thus, if individuals with rather strong influence in a group are the last to be informed of the decisions of the study team, they may resent the fact that their positions of high status have been ignored and might, either consciously or unconsciously, become more critical of the information released. The phasing of information releases, then, is helpful in gaining positive responses.

The third consideration, the response of the community to information released, is also critical. This is especially true in dealing with the group leaders since, by the very definition of their leadership, their reactions are an indication of the reactions of the community as a whole. In all contacts with community members, they must be invited and even encouraged to respond to the decisions of the study team. Furthermore, it has to be emphasized that the study team will give serious consideration to their reactions in developing the final conclusions of the study.

Community Survey

As a significant part of the overall community involvement effort, a survey should be conducted with the primary goal of identifying, in an explicit and comprehensive manner, the attitudes and opinions of the general community relative to transportation and transportation planning. The survey also helps to determine the representativeness of the individuals and groups contacted as part of the community organization work. The issue of the representativeness of protestors is always a special concern, since, if protestors are a vocal minority, the omission of the survey would make it possible for these individuals to have a disproportionately large voice in the community involvement program.

DEVELOPMENT OF A CONTINUING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE COMMUNITY

One of the typical findings of a community involvement program like the one described here is the pronounced desire of the community to participate in transportation planning. Individuals and groups consulted usually express a definite desire to take part in the transportation decisions that so greatly affect their lives.

Interestingly, the very execution of the community involvement tasks initiates a closer rapport between the community and those involved in transportation and transportation planning. Frequently, the persons contacted express a great deal of satisfaction with the fact that they have been consulted and their opinions and suggestions taken into consideration. Highway departments and other agencies involved can take advantage of this regeneration of trust by maintaining a continuing liaison with the communities they serve. In so doing, they can prevent future confrontations, or, at the very least, mitigate the intensity of such confrontations.