

# A REVIEW OF THE PUBLIC HEARING PROCESS AS A MEANS OF OBTAINING CITIZEN VIEWS AND VALUES

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## ABRIDGMENT

•THE importance of citizen input to the process of highway planning is well recognized as being essential to the development of proper designs of these facilities to best meet the needs of the people they serve. In the past this input of citizens concerned with a project has come mainly through their elected officials and through the public hearing process. Recently, however, the level of citizen opposition has increased in many cities and has raised serious questions as to the adequacy and accuracy of the public hearing process as a means of gaining citizen input into the planning process.

Previous work at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee (1, 2) investigated the feasibility of social diagnostic techniques as a means of gaining understanding of citizen views and values in the transportation planning process. This was done through conducting a home interview survey of residents living in or near the proposed corridor of the northerly extension of the stadium freeway in Milwaukee County. The purpose of this paper is to compare attitudes toward the project as expressed at the public hearing (obtained from an analysis of the hearing transcript) with those obtained from the survey and the use of social diagnostic techniques.

The overwhelming feeling of those persons who presented testimony at the hearing was one of opposition. Only 5 of the 14 organizations and 3 of the 42 individuals who testified orally at the hearing supported the project. Of those who submitted written testimony, only 6 of the 15 organizations and 2 of the 69 individuals were in support of the project. Finally, 5 petitions containing 4,183 signatures were received supporting the project while 9 petitions containing 21,487 signatures opposed the project. Among the concerns expressed most often by individuals in opposition to the project were its adverse effects on property through the taking of homes and inadequate compensation for them (33 persons), the increases in air and noise pollution levels (21 persons), the loss in tax base (23 persons), and the need for better mass transit (21 persons).

The picture that emerges from the survey is quite different. Of those surveyed, 40 percent approved of the northerly extension of the stadium freeway, 45 percent disapproved, and 15 percent had no opinion. This can be contrasted with that of the public hearing, where 95 percent of the individuals testifying opposed the project. The survey further indicated that the respondents had a generally low opinion of highway planning and felt that they were not being told enough about what was being planned. The respondents generally felt that public hearings were an effective means of expressing objections to a proposed project, but only a small portion of them have actually participated in such a hearing.

From these results it is evident that the public hearing did not present an accurate picture of citizen attitudes and values. This finding implies an essential need to conduct well-structured parallel surveys of the residents of an area affected by a project. Such surveys can be utilized to establish "bench marks" or "datum points" of community views that can be used to gain a fuller understanding and appreciation of the views

expressed at a public hearing. The findings also have further implications on the formulation of action programs for citizen involvement in the transportation planning process, namely, a need to gain an accurate understanding of community values if such programs are to be successful. Finally, the results also lend credence to the suggestions by others (3,4) of the need to modify the public hearing process and to open up more mechanisms for greater citizen involvement in planning efforts.

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