

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND COMMUNITY LIAISON

ALLAN K. SLOAN
Urban Affairs Consultant

This report covers 3 major subjects: structure of the participation, the techniques used, and 6 major lessons learned.

STRUCTURE OF PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

In the Boston region, there are 6 major highway corridors, all radiating from the city center. The Boston Transportation Planning Review (BTPR) was designed to examine the highway controversies that had developed in 3 of those corridors where the radial highways had not been completed and where there was a question as to whether they should be built.

The focus of the BTPR, therefore, was not on the region as a whole. The controversies had existed for a long time. The original plan that formed the basis for the highways was actually adopted shortly after World War II, about 1948. Thus, proposals for radial highways and an inner-belt highway connecting all the radials and skirting the edge of the core areas of Boston and Cambridge had been on the agenda for 20 years. Three of the 6 highways had been constructed, and it was in part a reaction to the impact of the facilities already built that brought about the BTPR. In two of the remaining corridors, highway construction had already begun. Land had already been cleared, property had been taken, and construction work had been started in some areas.

Thus, we were dealing with a situation where a moratorium was declared on a program that was actually well under way, having been committed for some time. Inasmuch as the participatory process in Boston resulted from those factors, one may well ask whether the Boston participatory process is applicable in another metropolitan region where the transportation plan is not fully committed, designed, and under construction. I think in general it can be but, of course, will have to be adapted to a different set of factors. For example, we never had the problem of trying to generate interest. The interest and controversy had been there for years. Many people were violently opposed to the highways. As the highways were built in some corridors, pressure mounted against the construction in the remaining corridors.

Because the structure of the participatory process was tailored around the specific situation in each of the 3 corridors, we really had 3 separate participatory processes in addition to the general regional process. About 60 to 70 percent of the participatory process centered on the dynamics in each of the 3 corridors, each of which had completely different sets of issues and different clienteles.

One of the important characteristics of the structure of participation in Boston was that formal committees were not the most important feature of the process. Most of us who were involved with defining a participatory process at the beginning of the BTPR assumed that the first step in any participatory process is to set up a committee on which there was someone on one side of the controversy, another from the opposing side, and so on. That did not happen for very good reasons. The formal committee that we did have—the Working Committee, which met every Tuesday at lunch to review the work program and the general events of the week and oversee the whole process—was a major component in the region, but was not the major component of the participatory process in the corridors. There, the process centered on the specific technical work and the local issues and the nature, habits, and strengths of the actors in that particular corridor.

As a result, we had completely different participatory experiences in each corridor. In the southwest corridor, which ran primarily through the city of Boston for most of its length, we had probably the highest input from ad hoc and permanent community groups. Local groups from the inner-city neighborhoods of Roxbury, Jamaica Plain, and South Boston and groups involved with the environmental issues in Dedham and Milton were the principal actors. In addition, the city of Boston's administration provided leadership and initiative for framing the basic issues and much of the technical work undertaken by the BTPR. The combination of the city administration and active well-organized community groups both in the city and in the other towns provided the major impetus for what we did.

In the North Shore, on the other hand, we had quite a different pattern. The governing bodies and chief executives of the towns and some of the interest groups were the key clientele. However, we had to deal with each town separately because their interests were so diverse. In the northwest corridor, 3 jurisdictions, the cities of Cambridge and Somerville and the town of Arlington, shared some interests, but community organizations were not so active as in the other corridors. As a result, we had to adapt and develop different mechanisms around the different substantive issues. The process involved in working out our relations in these 3 corridors turned out to be the essence of the participatory process.

TECHNIQUES

We had to invent some of our techniques because there were no applicable precedents for running this kind of participatory process. I directed Study Element II Staff, which was a group set up independently of the prime contract to provide liaison and assistance to the municipalities and the community groups interested in the BTPR. It was composed of locally recruited people with experience in community work in the community itself. The group reported directly to the study manager. We had the problem of trying to define exactly what role we were to play and how we were going to respond to the variety of pressures and interests that were involved in each of the 3 corridors. Our particular role was unique in that we had no contractual responsibility for producing any technical work. Our responsibilities were oriented toward helping manage the participatory process. One of our major functions was to make sure that there was communication going freely and appropriately among the various parties of interest in both the technical staff and the community groups. For example, we spent a great deal of time dealing with 2 groups that were in the same neighborhood and had completely different views of the Southwest Expressway. We had to develop mechanisms that were responsive to a variety of different situations and different kinds of people who had quite a wide variety of styles, knowledge, and interests.

We found that open public information meetings were more desired than any structure of formal committees. The key feature of our participatory process was a continual series of meetings. Thus, one of our main functions was to try to design the appropriate kinds of meetings at the appropriate time in the appropriate place for the appropriate people and to develop the relations between the technical staff and the community groups that were working on and concerned with the same substantive issues.

We needed to rely on the press and on other communication mechanisms to announce and publicize the meetings and to inform people about what was coming up and what some of the issues were. We developed a series of newsletters and had excellent cooperation from both the regional and local press (even to getting a notice of a scheduled meeting in the paper on the same day). Without the help of Abe Plotkin of the Boston Globe, I think we probably would have been in trouble a number of times when we had to set up meetings on very short notices.

A feature of the meetings that is very important is that the technical staff had to listen as much as they had to talk. They had to hear the concerns of community groups, come back from the meeting and reformulate their ideas and concepts, and within a week or so go back to the same group with their findings. This particular strategy was the core of the whole participatory process, and it was not the liaison staff so much as the technical staff that actually had to do this work and develop the procedures and techniques for carrying it out.

MAJOR LESSONS LEARNED

1. Do not underestimate or put down the community people. Do not assume that the technician must educate or otherwise enlighten the people about what the story is. In Boston, the people in the community (when I say community I mean both the municipal officials and various kinds of both ad hoc and permanently established groups) knew as much if not more about the issues than a lot of the technicians did. The people had lived with the issues longer, and the issues were affecting their lives very directly. It was a great tribute to the way the BTPR was conducted that we never dealt with people in a way of putting them down or assuming that they did not know what they were talking about. I think that this is the key to any participatory process, even though there may be a number of wild meetings, kooky ideas, quite a bit of yelling and screaming, and a lot of people telling you to your face that they neither trust you nor think you are so smart. This was a part of the game that we had to learn to play, and it is a very important feature of this process.

2. Present a rationale that is acceptable, reasonable, and well documented. Part of the problem in Boston stemmed from the reasons that had been given to the people in the communities for building the proposed highway facilities. They were told that the facilities were needed so that people could get from Maine to Florida on an Interstate highway or so that people could get into the downtown area, and so on. The highway plans in Boston were developed quite a long time before many of the studies of need were made, and part of the problem in the process was that the need studies often were used to rationalize already existing plans. What happened as a result is that there was a real credibility gap in terms of the purposes for which the highway plans were being developed and sold. There is now a new burden on all of us involved in technical processes to rethink with people the rationale for particular facilities and proposals. Another thing that was a credit to the staff was that we really backed away hard from any phony arguments or any arguments that people in the communities would see as arguments that had no support and no real analytical or any other basis.

3. Understand that procedures are as important as the technical work. What I mean by a procedure is a process for systematically presenting information to and getting feedback from people, who are, after all, the clientele and beneficiaries of particular programs. The finest technical work in the world can lose its effectiveness unless there is a procedure for getting it to the people and getting feedback from them. In the past, agency officials and technicians have sat in their offices and worked out the problems in their own heads and then rushed out at the last minute and announced, "This is

what we're going to do!" That will no longer work, and we learned this when we were dealing with the community groups. When people sensed that we were wrestling with their problems—doing the technical work around issues that they were concerned about—we were able to develop quite a good ability to communicate, especially with various people who were very hostile before and who came along to the point where they were willing if not to agree with the conclusions then at least to accept the analysis. Then we could begin to develop some debate and discussion on what some of the real issues were.

4. Relate transportation studies to the communities and view transportation problems as the communities perceive them rather than as long-range abstractions. Some of the models of long-range future travel demand have led to the rationale for a lot of facilities, but are really quite remote from the concerns of the people in those communities where the facilities will be constructed. We must recognize that the data and the kind of research that is done—and there is a lot of research needed—must be redirected.

5. Find out how people who actually use facilities and services and who need to get around perceive transportation, and design a continuing process that will address those problems. In our technical assistance program, about 60 or 70 percent of our work had very little if nothing to do with the expressways that were being studied. People would come to us with concerns like rerouting a bus route more conveniently or handling a local street problem by providing a new routing or by-pass. In our position, we would have to say, "Yes, that is a good idea but, of course, we are not studying that." They would ask, "Who is studying that?" We would say, "Well, we do not know." We did honestly try to address some of those concerns, but I think the focus of our work was such that we were not able to do them justice. The continuing process for regional transportation planning must address this level and this kind of concern, and I think that part of the participatory process has to be designed to do that.

6. Exercise caution about the participatory process. If the participatory process just becomes the new banner for the transportation planning of the future and all we do is tout the participatory process as the big new wave of the 70s, that is not going to wash. What is important is to have a much more sensitive way of dealing with some of the things that were supposed to be dealt with in the original transportation planning process as it was set up in the early 1960s, namely, a careful assessment of what is needed in the community. We got off on the wrong track because we were probably measuring the wrong things. In Boston, a lot of people felt we had a bad plan. The plan called for great expressways in radial corridors to the inner belt, while at the same time in those same corridors the rail services were drying up. Many people questioned the rationale: Why are you supplanting rail services that have been in operation but are now dying with great big new expressways, which are expensive, are disruptive, and are not going to work when you put them all together? These people were not doing sophisticated analyses but were looking at what was happening with some of the other highways that were built and in operation, particularly the Southeast Expressway, and were raising some good and important questions.

I think that participation has to be one of the key tools in the process. But the end of the process still has to be the delivery of transportation services that are appropriate to the particular clientele in the particular area. And I think we must learn from our experiences of the 1960s that led the move for participation. We may have become overly dogmatic about planning a big shiny new facility and ignored the kind of process that involves looking at the real needs of people, figuring out what we should plan as a result, and then having a much more flexible and open way of providing better transportation to citizens.