Public Participation in the Metropolitan Toronto Transportation Plan Review

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A public participation program cannot be reduced to a flow chart, nor will a program that has been effective in one area necessarily be effective in another area. Principles that guided the Metropolitan Toronto Transportation Plan Review included the following: develop planning alternatives that incorporate a number of different viewpoints and that offer something to everybody; do not agree to a level of participation that cannot be adequately serviced; follow a policy of open information; work within the traditional decision-making process; maintain day-to-day contacts with media; meet people on their own terms; broaden the base of involvement; rely on the use of community resources; and hire participation staff with strong community skills and limited knowledge of planning.

There is no common understanding of what the term public participation means. Therefore, those who initiate or carry out any kind of participation program should define the term for their own purposes and make that definition publicly known: what level of participation is being sought, how can the public participate, what is the program intended to achieve, and what is it not intended to achieve. Second, consideration should be given to the size and nature of the group to be involved and the context within which the work is to be done. For example, as the coordinator of public liaison for a royal commission, my role is clearly one of liaison in setting up formal hearings. On the other hand, at the neighborhood level, I might play the role of an advocate planner.

I make these points at the outset because I do not want to convey that what worked best in Toronto will necessarily work at all in some other city of comparable size and in all probability will not work without major modifications for programs on a different scale or programs designed to achieve different ends.

Metropolitan Toronto has a population of slightly more than 2 million people within an area of 240 miles$^2$ (624 km$^2$). We have a 2-tiered federated system of local government that incorporates 6 area municipalities: an inner ring of 3, which is considered the central city, and an outer ring of 3, which is considered the suburbs. Since 1951, the population of the outer ring has grown from 200,000 to more than 1.1 million. The impact of this rate of growth has been enormous. Many citizens, particularly in the central city, fear that we are losing our livability and that we should stop and reassess our priorities. As a result, the addition of any new centrally oriented transportation facilities is not generally favored. Opponents of the automobile-oriented city are numerous and are not prepared to accept any further urban expressway proposals. Toronto has approximately 800 citizen and community groups, a significant percentage of whom are fairly well informed and moderately active. Most are concerned with the preservation of residential neighborhoods. Few are militant, perhaps because there has been little evidence of corruption in local government, which is relatively open. In addition, area municipalities have developed a number of programs to involve residents in neighborhood issues.

Toronto is a wealthy city. It is the commercial center of Canada and one of its
leading cultural centers. As a result, its population is more politically sophisticated than that of some cities. It is perhaps important too that housing is scarce and housing costs have risen to the highest on the continent, thereby limiting the mobility of residents.

The major task of the Metropolitan Toronto Transportation Planning Review (MTTPR) was to develop some long-range transportation and land use alternatives for metropolitan Toronto. Therefore, public participation in the review meant involvement in the development of choices and not in the making of final decisions.

For the purposes of the MTTPR, public participation was defined as a process of mutual education among the public, planners, and elected representatives. Those who got involved in the program were urged to maintain close liaison with their local elected representatives not only while the review was in progress but also subsequent to it when some of the final choices would be made. There was no formal transfer of power from elected representatives to nonelected citizen bodies, citizen groups were not funded to hire their own staff, and there was no moratorium on transportation decisions while the review was in progress. The program supplemented rather than competed with the traditional decision-making process.

The review was not established to deal with specific issues. However, after the release of a preliminary report stating that the need for a proposed expressway facility had never been documented, we were directed to review the proposal and make a specific recommendation to Metro Council as to whether the expressway should be built. Since there was some indication by the council that the recommendation would carry considerable weight, a much more intensive public participation program was carried out on this issue.

In my view one of the most common fallacies with regard to public participation is the assumption that one can develop a flow chart of a participation program before that program is initiated. Even worse is the assumption that participation blueprints can be developed for use in a variety of locations and for a variety of purposes. Naturally one must work within an overall time frame and an overall budget, but the first rule in public participation is to have sufficient changes within the course of a program should the need arise. We can never program people nor can we plan for unforeseen crises.

The goal of the participation program of the MTTPR was to involve as many people as possible in long-range transportation planning. The program was never planned ahead for more than about 3 months, and major changes were made along the way. Although there was no fixed plan for the program, it was guided by a number of principles.

1. Develop planning alternatives that incorporate a number of different viewpoints and that offer something to everybody. It was hoped that, by the development of such alternatives, some of the trade-offs would be made at the planning stages and negative confrontation would be less likely at the time of decision making.
2. Do not agree to a level of participation that cannot be adequately serviced.
3. Follow a policy of open information. Review reports and research were available for public scrutiny at all stages of preparation (except for the final one that was prepared under considerable pressures of time). Rough drafts were not distributed. (People did come in to see them, and in the 2½ years, only one such report was handed to the press.) As soon as a report was completed, 1,000 copies were printed, about 700 of which immediately went into the community; every public library in metropolitan Toronto received a copy. Although the participation program was originally viewed with considerable distrust, we developed through our information dissemination a great deal of credibility in the community. An aggressive information policy also reduces the ability of individuals to manipulate people at the neighborhood level. Neighborhood issues do emerge, but local government is better able to negotiate reasonable compromises among groups with opposing views.
4. Work within the traditional decision-making process.
5. Maintain day-to-day contacts with the media. Before materials were released, the media were given copies so that they could review the materials and ask questions before preparing their reports. For the most part, the coverage received was better than average in terms of both accuracy and fairness. We did little advertising, largely
because of the cost, and in my opinion, we lost nothing by not doing so.

6. Meet people on their own terms. Staff went out to area neighborhoods and worked with people on local as well as metropolitan concerns. In this connection, we encouraged and supported the establishment of local or neighborhood participation programs in the belief that such programs provide people with a base of knowledge and experience invaluable to understanding and appreciating broader concerns.

7. Broaden the base of involvement. The MTTPR attempted to offer opportunities for participation on a variety of levels. Some groups were just kept informed, others prepared briefs that we printed and distributed, and others worked on a day-to-day basis with members of the staff.

8. Rely heavily on the use of community resources. Neighborhood facilities, such as public libraries, schools, and plazas, were used for public meetings. Community groups helped to organize and advertise these meetings. The staff of community agencies, schools, and other government departments assisted the MTTPR in identifying issues to be dealt with at the neighborhood level. Such a policy keeps costs down, avoids the compartmentalization of different planning initiatives, minimizes the chance of failing to take neighborhood concerns into account, and ensures a certain degree of acceptance of one's activities.

9. Hire participation staff with strong community skills and a limited knowledge of planning. The role of the participation staff is to bring all of the actors together, to provide the support services for this to happen on an ongoing basis, and to carry out a substantial information program. For large-scale programs, highly skilled community workers are needed. However, the program they develop makes heavy demands on senior planning staff. The senior planner many times worked 4 evenings a week. Junior planners were not sent out to deal with the public. By the end of the 2-year period, participation staff were quite comfortable in most planning discussions. They had a wealth of information about the structure of local government, the kinds of planning issues that were of greatest concern, and the kinds of solutions that were being proposed. They brought to the work team a social and human element that is badly needed in urban planning.

The public participation program of the MTTPR centered around public meetings. Meetings were held in neighborhoods all across the metropolitan area at which we discussed the role of the review, outlined the major existing transportation and land use proposals directly affecting the area in question, asked area residents to identify their transportation concerns and to suggest solutions, and invited them to get involved in transportation planning. Presentations at the meetings were brief since information booklets on each area were prepared in advance and contained many of the details. These booklets listed the people to contact for everything from getting a bus stop changed to getting detailed information on a regional transportation proposal.

In addition, numerous meetings were held to discuss specific issues or to hear the views of a special interest group. These meetings were advertised in neighborhood newspapers, and colorful flyers noting some of the issues to be discussed were distributed to community groups, area residents on the mailing list, libraries, and community agencies. In addition, flyers were often distributed to school children to take home to their parents. There were also many public service announcements in the media. With the exception of the meetings on the proposed Scarborough Expressway, advertising costs seldom exceeded a few hundred dollars.

In addition to having a senior planner at these meetings, we invited resource people from other transportation agencies and area elected representatives to participate. All of those who attended a meeting received a transcript of it. Therefore, any commitment made by a planner or elected representative was documented in writing. This practice, although cumbersome, helps to allay any fears that the meetings are being used as a public relations gimmick.

During the course of the review, more than 10,000 people attended these meetings. They were successful, I believe, because

1. They were held in people's neighborhoods,
2. Local residents were involved in organizing and advertising them,
3. They dealt with local as well as metropolitan concerns but avoided stepping on
toes by involving local officials directly, and
4. The MTTPR was the first transportation body in the metropolitan area to go to
the people despite the virtual stalemate that had developed in transportation planning
particularly with respect to roads.

The second major activity of the program was the production of simply written tab-
loids, which were distributed widely in the community. Some were progress reports,
some outlined alternatives and invited public comment, and some provided a detailed
description of particular aspects of transportation.

Many programs find tabloids to be of limited use, perhaps because they are often
written by technically trained people and are difficult for the average person to read
and understand. We found them immensely popular. They were used in classrooms
and as discussion papers by community groups. They are also inexpensive. In 1972,
we produced 20,000 copies of tabloids in black and white for approximately $500 and
staff time. Our most expensive tabloid at about $2200 was 20 pages in length and had
printing in several colors. Maps of plans or alternatives can be pulled out of a tabloid
and hung on the wall for purposes of comparison. Tabloids can be mailed for a few
pennies each.

The MTTPR had many other means of reaching people. Both participation and plan-
ning staff addressed and worked with numerous community groups, staffed and unstaffed
displays were set up throughout the area, courses in urban transportation were offered
by 2 community colleges and were taught by teachers provided by the review, TV pro-
grams were produced by review staff, and staff took part in many community affairs
programs. MTTPR produced a host of information booklets on local government struc-
ture.

Although the participation program was largely an education program, it was suc-
cessful in influencing a number of transportation decisions. An additional station was
added to a proposed commuter rail line, a proposed expressway was canceled and a
transit scheme will be implemented in its stead, an arterial road is to be built along
part of the right-of-way of the previously canceled Spadina Expressway but will not con-
tinue into the city core, and additional capacity is being planned for the commuter rail
lines. Perhaps the most important achievement of the review, however, is that it pro-
duced a final report in which land use and transportation planning are tied together and
a report that recognizes the affect of transportation services and facilities on the day-
to-day lives of people. The alternatives produced by the review will form a major part
of the Official Plan Review of Metropolitan Toronto and will be reviewed by a number
of study groups.

I will return now to the review of the need for the proposed Scarborough Expressway,
list participation techniques used, and expand on several of them. This program was
designed to solicit opinion on both a metropolitan wide and a corridor basis with the
greater emphasis being given to the area that would be impacted by the proposed facil-
ity. Features of the program were

1. Community advisory committee,
2. One-hour TV program,
3. A tabloid,
4. Public meetings,
5. Formal questionnaires at public meetings,
6. Reproduction of letters and briefs submitted and distribution in the community,
7. Socioeconomic survey of those persons who would be displaced along the western
portion of the expressway route (the eastern portion of the route had not been decided),
and

The 1-hour TV program was scripted and produced by MTTPR staff. It described
the expressway proposal in detail, showed models of certain sections, and discussed
the pros and cons of building it; described some transit alternatives to the expressway and their pros and cons; and discussed the impacts on the community of building these different facilities. The majority of the commentary was given by individual citizens who stood on all sides of the issue. The total cost of producing the program was less than $7,000 and the purchase of Sunday afternoon air time was approximately $3,000. The response to the program was far beyond our expectations; it was carried by the 1 commercial station and by the 5 cable companies as part of their community programming.

For reaching 2.5 million people in a community, television has enormous possibilities and need not be expensive. Our program was far from technically perfect. In fact, its imperfections won it praise for it was not viewed as a slick, expensive piece of public relations.

Members of the community advisory committee primarily advised on the public participation aspects of the expressway review, although they did make a limited number of more technical suggestions. To get meaningful technical advice from the public would require full-time planners working on a day-to-day basis with citizens prepared to give up many hours of their spare time. From my experience, voluntary technical committees can sometimes be effective on short-term projects; however, the net effectiveness on long-term projects is limited.

The questionnaires handed out at the public meetings were an attempt to get at people's values and to determine whether they thought this expressway should be built. The review did not want to solicit uninformed opinion. For this reason, we did not mail out the questionnaire to a random sample in the community. The responses we received were from people who had seen the TV program, read the tabloid, or attended public meetings on the issue.

The survey of those who would be displaced, should the expressway be built, was rather intensive and was done by an outside firm. The MTTPR wanted to know as much as possible about this group so that it could determine the real costs of relocating them. The area was a low-income area, but most homes were owner occupied. (Many of the people were elderly.) Virtually no low-priced housing is left in Toronto, and a more than adequate price for a home in that area would not have allowed the owner to purchase a comparable home elsewhere. The area in question was and is extremely well served by transit and is close to most other services. The MTTPR suggested that, should relocation become necessary, a body be established to plan and implement the relocation and that this body have sufficient resources to cover all of the costs to those displaced. Since the review recommended that the expressway not be built, no action was taken on this recommendation.

The real questions were whether adequate compensation would have included the costs of better accommodation if similar accommodation could not be found, whether such a body would compensate those who would require new mortgages at much higher interest rates, and whether it would lend money at low-interest rates to middle-aged or elderly low-income home owners who would in all probability not be able to borrow in the private market. There is also the larger question of what happens to a city when those with lower incomes are pushed into smaller and smaller spaces. I suspect that few would argue that policies that create this kind of situation may prove to be costly. Too often the construction of transportation facilities has been used as a kind of urban renewal. We need low-cost housing.

In conclusion, I have a few thoughts and suggestions that might be helpful to those planning or involved in a public participation program.

1. If you are trying to reach a large population, try to get a level of participation that is not prohibitively expensive and one that can be adequately serviced.
2. If the work group is working on a regional scale and reporting to an intergovernmental committee, do not set up a community steering committee with supervisory powers. On the other hand, such bodies can be extremely valuable at a neighborhood level or in dealing with a specific issue.
3. Remember that open information must precede any meaningful participation.
4. Keep the program flexible enough to accommodate changes along the way. You
may find yourself providing needed public services that are somewhat beyond your terms of reference because no one else is providing them. This particularly applies to the production of information.

5. Try to meet people on their own terms and allow for as many different kinds of participation as possible.

6. Involve the community in the design of your program and use existing community resources wherever possible. Be particularly careful to recognize those who are perceived to be or who are in fact community leaders.

7. Tell the public what you are prepared to do and also tell them what you are not prepared to do.

8. Ensure that the public understand the decision-making process and the role of your agency in it.

9. Unless you are prepared to take on the whole system of government, involve all relevant elected representatives from the outset. Although they may derive some political gain from the program, you can be reasonably assured of their support, particularly if activities involving them are visible and become part of the public record.

10. Remember that the person who holds the purse strings exercises a good deal of control. If the federal government will pay for a large portion of the facilities or services you propose, then members of Congress and their staffs should be kept informed and involved. Given the U.S. system of government, this is probably even more important than it is in Canada since the United States tends to have a stronger central government.

11. Expect at least a 50 percent increase in planning time, and ensure that senior planners are prepared for periods of unreasonably heavy work loads. Most staff will, therefore, need a good deal of freedom with regard to hours, and some attention should be paid to their morale.

12. Once you have set your short-term schedule and made it public, stick to it. Otherwise, you will be asked for postponement; delaying is a common opposition tactic. Meet your own deadlines and insist that the public do the same.

13. Beware of those who have found the perfect program. Public participation is a consultant's paradise. This is one area where a knowledge of the community is better than many kinds of training or expertise. The latter can be bought when required. Consultants can be useful in pointing out pitfalls to avoid and techniques used elsewhere, but try to find local people to design and manage your program.