

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN WESTSIDE TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

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This paper describes an experiment in citizen participation in Atlanta, Georgia, as seen through the eyes of a citizen who is also a professional transportation planner. Communication difficulties are identified among the three stakeholder groups—the citizens, the study design team, and the decision-makers. These difficulties are attributed to strong feelings of mistrust, which were reinforced as the citizens attempted to create a citizen-dominated executive board that could participate in policy-making at the highest level.

•IN 1972 and 1973, a program was launched to involve citizens in transportation planning for a major portion of metropolitan Atlanta. Although some benefit was gained from the program, it failed because of mistrust among the major participating groups: the citizens, study design team, and the decision-makers.

This paper traces the development of mistrust among the three stakeholder groups, and it is hoped that the conclusions will have some value for others planning programs of citizen participation. As a citizen with a professional background in transportation planning, the author became involved in the process in a major way. Whatever insights are offered result from an ability to communicate with the citizens and the study design team. Unfortunately, this role was not developed sufficiently well to turn failure into success.

STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

The three stakeholder groups were as follows. The citizens were a heterogeneous group varying in income, education, occupation, and race. They were interested in the transportation problems of the study area and attended a series of public meetings. Most of them lived in the study area; a few were outsiders who had strong areawide transportation interests.

The study design team was drawn from professional planners at the sponsoring agencies: the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), the area's comprehensive planning agency; the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT); and the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), the public transit agency. There were also five citizen members and some consulting support. The planners seemed to be dedicated to achieving their purpose. The citizen members were appointed from candidates known to the other members of the design team. (Later, there was some friction between the citizens-at-large and the study design team over the rather arbitrary method used to select citizen members.) Most of the study design team was absent from the later stages of the work because there was not sufficient money to support their continued participation.

The decision-makers were never really identified. Supposedly they were officials who had the authority to implement a transportation program and to commit funds to support continued study. Some members of the study design team discussed decision-makers as though they were a formally constituted body. When a decision-maker was asked for, some senior staff from the sponsoring agencies who did not have decision-making responsibility were produced.

The questions to be decided on were not clear. Many citizens were concerned only with what would affect their lives and homes; the design team seemed more concerned with planning decisions. The decision-makers were never clearly defined and did not play an active role in the process; nonetheless, their presence was always felt by the

other two stakeholder groups, particularly the citizens. Only one official of a sponsoring agency made an effort to deal with the other two stakeholders.

LOCATION

The Westside, or southwest Atlanta, has a population of about a quarter million. The Westside is bounded on the north by the Southern Railway, on the east by the major north-south urban freeway, and on the south and west by the perimeter freeway that circumscribes the Atlanta metropolitan area. In the Westside are Hartsfield International Airport, Fort McPherson, and a major part of Atlanta's industry. It includes three smaller communities—East Point, College Park, and a part of Hapeville (Tri-Cities)—and a portion of unincorporated Fulton County. There are a few affluent neighborhoods, a moderate number of middle-class areas, and many low-income and public housing communities.

STUDY DEVELOPMENT

The Westside study was partly motivated by the recent work of the Urban Systems Laboratory at M.I.T. (1, 2). A representative from M.I.T. served as an advisor to the study design team throughout the study planning phase. The implied objective of the study was to involve citizens in the design of a Westside transportation evaluation plan. The plan would then be executed by a professional design team with some form of continuing citizen input.

The plan for the program had four steps:

1. Organization of a study design team;
2. Preparation of working papers for use with citizen participants;
3. Public meetings to discuss, evaluate, and modify the working papers; and
4. Reduction of the working papers to a study design report.

The study design report was to specify the tasks, participants, organizational relationships, and a schedule for a comprehensive transportation plan for the Westside.

The plan erred in its perception of a citizen-professional dialogue and in omitting the professional from the dialogue. The first two steps proceeded on schedule and produced a set of working papers, carefully selected reference materials that were placed in several libraries that served the study area, and information about the design team and the program. The working papers reflected a desire to engage in a serious dialogue with interested citizens; however, they were a bit vague, too general, and not action-oriented. These are faults common to many writings about citizen participation in transportation planning. The tone of the papers was optimistic:

In response to public consciousness... a new direction in transportation planning in Georgia. This process will involve the community substantially and effectively at every stage of the planning process to insure that the final transportation decisions accurately reflect a basic community understanding of, and an agreement on, the course of action to be followed.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

The public meetings were to actively involve the attendees in reviewing and revising the working papers. The public meetings, however, developed in a very different way that reinforced the mistrust already felt by many of the citizen participants.

Many of the invited groups and interested individuals attended the first meeting. There was a general misconception among the citizens that the meetings would deal with transportation plans that had already been proposed. Design team speakers tried to make the point that a fresh start would be made in planning transportation for the Westside; however, many citizens were familiar with previous studies (e.g., GDOT plans for a Westside freeway) and did not believe that they had been discarded. The poor handling of questions and challenges reinforced the initial mistrust felt by the citizens.

At the second meeting a résumé of past planning studies and summary of the trans-

portation planning process were presented. Although the information was undoubtedly useful to many, the presentation was not well-received. The description of the planning process was particularly troublesome because of the complexity of the process. It was meaningful to only a few of the best informed citizens. For the balance, it served merely to widen the gulf between the citizens and the planners and to detract from the communication process.

The planners were uneasy because no basis for a dialogue had been found. The citizens were becoming hostile because no active citizen role was emerging, and they were not interested in discussing a study design plan but wanted to begin formulating policy.

To this point, citizen activity was nonparticipative (3). As a result, a mechanism was proposed and adopted to facilitate more effective citizen participation: A small citizen ad hoc committee was formed to focus on citizen input.

The design team planners, at the third meeting, attempted to focus on issues that could be discussed by the citizens. This appeared to be successful; however, the gap widened. The first report of the ad hoc committee focused on means for assuring adequate citizen participation in the decision-making and implementation processes. The committee was not willing to accept either a passive or a planning role. It wanted full partnership (3) with the decision-makers: control over the transportation facilities built in their neighborhoods. The planners seemed to feel that the citizens were exceeding the scope of the prescribed activity: to prepare a study design plan, not to make policy. Furthermore, they felt good decisions could not be made without benefit of the necessary planning.

In spite of a lack of agreement between the ad hoc committee and the study design team, a study design draft report (4) was distributed for review by the sponsoring agencies' personnel and the citizens. It is a loose collection of planning essays and does not set forth a logical procedure for executing a transportation planning study. It gives lip service to some citizen input, but, to the citizen, it seemed the study design team gave the decision-makers in the sponsoring agencies what they wanted. The need for a decision-making body, as advocated by the ad hoc committee, was overlooked.

Figure 1 shows the organization chart proposed by the citizens (4). Most of the report recommends a citizens' advisory committee similar to the ARC. The report emphasized the wasted citizen effort; this seemed to confirm the mistrust already felt.

The ad hoc committee's proposal was in direct opposition to the citizen advisory structure at ARC, which has a system of citizen advisory committees that are made up of representatives from citizen organizations throughout the Atlanta metropolitan area. The ARC advisory committees have no power and do not participate in decision-making. Their principal functions are to interact with ARC staff.

The ad hoc committee felt that all policy level decisions concerning transportation on the Westside should be made by an executive board with a majority of citizen members who would be elected and responsibly represent their neighborhood constituencies.

At the last public meeting, participants were encouraged to review the draft study design report and communicate their comments to the study design team.

AD HOC COMMITTEE

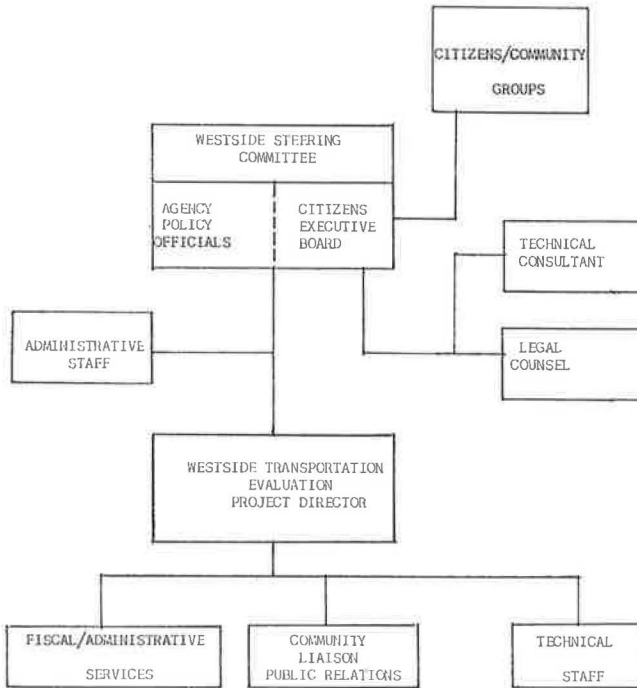
Several members of the ad hoc committee were determined to continue with a formal organization. Time and money would be needed to properly elect the citizen members of an executive board; however, in the interim, the ad hoc committee was voted to represent the citizens.

The last public meeting ended the formal dialogue between the citizens and the study design team; however, GDOT assigned one staff member to work with the ad hoc committee who provided invaluable coordination and support.

The ad hoc committee had not, to this point, received any encouragement from anyone concerning its radical executive board concept. The ad hoc committee members felt that to gain support they would need to develop a complete proposal for the decision-makers.

The committee's principal effort was directed toward districting and election pro-

Figure 1. Organization of Westside transportation evaluation project.



cedures. Public relations activity was not active, and a revised outline of the study design report was prepared but not revised. The proposal for an executive board was the most significant contribution of the ad hoc committee and deserves careful development. It was based on three premises.

1. The decision-makers are not to be trusted. In the past, they have favored the politically strong and moneyed interests at the expense of ordinary citizens.
2. Ordinary citizens have a right to participate in decisions that directly affect them and their life-styles, and, if properly instructed, they are capable of making good decisions.
3. Formal planning does not consider local (neighborhood) needs.

In defense of present procedures, one must acknowledge that many of the abuses rankling citizens are based on decisions made without the benefit of planning or made counter to planning recommendations. Problems usually begin with a political decision to build a transportation facility and subsequent changes in zoning (also politically motivated) that allow traffic to grow to the point of disruption and congestion. Transportation facilities can be and are built with minor disruption if zoning is carefully controlled. Unfortunately most of the good experiences occur in affluent parts of cities.

Disaffection is not restricted to citizens. Planners often are not held in high esteem by decision-makers. Mistrust between planners (with their computers) and decision-makers (with their politics) is not too evident because of their subordinate-superior relationship; however, I feel that mistrust does exist.

The majority of the committee members maintained that citizen input can be effective only at the highest level. Advisory committees, the ARC norm, are not heard; therefore, citizen power would have to be wrested from the decision-makers.

The mechanism for citizen participation was considered. Many persons outside the ad hoc committee recommended that existing elected officials be on the executive board. This view was ultimately rejected for the following reasons:

1. The heterogeneous nature of the Westside makes uniform representation by existing officials impossible;
2. District boundaries cut across rather than conform to neighborhood boundaries, and elected officials are given heterogeneous constituencies;
3. Districts are too large, and they contain more than one homogeneous neighborhood;
4. During their 4-year terms, elected officials often overlook the views of their constituencies; and
5. Elected officials are generally occupied with other duties and cannot spend much time on transportation, particularly at the neighborhood level.

The ad hoc committee opted to divide the Westside into about 10 uniform, homogeneous neighborhoods. Each neighborhood would elect two representatives to the executive board. These representatives would serve staggered 2-year terms subject to recall. (If elected executive board members are to make policy decisions about transportation matters, they must understand the consequences of these decisions as well as the desires of their constituents. This, in turn, requires effective interaction among citizens, citizen groups, and professional planners.)

Some committee members felt it was impossible to generate enough interest in future transportation matters to get a representative electorate in each district. There was a need for educational and public awareness programs. Eventually, a specific election proposal was drawn up by Economic Opportunity Atlanta (EOA) and submitted to the ad hoc committee. EOA proposed to use its field staff to canvass, hold meetings, and conduct elections. The cost of the election process necessitated direct dialogue with the decision-makers.

The success of the dialogue would depend on good, prompt answers from the planners and agreement among the citizens on values and neighborhood goals. Most serious conflicts in the entire transportation planning process would probably occur between citizens during the goal-forming process. Citizens would not agree on what they want their neighborhood to be. Once the goals had been accepted by all or a majority of the citizens, a constructive dialogue with the planners could take place. Nonetheless, this dialogue would need better, more flexible, and faster responding tools than today's transportation planning models (5).

The committee decided first how the citizens were to participate in the decision-making. Next, the committee had to identify the decision-makers. The formal decision-makers were as follows. GDOT selects highway projects for funding but is not generally concerned with design or specific routing. MARTA makes binding commitments for public transportation, but is also not concerned with details. ARC must approve all federally funded transportation projects in their comprehensive planning area. Local governments must approve projects within their jurisdictions.

The committee met with ARC staff for guidance. This was a mistake; ARC's senior staff had no intention of granting power to the citizens.

The ad hoc committee then met with ARC's transportation policy subcommittee, the committee that reviews all transportation matters before they are presented to the ARC board. This committee is made up of top officials from GDOT, ARC (Fig. 2), and MARTA. This also was to no avail. It seems that the only course available to the ad hoc committee is to bring political pressure on ARC (the funding agency for the committee) through the Atlanta area's elected officials. To date, this has not been done.

CONCLUSIONS

During the past 2 years, two major freeway projects in Atlanta have been either blocked or seriously delayed largely as a result of massive citizen protests. Millions of dollars have been lost in these projects alone. A tiny fraction of the lost funds could be used for an effective citizen participation program.

Despite failure of the Westside citizen plan for effective transportation, some ideas have evolved that are worthy of further development.

1. Citizens mistrust both transportation planners and decision-makers and are unwilling to accept a passive role in the transportation planning process.

Level. From Symposium on Public Participation in Environmental Planning and Assessment, Syracuse, March 14, 1974.

7. Community Involvement: Is Anybody Listening? Citizen Participation Conference, National Association of Regional Councils, March 26-29, 1972.
8. Citizen Participation in Transportation Planning. HRB Spec. Rept. 142, 1973.

DISCUSSION

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Most public agencies at the state and local levels are created and funded for a specific and usually narrow purpose. The authority and legal responsibility for developing and funding programs is mandated to them by law, and there is a complex of federal, state, and local laws, regulations, policies, and practices governing both the development of programs and the application of funds for implementation. In addition most public agencies have policy-making officials or boards either elected by popular vote, appointed by higher (usually elected) officials, or set by law. Plans and programs almost always require some form of political endorsement from local elected representatives before public money is spent. Therefore, unilateral decisions in this context are almost impossible. If they sometimes appear to be, then it is likely due to default.

Furthermore, as long as we continue to perceive decision-makers as a narrowly constituted group, they will be demons who have invaded our midst. Note that Jones admits no pressure has yet been brought on Atlanta's politicians. He seems to say that agencies should assume the role of intercessors between the citizen and the politician he elects and that citizens should only pressure their elected officials as a last resort.

If I could restate Jones's thesis, it would be that confusion over goals and objectives, disunity among participants, strategic and tactical errors, an unfavorable climate, an experimental approach, part-time staff, and inexperience produce unpredictable, limited, and sometimes negative results. Most human problems can be laid to mistrust. It is too abstract to deal with directly and only its manifestations can be dealt with effectively.

Jones failed to mention that the effort he describes was almost aborted 3 months before any citizens were involved at all. Confusion and disunity were prevalent, and several participants were ready to forgo involvement in the study. A midstream change in management rekindled some interest but did not resolve the underlying problems.

In view of all this, it is amazing that the public was ever involved at all in this project, and when they were, several tactical errors were made:

1. The large public meeting format was selected as a primary form of citizen involvement. This was probably a bad choice because it had become recognized and established for citizen protest and opposition in other parts of the Atlanta region.
2. Only a limited number of meetings held at a reasonably well-known but not too accessible site were scheduled. Although the original intent was to use these to generate smaller community group meetings, this was not completely successful.
3. There was inadequate prestudy publicity explaining the need, purpose, and scope of the study.
4. There were no full-time and separate public involvement staff to handle the day-to-day communications and follow-ups with citizen groups. The active full-time staff of the design team was limited to about five to seven people. The others divided their time among different, and often unrelated, duties. Few of the members had any training in public involvement; none were experts. The result was that fewer than eight full-time, untrained staff were ministering to a quarter million people.
5. There were no active and visible agency policy-makers or decision-makers

lending authority and status to the effort. This was only one among a number of concurrent projects requiring policy level decisions.

Despite this and the feelings of rebuff and defeat, the study accomplished more than Jones admits. The study has been transformed into a broader concept of subarea planning, which has become an integral part of Atlanta's current Regional Development Plan. It contributed to coalescing community-based interest groups in Atlanta and to appointment of the leader of the ad hoc committee to the advisory council of ARC. It stopped further work on the Westside Freeway project, changed attitudes on community involvement within the agencies, provided a reference point for development of Georgia's Action Plan, and led to more prepublic hearing involvement of community groups on major projects.