Current Use of Public Involvement Techniques by State Highway Agencies

FLORENCE MILLS

ABSTRACT

In 1983 a 5-year-old survey of citations by state highway agencies of their use of public involvement techniques was updated. One additional technique was added to the original 30. The 31 techniques were analyzed by (a) the stage at which they were used in the highway project development and planning process, (b) the types of communication they engendered between the agency and the public, and (c) the size of public group for which they were used. The percent change in numbers of states citing use of a technique between 1977 and 1983 is also presented. States are continuing to move away from reliance on the public hearing as the principal vehicle of involvement to increasing use of techniques such as informational meetings, informal meetings associated with hearings, workshops, and public forums. These techniques provide a procedural setting for two-way communications between the agency and the public. This suggests that public involvement is reaching a maturity that is characterized more by effective use of known techniques than by discovery of new techniques.

Since the early 1970s, public involvement specialists have urged the use of a broad variety of formal and informal techniques to involve the public in the development of highway projects and plans. The early and flexible use of a variety of involvement techniques suited to different types of public groups and to different objectives within an overall public involvement process was considered a way to overcome the widely perceived weaknesses and rigidity of the public hearing when it is used as the sole means of involving the public (1-5). A review in 1977 of documented participation by state highway agencies (SHAs) in the public involvement processes found evidence that these agencies mentioned the use of a wide variety of involvement techniques (6). Early in 1983 a similar survey was conducted in an effort to gain a broad overview of how SHAs were involving the public in federally funded highway projects (7). This information allows a comparison over the last 5 years of the diverse techniques used by practitioners at different stages in highway project planning and development, as well as a comparison of the types of public groups in, and purposes of, the involvement process.

In the early 1970s a number of studies identified comprehensive lists of public involvement techniques thought to be, or known from experience to be, effective in transportation planning and project development (2,8-10). These studies included classifications of techniques by purpose or function in a public involvement program, descriptions of their utility at different stages of planning or project development, and generalized methods for selecting techniques to compose an involvement program. The high level of interest in research on how to involve the public was a response to the uncertainty of how to meet effectively the increased federal requirements and public demand for public involvement.

Wood, in 1977, assessed some parameters of how SHAs and the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Direct Federal Program were responding to the need to use a larger variety of involvement techniques in a more flexible manner (6). Some of the considerations relevant to using these techniques were purpose to be accomplished within the public involvement process, character and size of the public group, and timing in the overall project planning and development process. Wood's analysis of State Action Plans that document each state's approach to public involvement identified 30 techniques as suitable for use. The 30 techniques were divided evenly into two groups: those appropriate mainly for one-way communication to the public and those appropriate for two-way communication with the public. Some techniques in each group were appropriate to large groups and some to small groups, and the Action Plans indicated that the public involvement techniques, as appropriate, were used in all phases of the project development and planning process. Wood concluded that the number of techniques was impressive, that there did not appear to be an uneven focus on techniques of a particular type, and that the indication of use throughout project planning and development was encouraging.

METHOD

In early 1983 the FHWA regional field staff was asked to update the printed tabulation of Wood's 1977 data to reflect current (January 1983) state written procedures on public involvement, either in the Action Plans or elsewhere. The federal requirements for Action Plans were dropped in early 1982, and some states now document their public involvement processes and procedures in other procedural manuals. All regions responded to the written survey; one region responded that there were no real changes in use of techniques by states in the past 5 years. In most regions the survey was completed by division level staff who work closely with the individual state agencies, and state staff were often consulted in the survey.

The 1983 data are analyzed using the same categories used in 1977. That is, they are classified according to how the SHA and the public interact through use of a technique as well as the size of the intended public group. Then, the types of techniques and combinations of techniques are related to their theoretical and actual patterns of use in the stages of the project planning and development process.

USE OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT TECHNIQUES, 1983

Typology of Techniques

A list of the 31 public involvement techniques used by SHAs and FHWA's Direct Federal Program (7) is as follows:

1. Public hearings
2. Information meetings
3. Legal notices
4. Mass media advertisements
5. Mailing lists
6. Citizens committees
7. Speaking engagements with interested parties
8. Circulation of project reports
9. News releases
10. Prehearing and posthearing meetings
11. Surveys
12. Public workshops
13. Direct contact with affected property owners
14. Response forms
15. Newsletters
16. Personal interviews
17. Audiovisual presentations
18. Public forums
19. Project field office
20. Published project development schedule
21. Telephone hotlines
22. Televised planning discussions
23. Project field review with citizens
24. Mass mailouts
25. Citizens band radio announcements
26. Resource base analysis
27. Announcement on local bulletin boards
28. Public information displays
29. Billboard advertisements near project
30. Press conference
31. Handouts distributed by local institutions

Although the survey included a request that additional techniques be added to the original 30, only one, handouts distributed by local institutions such as utilities, was added.

The 31 techniques can be divided into two types: (a) public information techniques such as legal notices or mass mailouts, resulting in a one-way transfer of information from the SHA to the public and (b) public involvement techniques such as speaking engagements or information meetings, resulting in a two-way exchange of information and views between the SHA and the public. The involvement techniques can be divided further into those that are most appropriate for large groups at a specific moment (e.g., public hearings) and those that are most appropriate for small groups over a period of time (e.g., direct contact). The information techniques can be divided into those useful for broad exposure of information to a mass audience (e.g., legal notices or mass media advertisements); for conveying information to a narrower community located near the project (e.g., bill boards located near the project of public information displays); or for disseminating information to specific individuals or groups (e.g., response forms or mailing lists).

Techniques by Project Planning and Development Stage

The 31 techniques are used as appropriate in five stages of the highway planning and project development process. These five stages are as follows:

1. Systems or programming stage. The need for a project is established at this stage. Typically, demographic, economic, travel, and land use data are collected and analyzed to forecast future conditions, which may establish the need for a plan or program.
2. Corridor or location stage. Alternative routes are discussed, and the most feasible alternatives selected. The assessment of environmental impacts and preparation of the appropriate environmental document take place at this stage.
3. Project design stage. The proposed project proceeds from approval of a generalized location through preparation of preliminary design plans to approval of design. Additional environmental impacts are analyzed and mitigation measures identified or permits obtained. Project plans are prepared for final approval at the end of this stage.
4. Right-of-way, construction, and implementation stage. This stage commences with approval of the design and includes acquiring the right-of-way as well as actual construction. Relocation and carrying out agreed-upon mitigative measures occur at this stage.
5. Occasional use. Used for techniques that appear in a written manual or procedure but are used so infrequently by the state that they are not normally associated with any particular stage.

Tables 1-3 list the techniques under each type and the number of states using these techniques for each project stage. As was apparent from a similar tabulation prepared by Wood, the states use an impressive variety of public involvement techniques throughout project planning and development. Some techniques, such as public hearings or meetings associated with hearings, are used widely by nearly every state; others are only of local significance.

Tabulation of all techniques across the project planning and development stages indicates there are more state uses of techniques for the corridor stage (590) than for design (491), systems (346), or implementation (54). This reflects, in part, the emphasis on completing the environmental documentation with associated public hearings as early as possible, when a project has passed from systems to project development. A number of states have combined the corridor and design stages into a single environmental impact assessment stage.

The following discussion of the data in Tables 1-3 will relate the use of techniques to the characteristics of each project stage as developed from the 1977 study of Action Plans. It should be remembered that this classification scheme reflects the primary use of a technique. Most techniques have several uses, and a secondary use such as one-way transfer of information for public meetings and workshops may be significant.

Systems planning is based in part on the federal requirements of the 3-C process, which calls for continuous, cooperative, and comprehensive planning activities between highway agencies and local jurisdictions in urban areas. At the time the 1983 data were collected, FHWA was altering its approach to urban systems planning from actively encouraging public involvement to viewing the participation of local jurisdictions in systems planning as a local matter to be addressed by local and state officials.

Thus, though information meetings and other large informal gatherings are widespread, only about one-half of the states continue to use formal public hearings at the systems stage. Small group techniques are used widely in systems planning; many citizens find it difficult to understand and participate in the rather abstract, future-oriented and technical subject matter of systems planning. Thus, ongoing citizens committees that offer a setting in which the public can accumulate expertise have been found to be useful. Associated with these techniques are a

TABLE 1 Number of States Using One-Way Information Techniques by Stage, 1983

Audience and Technique	Number of States by Stage[a]				
	Systems	Corridor	Design	Implementation	Occasional
Mass audience					
Legal notices	19	52	52	1	1
Mass media advertising	22	34	31	3	5
News releases	21	36	29	5	10
Audiovisual presentations	9	28	23	0	11
Publish project development schedule	4	8	4	1	6
Mass mailouts	3	12	10	1	7
Press conferences	2	5	4	0	8
Handouts distributed by local institutions	1	1	1	0	0
Specific community					
Billboard advertisements	0	3	2	1	3
Local bulletin boards	3	6	5	0	6
Public information displays	3	13	9	0	14
Specific individuals					
Mailing lists	29	44	40	1	1
Circulate project reports	18	25	14	2	5
Newsletters	12	12	5	1	9
Response forms	6	20	14	1	11
Citizens band radio	0	1	1	0	2

Source: FHWA environmental field staff and state highway agencies.

[a]Includes the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and federal highway projects.

TABLE 2 Number of States Using Two-Way Involvement Techniques for Small Groups by Stage, 1983

Technique	Number of States by Stage[a]				
	Systems	Corridor	Design	Implementation	Occasional
Citizens committee	43	22	13	4	9
Speaking engagements	20	33	25	4	11
Surveys	16	13	3	0	13
Direct contact	0	25	33	13	7
Personal interviews	7	12	10	1	7
Project field office	1	10	11	5	9
Telephone hotline	4	4	3	2	4

Source: FHWA environmental field staff and state highway agencies.

[a]Includes the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and federal highway projects.

TABLE 3 Number of States Using Two-Way Involvement Techniques for Large Groups by Stage, 1983

Technique	Number of States by Stage[a]				
	Systems	Corridor	Design	Implementation	Occasional
Public hearings	24	53	52	0	1
Information meetings	48	47	37	2	3
Prehearing or posthearing meetings	6	30	29	1	6
Public workshops	9	18	9	1	8
Public forums	11	10	9	0	3
Televised planning discussions	2	1	0	0	4
Resource base analysis[b]	1	4	1	0	7
Project field review[c]	0	6	7	1	5

Source: FHWA environmental field staff and state highway agencies.

[a]Includes the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and federal highway projects.

[b]Use of maps at large meetings for the public to indicate areas of concern.

[c]Explanation of the features of a project in its future setting; this technique makes it easier for the public to understand the project.

variety of public information techniques similar to those used for corridor and design with the exception of legal notices. Legal notices are used for public hearings, and their low level of use at the systems stage parallels the low level of use of public hearings.

During the corridor stage, the project, its alternatives, and their potential impacts become increasingly well defined. It becomes more important to the agency to gather information from individuals and groups with a direct knowledge of the project area and to communicate with persons or groups who will be directly affected by impacts or relocation. Very large or small segments of the public may be involved; and as the project becomes more specific, it is easier for the public to identify an interest in the project. Public hearings are usually held at this stage; however, it has been found that effective public involvement requires that hearings be supported by other, less formal, types of meetings. The evidence from the states is that information meetings, meetings before or after hearings, and workshops are used widely. Involvement techniques suited for small groups are used widely also. As project impacts become specific enough for individuals to realize that they will be affected directly,

direct contact becomes an appropriate technique.

These involvement techniques are supported by a wide variety of information techniques at the corridor stage. Legal notices are nearly universal because of their association with public hearings. Many states have found that legal notices are unread and that mass media advertisements in other sections of the newspaper or in other media are more likely to attract attention from a wide audience. As the project impacts and areas are better defined, it is easier to assemble mailing lists or use other information techniques suited for specific audiences. Some of the information techniques are used in the context of a meeting or hearing to convey or collect information more effectively. Audiovisual presentations, response forms, and public information displays are used widely for these purposes.

Design is the last project stage during which the public can influence the detailed plans for the project; however, most decisions have been made on the major design features at this stage, and some states do not separate corridor and design. Also for small projects or 4R-type projects (resurfacing, restoring, rehabilitating, and reconstructing) separation of corridor from design is inappropriate. Thus, there are fewer techniques identified for this stage. Public hearings are used widely; however, in comparison to the corridor stage there is a tendency to rely less on informal meetings to support hearings and more on direct contact with individuals or small groups. Design issues are often specific and relocation is a growing concern. The use of information techniques is generally similar to the corridor stage with the exception of newsletters, which are used best for large, complex issues that require time to resolve. Such issues usually are settled by the design stage.

The opportunity for public input in most states continues through the implementation or construction stage. Additional contact with the public may be required by relocation assistance, monitoring construction for adverse impacts, or unforeseen project developments. Such contacts are typically with specific segments of the public about specific issues. Not surprisingly, involvement techniques suited for small groups or individuals, particularly direct contact, are used most widely in implementation. There is no indication of a corresponding concentration in information techniques suited to specific communities or individuals in the implementation or design stages.

COMPARISON OF 1983 WITH 1977 DATA

States used basically the same techniques in both years, but techniques are used with greater frequency in 1983. Only one technique, distribution of handouts by local institutions, was added to the 1977 list. The stability in the types of techniques is corroborated by an independent survey made in early 1983 by the Bureau of Environmental Services of the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT). The 11 ODOT district offices and 12 Ohio metropolitan planning organizations that responded did not add techniques to a list of 20 techniques similar to the FHWA list.

Because the 1977 data are fundamentally limited to techniques mentioned in Action Plans and the 1983 data include techniques used by states in addition to those mentioned in their Action Plans, it is to be expected that, overall, more techniques would be mentioned in 1983. This increase is shown for three stages below:

Stage	Percent Increase
Systems	+25
Corridor	+92
Design	+85

As can be observed the percent increase is not the same for all stages, and the lower level of increase in the systems stage may indicate a change in state practice. This change appears to result specifically from a decline in the use of formal public hearings as an involvement technique as well as from overall lower rates of increased mention of other techniques for the systems stage.

Now states appear to be relying more heavily on information meetings and other less formal large meetings at the systems stage. Much of the increase in the corridor and design stages results from the more widespread mention of informal meetings before and after hearings, workshops, and public forums. There is little change in the numbers of states using hearings or information meetings, which were nearly universally used in both 1977 and 1983. Direct contact also showed a large increase in numbers of states using it between 1977 and 1983.

Among the information techniques, news releases and audiovisual presentations had the largest increase; indeed these two mass audience techniques had the largest increase in numbers of states using them of all techniques at any stage. There were also substantial increases in some information techniques for specific individuals or groups (e.g., mailing lists and circulation of project reports). In comparison to 1977, the overall picture in 1983 is an increased concentration on information techniques that reach either mass audiences or specific communities or neighborhoods.

States are thus continuing the movement, apparent in 1977, away from excessive reliance on the formal public hearing as the vehicle of public involvement. By supporting their hearings with informal meetings, states are now taking specific steps to provide the public with the opportunity to become involved in projects in informal settings conducive to communication between the agency and the public as contrasted to the one-way flow of information and statements of fixed positions on projects characteristic of the public hearing. Likewise, workshops, now used by about a third of the states, are a specific procedural step used by states to provide a specialized setting for gathering usable information from the public. This information from the public can then be incorporated into the development of the project. These changes are supported by recent FHWA regulation [23 CFR 771.111(h)] and technical guidance, which focuses on the state design of public involvement procedures for federal-aid highway projects that will effectively involve the public under the unique conditions prevailing in that state.

CONCLUSIONS

The evidence is that the practice of public involvement by SHAs is entering a period of maturity. Public involvement has been a part of the highway project, planning, and development process for nearly 30 years. Comparison of the two FHWA surveys as well as the ODOT survey indicates that significant numbers of new techniques are not now entering highway practice. Instead SHAs are using known techniques more extensively and more effectively to provide the public with involvement settings that increase the opportunity for the public both to gather information from the agency and to give usable information to the agency.

In moving away from reliance on the public hearing as the vehicle for public involvement, the evidence is that SHAs are beginning to make procedural changes that are conducive to improved public involvement. As the data indicate, this trend does not yet include all states. The FHWA has, and continues to, support the evolution of SHA public involvement toward informal meetings that are conducive to communication between the agency and the public. Specific federal measures include training courses for SHA staff, regulatory changes that focus attention on state design of public involvement programs (rather than meeting specific federal requirements), and ongoing technical assistance.

For the research community the data suggest that the skillful use of combinations of compatible techniques that form an effective public involvement program is the growing edge of public involvement practice. The most useful future research in public involvement, then, should focus here rather than on the discovery of new techniques.

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