

# Working with New Partners: Transportation Decisions with the Public

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Public participation is essential to ensuring that transportation systems serve community goals. Innovative use of a broad array of public relations and communications strategies can help to build public understanding and support for projects and techniques that improve transportation efficiency. Polls, opinion surveys, focus groups, alternative dispute resolution, and media campaigns may helpfully supplement more traditional public hearings, workshops, advisory committees, and task forces.

The new federal surface transportation law directs federal and state departments of transportation and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to "provide citizens, affected public agencies, representatives of transportation agency employees, private providers of transportation, and other interested parties with a reasonable opportunity to comment" on transportation plans and programs. Federal law, through both the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) and the Clean Air Act amendments of 1990, imposes a responsibility to make transportation planning more democratic. The law also provides an opportunity to increase the congruence between transportation investments and community travel needs.

ISTEA requires MPOs to involve the public before approval of their 20-year long-range plans (LRPs) and during the development and approval of their 3-year transportation improvement programs (TIPs). States must create LRPs in cooperation with the MPOs and must give citizens "a reasonable opportunity to comment" in developing the state LRP. In addition, governors are directed to ensure that citizens are involved in developing the state TIP. At both state and metropolitan levels, transportation planning must be coordinated with the plans providing for attainment of national air quality standards.

Some states and MPOs have been creatively involved in expansive contact and communication with community groups. But others may find new and vaguely ominous the notion of soliciting views from the public on plans and process. The purpose of this paper is to review existing public participation tactics and to highlight some innovative approaches to better integrate public participation into agency decision making.

## WHY DO SOMETHING NEW?

Public participation requirements have long been established in laws such as the Administrative Procedures Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, as well as in regulations and guidance issued by federal and state transportation agencies. However, the minimum standards set in such laws do not necessarily result in productive collaboration or partnership.

The phrase "public participation" may conjure up memories of numbing meetings during which dozens of people line up before microphones to complain to officials about projects, plans, or programs. But this is not the best or the only possibility. Neither transportation officials nor the citizens are pleased when public participation is reduced to a procession of gripes and pleas falling on deaf ears. The main value of public hearings is as a safety valve at the end of a long and complex process, which should include many other chances for two-way communication. Public hearings are almost always insufficient to cull good ideas, answer questions, sift through possible alternatives, and explain the reasoning behind projects, plans, or programs. Public hearings are not the grim gatherings that may come to mind. Working with new partners is something entirely different.

## PARTNERSHIP WITH THE PUBLIC

What is the significance of the title, "Working with New Partners"? Whereas hearings are one-time events, working implies an ongoing, interactive, iterative connection. Partners are participants with comparable status, with equal legitimacy. The old paradigm was that transportation engineers and officials invite "outsiders," the public, to hear about decisions made by the "experts." The new paradigm establishes transportation decisions as the product of partners' collaborative work. It is the result of debate and choices made jointly by a variety of governmental and nongovernmental parties.

People distrust closed, arcane, or technical processes. This is particularly so when such inaccessible processes result in decisions that directly affect the excluded individuals. Transportation is basic to people. If people cannot travel, their lives are impoverished. People need access and mobility to work, learn, socialize, relax, and challenge themselves. Transportation is so basic that average people, "nonexperts," have very strong views on their travel needs and how well they are being met. A huge amount of the hostility seen at public meetings regarding transportation proposals results from the

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frustration that people feel when their travel choices are made or constrained by people unknown for reasons unexpressed. Because transportation choices greatly shape people's lives, any process that excludes affected people, limits their input, or fails to provide the necessary information in readily understandable terms will not be effective, no matter how skillfully engineered or technically defensible.

## NEW CONCERNS NEED NEW RESPONSES

The broad scope of fundamental issues to be resolved under ISTEA and the Clean Air Act amendments makes it unlikely that any generic approach to public participation will be successful. However, it is possible to identify the key characteristics of successful participation: inclusiveness, early involvement, and clear, accurate information.

### Inclusiveness

One measure of the appropriateness of public participation is the inclusiveness of the process: whether it involves the range of people whose interests are affected.

Who are the public? First there are the usual suspects: state transportation officials, MPOs, local elected officials, and public and private transportation providers. Also affected by transportation decisions are environmental groups, developers, business leaders (especially major employers), transportation users (including the disabled, aged, or young), design professionals, and community organizations. No abstract definition will do to identify everyone who uses or may use a transportation system or be affected by it.

The involvement of the public does not mean decision making in a stadium with thousands of people simultaneously expressing views. People have different interests, skills, values, and degrees of commitment to a process resulting in transportation decisions. These differences must be identified and respected for the process to be a civil and productive one. The goal is to build on the strengths of all possible participants. Some people have no background in engineering or design but instead they know of some community needs that may otherwise be overlooked by planners or transportation professionals. Some may have innovative suggestions for investments that could serve multiple goals (such as daycare centers at transit nodes), but they may benefit from the advice and experience of others to refine and implement the ideas. The more participation in the process is limited, the more impoverished proposals will be and the less solid will be the popular support for the goals.

### Early Involvement

When should partnerships be formed? The answer is "yes-terday." Inclusion of a variety of interests should never be delayed because partnerships take time. The earlier there is concerted outreach, the greater are the prospects for successful outreach.

By requiring that citizens and others with an interest in transportation be involved in developing transportation plans

and programs, ISTEA sets the stage for early participation. In this context, a "reasonable opportunity to comment" must be defined in terms of the public's ability to help shape the earliest drafts of the LRP and the TIP, where specific projects are selected. This change in the law marks a departure from the old practice of soliciting public comment before approval of a drafted plan or assembled slate of projects.

Attempts at public participation that occur late in the game often generate hostility and may result in stalled projects. FHWA 1976 guidance on participation in transportation planning remains apt today:

If too much time elapses between the beginning of the [planning] process and the beginning of public involvement, several problems may develop: it may be difficult to still be flexible, rumors may have spread misinformation, local leaders may feel ignored and become distrusting. Early involvement saves times and agony for the planner. (1)

One model for inclusive, early involvement is the "visioning" process, which has been carried out in cities such as Roanoke, Virginia, and Chatham County, Georgia. In Roanoke, an outdated comprehensive plan was the issue; in Chatham County, eight municipalities, including Savannah, shared air and transportation problems but no regional strategy for solving them. Planners brought residents and business and property owners into the planning process through the wise use of public relations and state-of-the-art technology, including electronic town meetings and supplements to local newspapers. Both processes included citizens as facilitators: maitre-d's, schoolteachers, and business people were given training and asked to interview their fellow citizens at the town meetings and throughout the process. Follow through was important to sustaining involvement: planners established benchmarks of progress and made sure citizens knew when their questions would be answered. Early preparation expedited the approval process.

### Accessible Information

To accomplish the goal of inclusiveness, information is vital. Many citizens are discouraged by the lack of basic information about how and why transportation decisions are made in their communities. Citizens whose participation has been ignored have grown wary of further involvement. Agency professionals are equally wary that the public will impede their efforts to solve growing transportation problems. Wide availability of clear, accurate, and complete information on transportation procedures can help put both parties on a more equal and cooperative footing.

Effective information should be more than the traditional graphs and charts that accompany studies. Citizens should be helped to visualize the impacts of plans and proposals on neighborhoods, businesses, and the natural environment through the use of maps, models, slides, photographs, computer graphics, and other techniques to visually render the potential effects of transportation decisions.

In Manheim Township, Pennsylvania, located in Amish country in Lancaster County, the land use pattern had become a patchwork in which farms, scenic parklands, and historic

resources competed with strip developments and malls at major traffic interchanges. A visual preference survey was undertaken in which citizens were asked to rate photographs of scenes typical to the area: barns and farmhouses, scenic roads, old and new houses, shops, traffic signs and signals, parking lots, and public spaces, including parks and commons. Once citizens determined which sights and patterns they wished to protect and encourage and which they wished to discourage, they were shown how those values translated into design and zoning codes. Using maps and models, citizens were asked to redesign their township with their new preferences and goals in mind. The results were better-informed, more helpful citizen involvement and an accessible plan that reflects the values of the community.

The public needs access to proposals, statistics, and studies with enough time to allow careful review of the material and for the reactions to be incorporated into the process. The last step is crucial. No one wants to waste time thoroughly reviewing and addressing a complex issue only to find that the work will have no influence on the decisions. If there are delays in the production of useful background information, other deadlines must be relaxed to grant the public the time it needs to study and respond to the issue. If people are given less than a month to respond to complex and technical issues, it should not come as a surprise if they are angry and intransigent. People are not at their best and most productive when they are forced to react in a panic.

Finally, it is important not to hide the social and political context that transportation officials assume when developing transportation plans. Many community values and goals may be controversial, but they must be expressed. Many people care about regional development patterns, transportation options, and the consequences these have for employment, economic growth, air quality, livable communities, social justice, and other values.

Almost certainly people will disagree about which goals should be dominant, and they will dispute the means that will best serve the ends. That is to be expected. What everyone will distrust is any pretense that transportation investments are value neutral and somehow promote everyone's interests equally. Honest dialogue and disagreement are more constructive than efforts to avoid the underlying tensions about how jobs, urban design, environment, and transportation are related.

To review, a working partnership means a continuing, respectful collaboration. The new partners are potentially anyone who is affected by these decisions. Outreach and inclusion should begin right away. There is one more crucial element to bring everyone together: information—timely, clear, and accurate information, and above all, accessible information.

## THE MOST PROMISING TECHNIQUES

What works? There is no cookbook. Community involvement must be tailored to the community and the issues. The greater the diversity of the interested participants and the greater the controversy, the more necessary is a range of approaches. Following are some of the ingredients, if not the recipe, for success. A variety of these approaches is almost sure to be

more helpful than reliance solely on one of these measures. Each technique has both benefits and limitations.

## Task Forces

Task forces, reflecting the diversity of a community, can be convened to address transportation planning issues.

The MPOs of the Twin Cities (St. Paul–Minneapolis) and the San Francisco Bay Area have used task forces extensively to increase community involvement. These and other cities have an impressive array of task forces, some of which have regularly met for years, and all of which strive to include members from diverse organizations and perspectives. Task forces seem to work best when their scope is relatively narrow and well defined.

Two successful task forces were convened by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission in the San Francisco region: one was assigned to evaluate transportation control measures and another was created to address the transportation needs of communities with diverse ethnic backgrounds. Many participants found the experience of serving on a task force a positive one, from which there was genuine education as well as communication. However, it was unclear to one participant whether the enhanced understanding shared by task force participants was relayed to other decision makers, particularly those with the greatest authority. Another potential problem was excessive compartmentalization; interaction between task forces was often limited or nonexistent. For example, people with different ethnic backgrounds probably have useful and unique insights into designing and evaluating TCMs, and some TCMs may have greater impacts on minority communities than on the public as a whole. But opportunity for interactive learning may be lost if task forces operate in isolation from one another.

## Committees

A common tool for public involvement is the establishment of committees. Citizens' Advisory Committees (CACs) and Technical Advisory Committees (TACs) are two basic types. Although dividing groups according to expertise or technical skills may initially ease communication, it may result in reduced innovation and education. Therefore, some transportation committees mix citizens, business representatives, planners, transportation professionals, and advocates for particular transportation modes (bicycles, rail, transit, trucks). The challenge is to braid the skills and experiences of the various participants in ways that engender creative solutions.

Many communities have used committees to increase public involvement in transportation decisions. Local professional and citizen observers suggest that such efforts result in greater respect for the process and more cohesive support for the ultimate decisions. Even when the final outcome is controversial, broad participation helps prevent the high level of dissatisfaction that may lead to legal challenge and stalemate.

In 1972, for example, the residents of several neighborhoods in Boston united to protest the construction of the Southwest Freeway, an Interstate segment for which the land was already purchased. Through the efforts of city and state

representatives, the governor of Massachusetts commissioned a multidisciplinary team to examine alternatives to the highway. The team recommended a new subway line running along the same route as the existing Amtrak and commuter rail lines and uniting three adjacent inner-city neighborhoods via a greenway of parks, sidewalks, and bikeways that follow the subway route. The process was determined and overseen by a citizen's advisory group of residents, business owners, transit officials, and representatives of the city of Boston.

### **Public Meetings and Forums**

A public meeting or forum may be a good way to solicit ideas and discuss transportation alternatives and goals when plans are at an early stage of development. Open forums may include presentations from officials and citizen groups, while inviting response and limited discussion. Portland, Maine, and the San Francisco Bay Area have found such town meetings a useful first step, particularly when focused on the transportation needs of a designated, limited area or corridor.

One of the major difficulties for those who use such meetings is to encourage the going attendance of diverse individuals and groups. The determination and ability to create successful meetings are skills that are relatively rare and often unrewarded. It is essential but insufficient to find a good meeting room in a convenient location, provide broad and timely notice of the meeting, and encourage attendance of interested and affected people. In addition, conveners of public meetings need to be sensitive to the fact that public meetings often are intimidating to both the public and transportation officials. Officials may fear being the targets of blame or vituperative remarks. Citizens may worry that their remarks will be ridiculed or that they will be unable to penetrate the jargon of the experts. Officials will need to be ready to hear criticism but to establish a positive, constructive tone. Civility should be expected of all participants but agreement should not.

Fortunately, respectful treatment of people usually generates polite and respectful responses. Successful meetings depend on airing concerns as well as providing solutions. Public officials should try to avoid promoting a particular outcome, which should be easier if meetings are held early in the process of framing alternatives. Officials should try to avoid defensive reactions to criticisms. Citizens may find that their views are given more respect when they directly note their concerns but refrain from casting doubt on the motives behind proposals. The judicious use of humor is a precious commodity in such settings and can go a long way toward bridging fears and misunderstandings.

Sometimes training seminars in negotiation or alternative dispute resolution are useful for both officials and interested public participants before they embark on an ambitious or controversial series of public meetings. Both transportation officials and the public will benefit from an atmosphere in which people are candid and open to new ideas.

It is also important to encourage that wide-ranging discussion from meetings or forums be folded back into the more traditional planning process. If ideas and suggestions generated are lost or forgotten once the meeting is adjourned, there

is a distinct likelihood that the public will perceive such meetings as a sham and a waste of time. Follow-up is essential.

### **Panel Presentations, Symposia, and Interactive Workshops**

Public participation in transportation decisions can be increased by public workshops, presentations, and debates. These can cover a wide range of topics, but they are most useful if tied to issues that have special, explicit relevance to the city or region. Such gatherings can be highly technical. They are obviously more useful to a broad range of the public if panelists avoid or translate acronyms and technical jargon. Topics that may merit such treatment may include how transportation can reduce air emissions, how transportation investments can induce or reduce travel, and the factors that make public transit safer, more attractive, more reliable, and therefore more usable.

Another model for public inclusion is a team effort called a "charette." The term is derived from an intensive, collaborative exercise of architects, operating under deadline pressure, to design a project. A charette was formed for the Puget Sound region in Washington to allow diverse interests to debate and cooperatively discuss development patterns and transportation alternatives. Although it requires a substantial commitment of resources from participants, such an approach fosters consultation and trust while eliciting innovative and collaborative solutions.

### **Facilitators, Mediators, and Alternative Dispute Resolution Techniques**

Particularly when a region is embroiled in controversy over transportation, facilitation and other alternative dispute resolution techniques may help create a positive atmosphere for cooperation and problem solving. Experienced, neutral facilitators and mediators often can establish basic ground rules and reduce the tendency of participants to interrupt, pontificate, ridicule, or intimidate other participants. Such "neutral" experts can often elicit information that might be difficult to obtain during heated exchanges. For example, facilitators may request further information or encourage people to explain confusing or seemingly inconsistent statements without appearing to challenge or disagree with the assertions. As neutral parties, they may be able to guide discussions to include a greater variety of views and help to enable all parties to feel that their insights are being heard. Facilitated meetings can often take less time to result in more productive decisions than meetings that are less structured.

Formal dispute resolution techniques, including regulatory negotiations (or "regnegs"), have been used at the federal and state levels to distill complex legal and political issues into alternatives that more fully integrate the concerns of the affected parties. After a very divisive political campaign, Maine voters passed an initiative that stopped a turnpike widening proposal and required examination of transportation alternatives. A regulatory negotiation was successfully used to develop unanimously supported regulations to implement the new law. Included in the regneg were environmentalists, de-

velopers, transportation officials, and community organizations—many of whom had been previously active in the polarized debate concerning the initiative.

### Agency-Initiated Outreach

MPOs and state transportation agencies may wish to invite members of the public or representatives of groups to events and meetings to improve rapport with a broader public. Many agencies also develop a mailing list of people interested in the region's transportation issues, and they may regularly send notices of upcoming events to all people on the list. Newsletters, updates, and bulletins can be targeted to people who have attended previous meetings, who have called to request information on transportation planning processes, or who are involved in community activities that indicate an interest in transportation alternatives.

### Public Education Campaigns

Partnerships can be heightened by innovative public education campaigns, which may selectively use public service announcements, advertising, the news media, posters, talk shows, and educational television and radio programming. Campaigns can be developed around current transportation problems, transportation solutions, or policy options. Areas with air pollution problems may want to develop an information campaign on the air quality effects of certain transportation practices. For example, the importance of trip-chaining to reduce cold starts emissions from vehicles could be the focus of such a campaign. Practical tips on ridesharing or public transportation services can be presented in ads or public service announcements, following the example of cities such as Seattle and Denver. Ongoing efforts to encourage higher rates of vehicle occupancy can provide the basis of a shift in public attitude about solo driving of the same magnitude as that experienced in the last decade about recycling.

### Public Opinion Surveys, Interviews, Focus Groups, and Polls

Maybe there is one lesson that can be learned from politicians: polling and related techniques are basic ways to find out what people need and want. Surveys, interviews, focus groups, and polls are ways to gather public opinion on transportation services, alternatives, and potential improvements. The benefit of surveys or polls is the opportunity to reach a wide audience at relatively low cost. But designing surveys is an art: a survey or poll will be useless if it asks unintentionally or deliberately loaded questions, fails to provide room for "none-of-the-above" answers and unstructured feedback, or otherwise stifles honest response and unbiased results.

Focus groups are another way to involve many points of view. In Bethel, Maine (population 5,000), citizens were catalyzed into a planning process when one of the area's chief employers, National Testing Laboratory (NTL), announced its plans to relocate. The town convened 27 focus groups in a 6-week successful planning process. Participants ranged from

loggers to environmentalists, ski resort owners and innkeepers to crafts people and musicians, and old timers to summer people. An unexpected bonus was NTL's decision to remain in the area because of the successful resolution of the conflicts that had motivated talk of relocation.

### Competitions

Civic competitions can be held, as they have in some cities, to reward people whose projects or suggestions promise to improve transportation services, safety, accessibility, or efficiency. Competitions could be held, for example, to select the best proposal for a public education campaign to increase transit ridership or reduce single-occupancy travel. In addition to a monetary prize, the reward could include broadcasting the winning advertisements on radio and television.

### Technical Support

Community groups may be granted technical assistance funding to enable them to refine, in a technically sophisticated manner, proposals for transportation alternatives. The federal Superfund law provides technical assistance grants so that community groups can hire an expert who can help them analyze and evaluate hazardous waste clean-up proposals. Transportation plans also involve technically complex issues, and transportation decisions may sometimes benefit from the inclusion of independent experts who can help to explain and evaluate the alternatives for community groups. Community groups may be much more informed and engaged if they can rely on the technical advice of a respected consultant, whom they see as serving their interests.

Technical support can also be provided by assigning transportation agency staff to assist in the development of ideas generated by the public. For example, in Tallahassee, Florida, a state bicycle and pedestrian office helps to refine citizen-generated proposals that would expand opportunities for non-motorized transportation.

People cannot be fully functional in society without mobility, yet mobility is increasingly limited by congestion. Health is threatened by vehicular emissions. No wonder many citizens feel so strongly about transportation policy. Air quality can be improved, transportation can be made more efficient, and transportation investments can be used to revitalize and strengthen communities, but only if diverse communities become true, continuing partners in the transportation planning process. The new partners are full of promise and enthusiasm. The forms of greater public inclusion are limited only by imagination.

### REFERENCE

1. *Effective Citizen Participation in Transportation Planning*, Vol. 1: *Community Involvement Process*. FHWA, U.S. Department of Transportation, 1976.

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