

# Redefining Public Involvement

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Public involvement requirements have been part of government programs for at least 20 years. But they are often still seen as one of the more onerous aspects of project development as part of the bureaucratic red tape: necessary, but more an obligation than a productive part of the process. The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act fostered a new spate of grumbling, as public involvement requirements were expanded from project development to short- and long-term planning. While the scope of the detail and the requirements expand, decision makers and project staff increasingly find that heightened public interest and activism grind projects (and sometimes entire agencies) to a halt. Information meetings, scoping meetings, and hearings are poorly attended, but then controversy swells and citizens turn out in droves to point fingers and raise angry voices. Frustration over an increasing number of controversies arising late in the project development process led the Montana Department of Transportation to develop a new process intended to minimize controversies that stop projects and erode public trust. The goals for that process are described and information contained in a new handbook intended to redirect Montana's public involvement program are highlighted.

A groundswell of concern and frustration inside and outside the department led to formation of a Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) FHWA task force to find a better way to involve the public. The press and a particularly difficult project "blowup" gave the task force ample evidence of the problems. Plans to expand a busy section of US-93 just south of Glacier National Park to five lanes split the local communities; numerous groups took sides and others waged a persistent but unsuccessful fight to redesign the project.

Nevertheless, design features were nearly complete and MDT and the Montana Highway Commission refused to "start over." Local political bodies lined up on both sides of the issue, and the controversy was cast in terms of safety and land use impacts. MDT officials lacked credibility in the eyes of much of the press and local public, making it difficult or impossible to respond to questions and charges.

The project was halted in August 1992 by Montana's senior senator Max Baucus with a "rider" on an appropriation bill prohibiting further work until a study of alternatives was completed. By then right-of-way acquisition was 95 percent complete and utility moves were well under way. The prohibition was announced in local papers and tempers flared again as all sides made allegations. Work was halted within hours of the announcement.

Even though the MDT/FHWA task force was already formed and had outlined a work plan, the problems surrounding the US-93 Somers-Whitefish project related directly to the assignment at hand and underscored the need for change in a dramatic way.

## RECOGNITION OF BASIC NEEDS

The charge made to the task force was to develop a new process to supplement or replace the FHWA-approved public involvement/public hearing procedures implementing 23 CFR 771 that would

help MDT minimize controversies that stop projects and erode public trust.

New procedures and guidelines grew out of a fairly simple premise: that agency needs and awareness of basic human nature—not statutory requirements—should drive the process.

This is not to say statutory requirements should be overlooked, assuming for the sake of argument they even could be. But meeting the agency's most basic need—to develop facilities and systems in a timely way, accomplishing a clearly stated, well-thought-out purpose—today will require meaningful public involvement. And achieving this level of involvement requires the recognition of basic human needs, such as the individual's need to be recognized and the need to have some control over one's life.

## GOALS TO SET DIRECTION, AID DECISION MAKING

Redefining Montana's process benefited from an early effort to identify clearly what was hoped would be accomplished

- Reducing to a minimum the number of projects that "blow up" at the last minute because of public opposition;
- Helping get the project right the first time, thus saving time and money by reducing or eliminating redesign or other delays;
- Improving the department's overall public image in terms of responsiveness, openness, and willingness to change; and
- Improving the public's satisfaction with the final product.

To accomplish this, the focus was to develop goals that were specific enough to help set a direction and aid decision making. The goal-setting effort was difficult; loosely stated or overly broad goals are easier to write but are not very helpful. So the task force struggled to define goals that met a strict test: goals that are specific, achievable, and measurable. The following were adopted:

- To provide useful, timely information to the public throughout the development of projects, from preliminary engineering approval through final acceptance of the completed project by the district engineer;
- To proactively seek public comment and involvement in project development;
- To facilitate open discussion of controversial issues; and
- To respond to comments and suggestions so that useful ideas are incorporated into projects; and to ensure that public comments are heard and considered in technical studies as well as in final decisions.

## SIMPLE, HELPFUL HANDBOOK

Implementing the public involvement program involves many employees at all levels, so the statement of purpose, goals, procedures, and advice were all put together by MDT in the form of a simple handbook.



**FIGURE 1** Informal meetings help the agency get the information it needs, anticipate problems, and build relationships that can be productive throughout the process.

The effort is to substitute one approach for another: to replace the old set of rules, often handed down from one individual to another—part of the lore of our internal culture with another. So a program of orientation and training is being developed to help employees understand the concepts, to sort out difficulties, and to respond to the complexities and the resistance that are bound to arise. Without training and orientation (or reorientation), some will embrace the new approach whereas many others will resist it.

A handbook was chosen so that this new approach would be defined and illustrated and the intent would be clearly stated. It was carefully written to be easy to read, easy to use as a reference, and helpful and therefore more likely to be used.

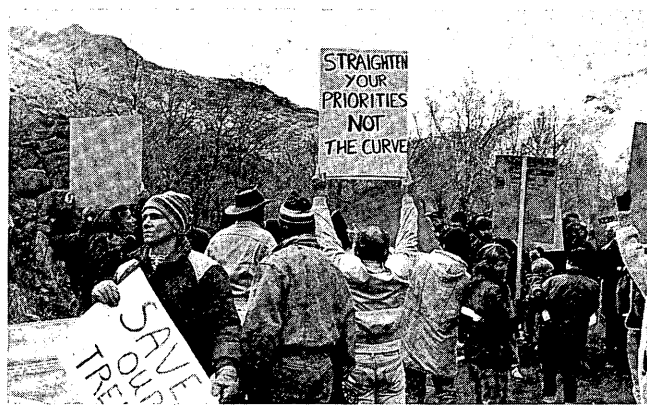
MDT's handbook outlines four levels of involvement that relate to the level of complexity and interest in a given project (not just the level of environmental study). The levels range from a very basic program to a much more involved one that includes advisory committees and numerous personal contacts with groups and individuals for more complex projects. The handbook also includes instructions and advice specific to each step in the four levels of public involvement plans. Examples of involvement plans are included, as well, for each level of involvement.

After discussion at the preliminary field review, a public involvement plan is outlined as part of the preliminary field review report. The plan is written by the lead unit—normally an area engineer in the road design or traffic sections. Overall responsibility for the plan and implementation is with the district engineer, assisted by the public affairs bureau.

### MORE PERSONAL CONTACT

Recognizing that it is to its benefit to discuss issues and hear about problems and ideas early, the agency places much more emphasis on personal contacts. For example, although asking people to attend evening meetings can often be unproductive, especially when construction is still years away or there is little early controversy, informal meetings with landowners, interest groups, and individuals in their homes or at a neutral location like a local coffee shop can help the agency get the information it needs.

Informal meetings also will help agency staff anticipate problems and build relationships that can be productive throughout the



**FIGURE 2** When people believe that they are not being listened to, they turn to means outside the formal process to make themselves heard.

process (Figure 1). The one-to-one exchange that takes place will likely be more productive and also more satisfying. (Barriers to communication have been a common part of past practice: overly formal written communication that did not really say much but reinforced the image of a cold, faceless bureaucracy, for instance; and formal meetings where an “us-and-them” scenario had engineers giving a technical lecture to a group unable to understand much of what was said.)

### CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Less-formal meetings make sense and so does less-formal communication. The handbook includes numerous tips, such as writing a letter of intent and news release that are more likely to be read and set a tone that leads to involvement. The following tips are included in the handbook:

- Write the letter in a style that is less formal than that of typical government correspondence. Write your message as if you are speaking to someone in an informal setting; in other words, write it as you would say it.
- Be as brief as possible without eliminating necessary information. Make the correspondence easy to read and understand: write for a general, nontechnical audience, that is, for someone who may know nothing about engineering or project development. Limit your message and limit letters to just one page. If further explanation is necessary, use attachments.
- Do not use abbreviations and acronyms. In addition, stay away from jargon—terms that have special meaning in project development, but do not make any sense to the public. Writing in a “language” people do not understand is not productive and turns people off.
- Use contractions at every opportunity. Say “It’s our intent to develop” and “We’d like to hear from you,” rather than “It is our . . .” and “We would like. . .” Contractions are one of the easiest ways to set a less-formal tone in your writing, making your message more conversational and easier to understand.
- Address the question “Why?” Your letter, news release, or other correspondence should include information that clearly explains the reason for the project. For instance, “We propose to improve safety and replace the worn-out pavement by reconstructing and widening the roadway” or “We intend to study numerous alter-

natives and suggest improvements to respond to traffic congestion and safety issues."

## TALK, TALK, TALK AND ACT

The handbook encourages communication among the project team and, in more complex projects, among members of the multiagency interdisciplinary team, as well as between team members and the public. Their job is to find the issues, analyze them, and find answers before problems start consuming time and resources. When needs or issues are identified, team members are urged to act. The MDT handbook advises the following

- Do not wait until the next scheduled meeting, which gives difficult issues a chance to become fraught with misinformation and speculation.
- Do not discount ideas or suggestions out of hand. Strive to listen carefully.
- Do not let dealing with issues be a point of frustration. Dealing with issues is the project team's job. Deal with each issue fairly and promptly, even if it is the same issue for the tenth time. This is the challenge and it is what public involvement is all about.
- Actively seek out those individuals, groups, and agencies that may be concerned about or opposed to a project. They must be a part of the process and must be heard. When people believe they are not being listened to, they turn to other means outside the formal process to make themselves heard (Figure 2). Activist organizations and news reporters often help fill this need capably.

## KEEPING PEOPLE INFORMED

Interest in project development extends well beyond those who attend the formal meetings. Procedures call for extra effort to arrange news coverage or to follow up with a news account after a public meeting, a decision on the project design or scope of work, or a significant delay.

A news release or public statement in a format and style that are suitable for the medium can help ensure that news is described in terms that help the agency achieve its goals. To do this, the handbook offers the following advice:

- Newspapers cover more detail and can include helpful graphics, such as maps or diagrams. Be guided by the adage "A picture is worth a thousand words."
- Radio news often requires a shorter story, but radio can sometimes incorporate a live interview or tape an interview for airing later—a good opportunity to explain and to provide for interaction. Many radio news reporters will jump at the opportunity to cover transportation stories. Give straight answers and describe what is going on in an interesting way, and these reporters will want to talk to you more often.
- Television (TV) requires graphics. TV reporters will want to shoot video footage. Therefore, be prepared with ideas about where their camera crew can get interesting footage. (Do not expect TV stations to accept footage the agency shoots; that may occasionally happen, but it is rare.) The story is generally brief, so only the bare details can be covered. Be prepared with a clear, concise message. If you are not accustomed to TV interviews, get some training and practice.
- Use of common language and lay terms may be the most important ingredient in getting a message across. It is difficult, but essential, especially when the subject is technical and the speaker

(you) is accustomed to talking to other specialists, engineers, and those in the field—not a general audience. Therefore, if you are planning to make a presentation to the public or a reporter, have a small group of your peers or a co-worker listen to your presentation and highlight words or phrases that will not mean much to the general public. Find other terms to describe those things.

## RESULTS

Giving attention to a public involvement plan early in the project development schedule, making frequent informal contacts with interested individuals and groups, and concentrating on clear communications are all expected to have a number of benefits.

It is not possible to be all things to all people. Both common sense and experience have shown that public acceptance and confidence in decision making can expedite project development, which will often mean better use of resources and better projects—projects that best meet the overall public interest.

Results from the first effort toward applying the new procedures at MDT are encouraging. Material from the draft handbook was incorporated into the consultant contract for the controversial US-93 Somers-Whitefish highway reconstruction project and the concepts are being applied capably and willingly. As a result, openly hostile relations are improved, with those on either side of the debate working cooperatively to identify issues and suggest solutions. Overall public awareness of the difficulties of the project has been heightened, and the group of active and interested parties has been expanded. The local press, for the most part, is covering the progress instead of the controversy. It is not all good news. But the issues are being covered and information resulting from the numerous studies is presented without skepticism or outright distrust. The project is still months, if not years, away from construction, but the public is undeniably involved in its development.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

The MDT/FHWA task force focused on project development. The concepts and practices recommended by the agency were also used on a trial basis to spur involvement in Montana's Statewide Transportation Improvement Program. For example, informal "open house" style meetings were held in the afternoon and early evening at numerous locations. Announcements, including news releases, personal invitations, and newspaper advertisements all set an informal tone and described the process in simple terms and conversational language. Individual meetings were offered, presentations were conducted one on one, and materials were translated and presented in lay terms.

The effort was warmly received. What's more, agency staff enjoyed the process. Attendance at meetings was still poor, but it is recognized that that may not change much. The effort now is to seek public awareness and involvement in other ways and not rely so heavily on the public meeting.

Work is just beginning to integrate planning, programming, and project development into a single, comprehensive public involvement process. Such a process further supports the goal of involving the public in a substantive way and at a time when it is helpful and productive. The specific goals and clear statement of purpose already in hand provide a well-marked path.

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