The Ithaca Model: A Practical Experience in Community-Based Planning

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The Ithaca–Tompkins County Transportation Council (ITCTC) is the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for the Ithaca, New York urbanized area, designated as a result of the 1990 Census. The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) and its corresponding regulations dramatically altered the public involvement requirements for the metropolitan transportation planning process. In response to the new requirements, the ITCTC implemented a community-based, strategic, comprehensive planning process to assist in accomplishing its first long-range comprehensive transportation plan under ISTEA. The process used seven citizen volunteer transportation task teams to identify and articulate a community vision for the future of the transportation system. During a 5-month period the ITCTC staff facilitated over 70 task team meetings. The process implemented by the ITCTC and the obstacles encountered in this community-based process are described. Several recommendations for future applications are included. The Ithaca Model is of interest for several reasons. First, ISTEA requires that MPOs undertake a "proactive public involvement process" as part of the metropolitan planning process. Second, ITCTC is a small MPO with extremely limited resources, thus demonstrating that a proactive public involvement process is within the capabilities of nearly every MPO. Third, there are significant direct and indirect benefits to be gained from a public involvement process of this scale. The experience of the ITCTC is valuable to any other agency considering the use of such a process.

Ithaca is one of the principal cities of the scenic Finger Lakes region in upstate New York. It is centrally located in Tompkins County at the southern end of Lake Cayuga, the largest of the Finger Lakes. This area is geographically characterized by acute topography due to the glacial activity that created this Finger Lakes region. The community is best known as an education center, as it is home to Cornell University, Ithaca College, and Tompkins Cortland Community College. These institutions provide important sources of employment, education, and social and cultural opportunities to the residents of Tompkins County and the surrounding counties. Due largely to the influence of the colleges and university, local demographics indicate a relatively high rate of educational attainment in the Ithaca–Tompkins County area (i.e., 1990 Census figures show 41.7 percent of the population aged 25 and older have completed 4 or more years of college). According to the 1990 Census, over 38 percent of the resident workforce is engaged in the educational services sectors. These trends contribute to the relative stability of the local economy (e.g., the unemployment rate in Tompkins County is consistently the lowest in the state). It is likely that there is a correlation between these demographic characteristics and the high level of interest in the activities of government exhibited by the local residents. Local political issues (including decisions regarding future community development) tend to be governed by liberal views and environmentally sensitive convictions. All of this makes an interesting environment in which to perform metropolitan transportation planning activities.

Since the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962, the establishment of metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) has been mandated for every urbanized area with a population over 50,000. The 1990 Census revealed that the Ithaca urbanized area had grown to a population of 50,132. Therefore, in September 1992, the Governor joined with the affected local governments to designate the Ithaca–Tompkins County Transportation Council (ITCTC) as the MPO for the Ithaca–Tompkins County urbanized area. The current metropolitan planning area boundary is contiguous with the boundary of Tompkins County, thus encompassing a one-county planning region with a population of 94,097. As a new MPO, ITCTC has both the benefits and disadvantages of having no history associated with planning activities, programming decisions, or a long-range transportation plan.

MPOs are responsible for conducting a transportation planning process in a "continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive" manner. They provide a direct link between the local, state, and federal transportation agencies and governments. This link facilitates and enhances coordination at the local level and provides direct access to the state’s decision-making and funding processes. The result is increased project efficiency and heightened sensitivity to local issues. The MPO also provides an environment that is conducive to public involvement and participation in the transportation decision-making process.

In the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA), Congress reemphasized the importance of conducting comprehensive metropolitan transportation planning activities. The joint planning regulations (23 CFR Part 450; 49 CFR Part 613) promulgated by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) provide specific instructions to MPOs regarding the way in which transportation decisions should be made. The regulations specifically emphasize diversity and balance among transportation modes, preservation of existing systems, and increased public involvement in the decision-making process. MPOs are directed to solicit more public involvement than ever before, both from a wider range of publics and at more points in the planning process.

To receive federal planning funds, MPOs must perform specific activities. One of these activities is the development of a long-range transportation plan. This plan must provide a fiscally constrained, 20-year vision of transportation issues facing the region and must be completed and approved by the specific deadlines established in the regulations. As a newly established MPO, ITCTC was faced with the monumental task of simultaneously initiating all aspects of a functioning MPO, including the development of the initial long-range transportation plan. To be sensitive to the disposition of the community and to satisfy the public involvement requirements of ISTEA, ITCTC chose to implement a community-based, strategic,
comprehensive planning process to facilitate the development of its first long-range transportation plan. The remainder of this paper explores the experience of the ITCTC in developing what is referred to as the Ithaca Model for public involvement.

DEVELOPMENT OF A “PLAN TO PLAN” (1)

Community-Based Planning

The Ithaca-Tompkins County metropolitan area is a unique area to upstate New York. As previously discussed, the socioeconomic profile of the residents includes relatively high levels of education and family income, due largely to the strong community ties to its three major academic institutions. As a result, the citizens of the metropolitan area are inclined toward active participation in local planning activities, especially those that have the potential for significant ramifications on the natural and built environments. Historically, the hallmark of transportation decision making has been one of contentious debate and indecision. The last major road construction project was completed in 1968, and only rehabilitation activities and minor geometric improvements have been completed since (and these have not been without controversy). The most recently approved major project has been in the discussion stages since 1946. Given this decision-making climate, it was necessary that the transportation planning process be designed to facilitate broad-based community participation while addressing the strategic issues associated with plan implementation.

A community-based planning process was adopted to accommodate the interests of the community while meeting the needs (i.e., the regulatory requirements) of the MPO. Community-based planning has been defined as “a cooperative planning process in which the planning agency, elected officials and citizens who live in a community work in true partnership to create a vision for their community’s future, build consensus in the community for that future and develop specific plans and projects to make that future happen” (2). This process was achieved largely through the use of seven transportation task teams combined with other involvement techniques (e.g., public meetings and events). Through this process, citizen volunteers were asked to assist in articulating the spirit and vision of the community and to help identify the transportation issues of vital concern to the populace.

Strategic Comprehensive Approach

Planning efforts are guided by a theoretical framework that establishes certain stages and benchmarks in the development of a plan. Two different frameworks are commonly used. The first—the traditional “rational comprehensive” approach—has the benefit of identifying boundless numbers of issues, developing goals related to those issues, and making decisions based on documented conditions (i.e., data). The downside of such an approach is the “rationality limit”—the point at which we, as humans, are no longer capable of explaining the complex relationships that exist in the urban form. The second approach, referred to as a “strategic” planning technique (3), has its roots in military and business management applications. Strategic planning processes attempt to be implementation oriented by focusing on key issues and the environment in which the decision is to be implemented (external and internal opportunities and threats). In a strategic planning framework, the lack of data as a reasonable course of nondecision is not accepted. The downside to this approach is that by initially constraining the number of issues considered, strategic planning may tend to oversimplify relationships and limit potential solutions.

The objective of the “strategic comprehensive” approach is to combine the strengths of the strategic process with those of a rational comprehensive process. This technique was implemented in the 1986 Comprehensive Plan for the city of Arlington, Texas (4). The result is a process that facilitates the identification of broad-based issues and then quickly focuses on those issues with a strong potential for implementation. ITCTC’s strategic comprehensive approach included the following steps: establishing a conceptual framework for the development of the plan, identifying major transportation issues, developing and articulating a community vision, refining and prioritizing the issues, developing strategies that address the highest priorities, examining the strategies to determine their implementation potential, and allowing appropriate time for adoption, implementation, and feedback. Step 1, completion of the conceptual framework, the veritable “plan to plan,” was accomplished by ITCTC as a prerequisite to the project. This document addressed community participation, outlined the planning process, described the format of the final document, provided the mission statement and general goals and objectives that the plan should strive to accomplish, and presented a schedule for completion of the plan. To complete the remaining steps, ITCTC employed several community-based planning techniques, including the use of seven citizen advisory committees, the transportation task teams.

Transportation Task Teams

In mid-November 1993, ITCTC began the process of creating seven transportation task teams. These task teams were organized based on functional and issue areas: bicycle, pedestrian, infrastructure, mobility, public transportation, intermodal, and environmental. The purpose of these task teams, as stated in the conceptual framework, was to assist ITCTC in developing specific and measurable goals, objectives, strategies, and actions that would address major transportation issues within their respective functional and issue areas. Due to the regulatory deadline for completing the initial plan (December 18, 1994), the task teams were expected to complete their assignment within 6 months. Five to seven citizen members were targeted for each task team to ensure an optimal committee size. To obtain the citizen volunteers, solicitations were sent directly to ITCTC’s mailing lists (over 200 people); press releases were distributed to local radio, television, and print media; and general block advertisements were published in the two local newspapers. MPO member contacts with various other civic groups, boards, and commissions were also used. Individuals interested in participating were asked to contact ITCTC by mail or phone and to indicate their area(s) of interest and to identify any special expertise or experiences. ITCTC received a significant response to the solicitation but was still able to assign all volunteers to a task team, and, in most cases, to establish a balance among the opinions represented on each team. The volunteers had a wide variety of backgrounds and consisted of an interesting cross section of the community (homeowners, schoolteachers, etc.). The membership for the seven task teams was formally approved in January 1994.

It is important to recognize a number of features of the task team initiation process. First, the limited term of commitment (i.e., 6 months) seemed to result in a broader range of participants. For this
particular effort, a broader base of participation was viewed by ITCTC as being more important than establishing sustained, long-term advisory committees. Second, while a good cross section of the community was obtained, it was not statistically controlled for any variable (e.g., sex, race, age, physical condition, geographic location of residence, owner-renter status, income, etc.). Third, despite the potential for conflict, the "balance of opinions" was desired to achieve temperate results that would appeal to the total community (i.e., ISTEA deadlines allowed little time for extended community debate). Fourth, the issue of communication between task teams was resolved through liaisons, members of ITCTC's planning committee (i.e., the technical committee of the MPO) assigned to each task team. The resulting structure is analogous to a wheel—the liaisons served as the spokes between the hub (the MPO) and the rim (the task teams and public). Finally, given the limited resources of the MPO (i.e., a staff of two) and the depth of local expertise available, part of the strategy was to tap the brainpower of the community. These features were consciously considered by ITCTC in the development of this process.

THE PROCESS IN ACTION

Task Team Performance

The seven transportation task teams began meeting early in February 1994. They met approximately twice a month for 2-hour meetings. The meetings were scheduled by the task team members to accommodate their personal schedules. While all meetings were open to the public, one of the early complaints was that some meetings were held at inconvenient times (i.e., during regular working hours). In addition, ITCTC staff kept other citizens who expressed interest in the project but did not have the time to be full-fledged task team members informed through frequent mailings and telephone correspondence.

Each task team was asked to select a group leader to keep the meeting process productive and on schedule. In response, some task teams selected a standing chairperson; others rotated responsibilities; another picked a "timekeeper"; and one proceeded without any formal leadership. The ITCTC staff, along with a member of the ITCTC planning committee acting as a liaison, provided technical and administrative support to the task teams. The staff provided agendas and advance materials, action summaries of previous meetings, reading materials, and other information as requested by task team members. While attendance and participation at task team meetings were considered as minimum activities, task team members were encouraged to perform as much additional reading and research as their personal schedules allowed. The overall objective was to provide the task teams with sufficient latitude and the resources necessary (within limits) to reach their own conclusions within the time frame allowed by the ISTEA deadline.

The first objective of each task team was to refine the list of major transportation issues identified at the first public meeting. The task teams then generated mission statements and began to prioritize the major transportation issues that were facing them. In time, the task teams developed goals, objectives, strategies, and action items that were recommended to ITCTC for inclusion in the long-range plan. Over the 5-month period February to June 1994, over 70 task team meetings were held and approximately 6,500 hours of volunteer time were contributed (not counting untold hours spent outside of meetings doing additional reading and research).

Events

Three general public meetings and one transportation "fair" were held throughout the planning process. The transportation fair (EXPO '94) was held on Saturday, May 21, 1994, inside the transit center (bus garage). This event, modeled on a previous event held in September 1993, consisted of a symposium of speakers and over 50 exhibits from private and public organizations. The intent was to provide an informal setting for the public to meet with representatives from the MPO, state DOT, local transit operators, and any of a number of advocacy groups and organizations (e.g., the Sierra Club, the Finger Lakes Police Mountain Bike Association, the Tompkins County Greenway Coalition, New York State Department of Parks, etc.). The local media provided extensive pre- and postevent coverage. As expected, the participants (approximately 300 persons) were very interested in appropriate transportation and other environmental issues. The event provided a positive environment to introduce the MPO and its efforts, increased the public's awareness of the need to plan for the transportation future of the area, and facilitated extensive networking among the advocacy groups and the represented agencies.

The public meetings were scheduled to coincide with the beginning, middle, and end of the task team process. Instead of a traditional (i.e., reactive) public hearing format, these meetings were designed to encourage proactive participation and to promote one-on-one interaction between the general public, the MPO members and staff, and the task team members. All of the public meetings were videotaped for possible use on public-access television (i.e., live broadcast time was not available).

In January 1994, ITCTC kicked off the long-range planning process with its first formal public meeting. The goal of this meeting was to obtain direct input from the public on those transportation issues affecting the metropolitan area. This meeting was held in a charrette format in which small breakout groups were used to brainstorm lists of current and future issues. A professional facilitator was hired to ensure that the meeting progressed in a positive and creative manner. The presence of such a facilitator clearly helped to communicate to the participants that they were on neutral ground and helped to ease most of the groups' inhibitions. In an effort to further reduce costs, local planning experts with strong advocacy backgrounds, working under the direction and supervision of the professional facilitator, were recruited to facilitate the breakout groups. The meeting was once again widely publicized through direct mailings, local media contacts, and block advertisements. In addition, large colorful advertisements were placed in all public transit vehicles. The meeting was held in a large room at a centrally located (and accessible) downtown hotel. The meeting drew approximately 50 people. All of the ideas generated that evening were recorded on newsprint and reported by group representatives in a general assembly at the conclusion of the breakout sessions. While the issues were still in rough form, it was evident that considerable overlap and consensus existed on many issues. The final reports and breakout group notes were compiled by the ITCTC staff to form lists of transportation issues affecting the area. These lists provided the first input to the task team efforts.

On July 7, 1994, the second public meeting for the long-range plan was held. The purpose of this meeting was to present publicly the work of the seven transportation task teams and to receive public input on their efforts. Once again, this meeting was widely publicized and was held at the same centrally located venue as was the first meeting. There were approximately 50 participants. The format for
this meeting was a plenary workshop in which a representative from each task team gave a brief overview of their work. After the presentations, the participants were asked to visit each of the seven task team booths where copies of the full team reports (containing the task team mission statements, goals and objectives, strategies, and action items), comment sheets, and representatives from the task teams could be found. This format encouraged direct communication between task team members and the public, further personalizing the process. The observation that the task team members seemed proprietary toward their reports was a good indication that there was confidence that the community-based process was indeed working.

Following the second meeting, a written comment period was extended until August 1, 1994, to give the participants ample opportunity to review and comment on the task team reports. However, due to the severe time constraints imposed by the ISTEA deadline, it was not possible to reconvene the task teams to allow them to fully review the comments and modify their work. Instead, the task of considering the comments fell to the ITCTC staff. Minor corrections and revisions were incorporated into the task team reports, where appropriate. In cases where substantial revision to a task team report was suggested, the comment was not incorporated, although it was preserved for future consideration.

A third public meeting was held on October 12, 1994, to present the draft 2015 Long-Range Transportation Plan and to receive public comment. This session was held in a town meeting format in which the ITCTC staff presented a brief overview of the draft plan followed by a question-and-answer period. The meeting concluded by offering the podium to anyone wishing to comment to the audience. This meeting fell within a voluntary 45-day public comment period established by ITCTC. Comments received at this meeting and during the comment period were considered in the final draft of the 2015 Long-Range Plan. Approximately 25 people attended this third meeting.

These events were intended to be low cost and provide an environment conducive to high levels of participation. The transportation fair cost the MPO about $250 (for table rental and printing). The site was free and the cost of promotion was shared with other organizations. One innovative feature of this event was the inclusion of commercial vendors (primarily bicycle dealers and outdoor outfitters) who were invited to exhibit their wares for a small fee (no on-site sales were allowed). This further reduced the costs to the public organizations and helped link the business community to the planning process. The meetings cost about $600 each (room rental and refreshments $200, block advertisements $300, and miscellaneous printing and postage $100) with an additional $150 for the professional facilitator for the first meeting. Attendance at these events, while not overwhelming, was significant. Also important was the level of participation (which should be considered as distinct from attendance), which was considerable. In summary, the total cost for these meetings was approximately $2,200. (Note: these costs do not include printing costs associated with the reproduction of the draft Long-Range Plan or the task team reports.)

CONCLUSIONS
Positive Impacts

Essentially the Ithaca Model was a success. A long-range plan was developed that reflected the interests and spirit of the community and was approved without significant opposition. The model, while labor intensive for a small staff, afforded a “proactive public involvement process that provides complete information, timely public notice, full public access to key decisions, and supports early and continuing involvement of the public” (5). The direct benefits of such involvement included (a) reduced project cost by tapping the expertise and experiences of the community brainpower; (b) assistance to the MPO in prioritizing future planning and project efforts by identifying areas of clear community consensus or conflict; and (c) the development and articulation of a shared community vision for the future of the transportation system. The indirect benefits of such involvement included (a) increased public knowledge about the relationships between the transportation system and the community fabric; (b) enhanced public understanding of the ISTEA metropolitan planning process and its requirements; and (c) the potential to minimize later delays in project implementation due to public opposition based on a lack of early involvement.

In particular, the task team work was invaluable to the development of the 2015 Long-Range Plan. The task team goals and objectives were incorporated directly, and the work of the task teams was very influential in determining the policies and recommendations that are set forth in the plan. On a more abstract plane, it is important to recognize that the discussions at the task team level permeate the entire plan, providing a foundation based truly on grassroots input and efforts.

Obstacles Encountered

In general, community-based planning is not without its pitfalls. ITCTC has discovered that working directly with diverse publics presents many significant challenges. Four general obstacle areas, which proved to be a source of significant stress on the process, are discussed below.

Public Participation

The term “public participation” is deceivingly complicated. Participation has traditionally been measured by the number of surveys completed, number of people who attended meetings, and so forth. A more appropriate definition is offered by Sherry R. Arnstein. Arnstein’s definition focuses on the redistribution of decision-making power. Arnstein states, “It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated and benefits like contracts and patronage are parcelled out. In short, it is the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society” (6). While Arnstein’s definition is based largely on the social program debates of the time period, in the view of the authors the concept of power sharing accurately describes the intent of the ISTEA regulations. As it is relatively easy to define or measure “participation,” it is more difficult to define the “public.”

The current transportation planning literature likes to use terms such as “customers,” “constituents,” “clients,” or “stakeholders.” While there are differences among these terms, for the purposes of this paper the differences are largely semantic. There are two facets to the obstacle under discussion. The first is the issue of inclusiveness, which is discussed in detail later in this paper. The second relates to interest-group influence and opinion dominance. It has been said that people who go to meetings rule the world and any
time you get two or more people to agree on something, you have created an interest group. Since the community-based process and the Ithaca Model rely heavily on meetings, there are some inherent biases in the process. For instance, a person’s attendance at meetings is often based on a number of factors, such as the availability of time (often a question of personal economics) or access to transportation. In essence, the more meetings one can attend, the more one’s opinion will be heard—and possibly affirmed. When a well-organized interest group is consistently present at meetings, it is possible that its convictions may begin to carry disproportionate influence on the outcome of the process. While these opinions may be both valid and valuable, it must be recognized that they may not represent the views of the general population. Amplification of this imbalance through a participatory process, such as community-based planning, could result in a blurred community vision. However, the tempering of this influence may lead to claims of “foul” by the interest group. Thus, one of the obstacles encountered in the Ithaca Model was how best to keep interest-group influence and general-public sentiment in a balanced and rational perspective.

Attendance Versus Participation

The second obstacle was the dichotomy between attendance and participation. In simple terms, high levels of attendance do not automatically equate to meaningful involvement in the planning process. Personalities and group dynamics play a large role in the level of meaningful participation in any public forum. Since the Ithaca Model relies on the breadth (and balance) of opinions among the task team members, the presence of a strong personality often inhibited the level of input from more subdued personalities.

Task Team Conflict Resolution

Conflicts occurred both within task teams (internal-internal) and between task teams (internal-external). The emergence of conflict was not entirely unexpected, especially considering the diverse nature of the functional and issue areas and the wide range of interests represented by the task team membership. However, the negative impacts of these conflicts (e.g., discontent among members, disenchantment with the viability of the planning process, and loss of significant time to irreconcilable debate) were not foreseen. The internal-internal conflicts were generally easier to reconcile. While they consumed much time, the discussions, which served to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas, were generally valuable to the outcome. More troublesome were the internal-external conflicts between the task teams. Sometimes these conflicts were large and rooted in base philosophical differences (e.g., prodevelopment versus antigrowth), while at other times the conflicts were small and detail oriented (e.g., on-street parking as a traffic-calming device versus on-street parking as a hazard to bicyclists). In the end, the time and resource constraints facing ITCTC simply prevented total conflict resolution at this time. It is intended that these types of conflicts can be resolved through future planning efforts and activities or on a case-by-case, project-by-project basis.

Power Redistribution

Perhaps the most complex obstacle was the issue of power redistribution. “There is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process” (6). Although the role of the task teams was clearly identified in the Long-Range Plan Conceptual Framework as being advisory in nature, the extent to which a true partnership was formed between the MPO (i.e., the decision makers) and the task teams (i.e., the public) was questioned by a few people. While this question is valid and deserves further contemplation, the insinuation was that the process represented a sophisticated form of co-option. The issue seemed to be one of “control” and has two specific aspects: the level of influence the task teams had over the final Long-Range Plan document and the impacts the task teams would have over future project implementation. The simple answer to these questions is that the task teams, through their efforts to articulate the community vision through their final reports, essentially established the agenda for the plan and for future implementation efforts. This represents a genuine form of real, although indirect, power necessary to affect the outcome of the process.

Improving the Process

“The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it because it is good for you” (6). The Ithaca Model provided an effective process for articulating the broader community vision and for identifying public concerns; however, the authors have identified several areas that should be addressed in the next application of the process.

Public Participation on Task Teams

Defining “the public” is a difficult task. One of the principal issues is how the public should be defined for the planning process—should it be a statistically correct sample of the population or should it strive to include traditionally underserved populations? The answer to both is yes, but for different reasons. In the Ithaca Model, the task team membership did not present a statistically significant sample of the population, thus reliability of the community vision could be questioned. Given additional time and financial resources, the task team and public meeting processes should be supplemented with focus groups and scientifically designed surveys of the general population.

Obtaining the participation of underserved populations can be extremely difficult. In simplistic terms, these groups generally face more pressing issues than participating in an exercise to think about the future; they are engaged in a struggle with the present. The doctrines of advocacy planning emphasize that planners should seek to assist those least able to assist themselves. Thus, one of the arguments favoring a disproportionate effort to involve the underserved is based on professional ethics. While ITCTC’s task team membership represented a wide variety of backgrounds, the adequacy of participation from minorities, disabled persons, and various income groups could also be questioned. ITCTC’s efforts to solicit task team members from these underserved groups could be described as relatively unsuccessful. Given additional time and resources, enhanced outreach efforts to these groups should be undertaken. For example, more community leaders (e.g., church leaders, neighborhood groups, etc.) could be identified and personally contacted to encourage them to get their constituents involved. Meetings could be located in areas more convenient to these populations. Special transportation or even child-care services could also be arranged.
Organization and Structure of Task Teams

The experimental component in the Ithaca Model was the extreme level of independence and latitude granted to the task teams. In essence, each task team was given an assignment and asked to work to develop a means to accomplish its objective. Some of the task teams did very well, quickly organizing themselves and beginning work. Others spent considerable time getting organized, trying to determine their leadership structure, or, in some cases, even attempting to redefine their original assignments. One of the clear lessons was that the organization and structure of the task teams should be carefully orchestrated prior to commencing the process. Unless unlimited time is available to conduct the process, there seems to be little benefit in allowing these types of committees to define themselves. Therefore, it is recommended that the roles and responsibilities of committees and their members, as opposed to a general mission statement, be clearly defined and communicated to the participants in the form of ground rules prior to starting the project.

Leadership

One of the biggest problems seemed to be the lack of leadership necessary to keep the task teams focused and on schedule. Several options could be explored for future efforts. First, chairpersons for each committee could be selected and appointed by the MPO. While this may seem heavy handed, it ensures that a person with appropriate leadership skills will be steering the committee’s efforts. Second, it was necessary for the ITCTC staff to identify and initiate group dynamics and decision-facilitating techniques in order to jump-start some of the task teams. In general, the staff was unprepared for the level of chaos that existed within some of the task teams. The second alternative would be to provide additional, specialized training in group dynamics, conflict resolution, and decision-making techniques to the staff as part of the preparations for future efforts. An alternative, if resources were available, would be to use professional facilitators. Third, an innovative alternative is to create a group of citizen facilitators. For example, the Texas Bicycle Coalition (TBC) started Project MPO as a means of training its advocates to play a proactive role in the ISTEA metropolitan transportation planning process. By training its advocates to function within the MPO environment, the TBC was able to effectively influence MPO decisions in its favor. MPOs might consider how a similar program could work from the MPO’s perspective. Training and educating local citizens to become facilitators, or “MPO Ambassadors,” could prove to be useful for public meetings, advisory committees, or for other public presentations (e.g., civic group meetings). This type of program would both empower citizens with the tools they need to participate effectively and equally in the MPO planning process and help create an informed citizenry.

Achieving Consensus

Decision making within the task teams was not always easy. While ITCTC attempted to balance competing interests within each task team, on more than one occasion, the result was heated debate and conflict. The process seemed especially susceptible to breakdown when the task teams began to evaluate strategies for implementation potential. While many of these situations could be resolved by a more definitive leadership structure, most are a reflection of the lack of detailed, localized data. While it was always intended that the initial ITCTC plan would be policy oriented (as opposed to a physical plan) and would establish the direction for future planning and data collection efforts, the lack of data hindered conflict resolution. It is hoped that future efforts will have the benefit of the types of data that are generally available from established MPOs (e.g., travel demand forecasts, local surveys, detailed cost and resource estimates, etc.); however, since there will always be cases where data are not readily available, an alternative method should be considered. One possible solution is offered. When significant debate seems imminent, those items could be assigned to the staff. The staff would then develop the specific proposals (including contingency alternatives) based on the initial committee input (i.e., goals and objectives), the available data and information, and its own knowledge and expertise. Thus, instead of trying to “design a camel by committee” or belaboring wordsmithing, committee members would be asked to react to specific recommendations. This should result in a more efficient use of committee time (although more difficult for the limited staff).

Summary

The authors believe that, as a result of the high level of meaningful public involvement accomplished through the community-based planning process, the final ITCTC planning document accurately captures the spirit and vision of the broader community. However, this is not to say that no resistance to the final product remains. One of the clear lessons is that it is not possible, nor advisable to attempt to satisfy the desires of all of the members of “the public.” Those who undertake community-based activities must understand that irreconcilable conflicts may emerge, but that the knowledge of those conflicts is itself valuable.

The lessons learned by ITCTC and presented in the Ithaca Model are directly transferable to other MPOs and planning efforts. In simple terms, if a new MPO with a staff of two can undertake and benefit from this type of process, even in a highly dynamic sociopolitical climate, then anyone should be able to do likewise.

REFERENCES


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