

Developing a Customer Focus in the Statewide Transportation Planning Process

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In the spirit of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, the Colorado Department of Transportation in association with the University of Colorado at Denver Graduate School of Business Administration developed an innovative process for obtaining increased public input into the statewide transportation planning process. The university conducted a series of citizen focus groups in each of Colorado's 15 transportation planning regions. The purpose of these gatherings was to meet with those who participated in a telephone survey conducted earlier in the year and explore significant survey findings in greater detail. Significant findings of the focus group proceedings are summarized with emphasis on key issues of public policy discovered in the focus groups. Conclusions about the usefulness of postsurvey focus groups are also presented with an emphasis on the value they were found to provide in evaluation of survey results and preparation of focused response plans.

In the spirit of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), the Colorado Department of Transportation (DOT) in association with the University of Colorado at Denver Graduate School of Business Administration developed an innovative process for obtaining increased public input into the statewide transportation planning process. The first phase of this information-gathering effort consisted of a telephone survey of households and transportation officials in the state. In early 1994, the university sponsored a survey of over 2,000 Colorado households and 120 transportation officials to define the major transportation issues concerning citizens of the state.

In the second phase of the project, the university conducted a series of focus group meetings in each of the state's 15 transportation planning regions. Separate focus groups were held with citizens, elected and appointed transportation officials, representatives of the business community, and representatives of the elderly and the disabled. The purpose of these gatherings was to meet with those who participated in the telephone survey and explore significant findings in greater detail. By using the informal focus group setting, survey respondents explained their answers to the telephone survey more fully. This information enabled decision makers to better understand the public's feelings and priorities on transportation issues.

This report presents a summary of the responses of citizen focus groups in all 15 Colorado transportation planning regions. It also evaluates the usefulness of postsurvey focus groups to validate survey results and to explore survey results in greater detail. The report is divided into sections that describe the methodology of the focus group process, a description of answers to each of the focus group questions, and conclusions about information gathered in the focus groups and the usefulness of postsurvey focus groups as a research tool.

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METHODOLOGY

Background

A focus group is a meeting of a small group of individuals in an informal setting to discuss a specific set of issues. The group typically comprises 8 to 12 individuals who are invited to talk openly about a specific topic. The interactive nature of the discussion generates many spontaneous comments. From these, a great deal of insight can be gained concerning public views on the topic. Focus groups are often used to obtain qualitative information to better understand the issues associated with a research question and to help develop a formal questionnaire to obtain quantitative information.

A unique research approach is to conduct focus groups after obtaining quantitative information from a survey. Postsurvey focus groups are conducted to explore the possible reasons for the answers in the surveys and to better understand the quantitative results. They aim to provide a context and evaluation of the survey responses.

Venues

Focus groups were held in each of the 15 state transportation planning regions:

- Pikes Peak (Colorado Springs)
- Denver Metro
- North Front Range (Ft. Collins)
- Pueblo Area
- Grand Junction
- Eastern (Akron)
- Southwest (Las Animas)
- San Luis Valley (Alamosa)
- Gunnison Valley (Montrose)
- Southwest (Durango)
- Intermountain (Glenwood Spgs)
- Northwest (Steamboat)
- Upper Front Range (Ft. Morgan)
- Central Front Range (Canon City)
- South Central (Trinidad)

Focus Group Implementation

Consistent with the aim of providing a qualitative context for the quantitative results of the telephone survey, the university contacted people who participated in the survey of Colorado households. In each of the state's planning regions, individuals were invited to participate in a meeting with their fellow citizens to discuss trans-

portation issues. The purpose of the meeting was to provide context and explore responses to the telephone survey.

Typically, the meetings lasted from 1½ to 2 hours and were attended by 8 to 12 individuals who resided in the transportation planning region. The questions for the focus groups were derived from the responses to the statewide household survey. They covered topics including mass transit, ratings of quality, system satisfaction, air quality, funding priorities, taxation and funding allocation, car-pooling, and decision-making input. Examples of the focus group questions are included at the end of this report.

At the meeting, focus group participants were presented with regional survey results on these and other topics, and asked if they agreed or disagreed with the regional results. The members of the group were then asked to explain the regional responses and whether these responses seemed significantly different from what they would have expected. The purpose of these questions was to determine if the survey responses were valid and to discover *why* residents from a given region placed more emphasis on one issue over another.

Analysis

The meetings were tape-recorded and videotaped to provide a clear record of the proceedings and to aid in future analysis. Because of the subjective nature of analyzing the focus group proceedings and extracting important qualitative information, each meeting was evaluated and summarized by separate individuals, in an iterative process, to ensure interrater reliability.

Each regional focus group was viewed by at least three members of the research team. The recording was first viewed by each evaluator, who then developed a list of key issues brought up in the meeting. From this list, a summary report of the meeting was prepared. After preparing the regional summary report, each reviewer evaluated the summary of the other team members. The group met to review the findings and to reconcile any discrepancies in the individual summaries. From this, a single regional summary was synthesized.

By using this multiple review process, the group was able to ensure interrater reliability and significantly reduce the chance that any one researcher would arbitrarily skew significant findings and present an inaccurate summary of the focus group. The same multistep process was used in preparing the statewide summary of focus group findings.

SUMMARY OF STATEWIDE RESPONSES

Highways Versus Mass Transit

Throughout the state, responses were much more in favor of spending to improve and maintain existing roads than to build new roads. With the exception of bypasses in towns like Montrose and Ft. Collins, the participants did not perceive a need for new roads. They believed available highway dollars should be used to maintain or upgrade the existing system. The benefits provided by new roads were not viewed as justifying their cost or the money taken away from other activities. Citizens wanted the state to focus its efforts on providing the best possible maintenance of the existing system, and to consider new roads only in very specific instances.

When faced with the choice of mass transit or new roads, the participants opted for mass transit in approximately the same ratio as the statewide survey. However, support for mass transit did vary by

region. In areas such as Trinidad, Durango, Alamosa, Montrose, Akron, and Canon City, the support for mass transit was very low. People in these areas did not see the potential benefits of a transit system and believed the region was too widespread to make effective use of transit resources. Pueblo was another area where respondents did not indicate support of a mass transit system because the city's transportation problems were viewed as not being bad enough to warrant the necessary investment.

On the other hand, in major urban areas such as Denver, Colorado Springs, Ft. Collins, and to a lesser degree Grand Junction, there was strong support for improving the mass transit systems. The primary reason for the public support in these areas was to alleviate perceived congestion and pollution problems. Concerns about air quality were central to the support for mass transit in most of these areas. In Denver, residents did not want to see air pollution get any worse. In other areas, particularly Colorado Springs and Ft. Collins, residents did not perceive a severe air quality problem at this time but were concerned air pollution would worsen as the area grew.

Grand Junction was an area where support for mass transit was mixed. Concern was expressed that the elderly and disabled did not have adequate access around town. There was also concern about mounting congestion problems and increased air pollution in the area. Still, these concerns were not strong enough to gain a consensus for significantly increasing the level of public transportation offered in the area.

Smaller cities that indicated moderate support for mass transit were Steamboat Springs and Glenwood Springs. Mass transit was viewed as a way to improve the heavy traffic conditions on Highway 82 from Glenwood to Aspen and to improve connections from Steamboat to Craig. Such mass transit systems were typically viewed as being rail based, however, the high cost of building and operating such systems was not given a great deal of consideration in the discussions.

In major towns along the Front Range, there was support for an intercity rail-based mass transit system that could be used to move people along the entire Front Range corridor. Interest in such a rail link was particularly strong among the respondents from Colorado Springs, who saw the need for improved public transportation links to the Denver area. This interest stretched as far south as Trinidad and as far north as Ft. Collins.

There was some interest in heavy rail solutions to the ski areas—the "ski train" concept. Some of the regions on the Western Slope, which generally refers to the areas of Colorado west of the Continental Divide, saw rail solutions helping tourism and providing local transportation. However, there was little interest in supporting these issues with additional taxes. In Steamboat Springs, little approval was expressed concerning the development of a very specialized mass transit, such as a light rail system between the town and Craig, a transit solution for Route 82 between Glenwood Springs and Aspen, and bus transportation or park and ride for commuters between Montrose and Telluride.

The citizen interviews also pointed out several areas where the public has a low level of understanding of mass transportation issues. The first misunderstanding concerned the use of different rail technologies. Typically, all proposed rail projects were referred to as "light rail." Our interviews indicated that light rail could mean a monorail system, a trolley car system, an intercity high-speed rail, or a subway system. There was very little understanding among the public about the most appropriate use of these alternate systems.

The second major misconception was the true construction and operating costs of any rail-based mass transit systems. There was a

perception that due to their efficiency, these systems were not very expensive. In some cases, the perception was that rail is less expensive than buses. In very few cases did members of the public understand the level of subsidization of any rail transit system in the country. It was believed fares alone could support the operation of rail mass transit in the major metro areas of the state.

In all the focus groups, the participants had a difficult time not discussing improving and widening the highways. Even after stressing a forced choice between new roads and mass transit, the longest any group went without mentioning improving or widening the existing highways was halfway through the discussion. Pothole repair was the strongest issue identified by the participants. Most had anecdotal evidence of the absolute need for improvement of a highway, road, or other existing facility. Some of the most noticeable problem areas, such as Route 82 from Glenwood Springs to Aspen and Route 50 between Grand Junction and Montrose, were so infamous they were brought up in focus groups outside of their own regions.

The improvement issue went farther than just improving roads. The participants viewed reducing air pollution, improving safety, and prolonging the life of their vehicles as also being important. The bicyclists, of which there were quite a few in the western regions, viewed the widening of the highways as contributing directly to the quality of their sport. Bikers and nonbikers alike viewed highway widening as a strong safety issue. Many of the participants also viewed narrower highways without bike lanes as very bad for the tourist industry, especially since certain areas of Colorado promote biking as a tourist attraction.

Future Vision of Transportation System

There was strong statewide concern about future congestion, air quality deterioration, and decline in quality of life due to increases in population. Although the concerns were voiced differently and the solutions were unique to particular regions, the fear was the same; transportation problems will get worse. One frequently used expression was the transportation system would be "a mess" in the future.

The more pessimistic views on the future state of the transportation system were based on two perceptions. The first perception dealt with increasing congestion problems from the rapid growth of the state. The participants believed these congestion problems would tax the capacity of the existing system and cause roadways to deteriorate and lead to increased maintenance problems. There was also a strong concern that air pollution would significantly worsen as congestion levels rise.

Participants from the Western Slope (areas of Colorado west of the Continental Divide) saw significant growth coming from land development and an influx of tourists establishing second homes. They foresaw substantial growth in the retiree population leading to transportation problems for the elderly or disabled, especially in outlying areas where the cost of land is still low. These groups also saw a substantial growth in immigrants from disadvantaged countries who will work in lower-paying service positions.

The Front Range, especially from Colorado Springs to Ft. Collins, saw continued rapid growth with increased congestion and deteriorating air quality as the main problem for the future. Most of the focus groups called for improvements in mass transit as a means for alleviating these problems. There was significant support for some type of rail or light rail along the Front Range for both con-

venience and congestion reduction. These areas were far more supportive of carpool incentives, carpool lanes, and park-and-ride solutions than the rest of the state.

The south central, eastern, and southeastern regions did not appear to believe growth and congestion would be as significant in their regions. They believed their transportation problems required immediate attention, rather than planning.

In areas such as Ft. Collins, Denver, and Colorado Springs, these concerns were also tied to a desire to keep air pollution from getting worse as the area grew and congestion increased. For that reason, these participants were strongly committed to developing workable mass transit alternatives that would reduce the need for using automobiles in daily travel. The public believed the increased use of alternative fuels should be encouraged to mitigate future air pollution problems.

In more rural areas such as Montrose and Durango, the primary concern was to ensure that highways are expanded sufficiently to handle increased traffic flow, and that bypasses are built to divert increased commercial traffic away from town centers. A similar concern about building a bypass to alleviate downtown traffic congestion was expressed in the Ft. Collins area.

Future concerns were also expressed in areas that rely on tourism. In places like Durango, there was a concern that highly congested and unsafe roads would make travelers less willing to choose Colorado as a tourist destination. In these areas there was a strong belief that the highways must be able to safely accommodate the increased number of tourists visiting the state by car.

The second perception that created pessimism among the participants was a lack of trust in public officials. Many areas believed state officials were not properly planning to meet the needs of the future. The view was that officials should be preparing for future growth in population and road congestion. The public also expressed the belief that by adequately preparing, government could reduce the cost of developing and building the transportation infrastructure needed 5 to 10 years in the future.

Overall, there were many suggestions for improving the transportation system in the future. There were many recommendations for promoting the use of alternative power sources, such as liquid natural gas, propane, and electricity, for automobiles and mass transportation. Additionally, several regions called for more research into better means of transportation, such as lighter and more efficient cars to use alternative fuels. Railcar carriers for small commuter vehicles were another suggestion. Several suggestions were made to promote the use of bicycles in the commuter system. These included improving highways and bike paths to accommodate bicycle commuters and incorporating facilities for bike storage on buses and trains.

System Quality

Each focus group was asked to review and comment on the system satisfaction results of their regional survey. In the telephone survey, residents were asked to rate the quality of items such as snow removal, parking, road conditions, planning and design, and convenience. The overall agreement of focus group members with the ranking of important items from the survey was remarkable. Discussions of system quality tended to center on four major topics: repair and maintenance, congestion, air quality, and safety.

Reactions throughout the state were in favor of better repair and maintenance of the existing road system. The focus group's opin-

ion was that proper, initial repairs would reduce the overall cost of the repairs. Rather than making less expensive, shorter-lasting improvements to the roads, participants indicated they preferred quality repairs, even if it increased short-term costs. The opinions on repair and maintenance were particularly strong in the more rural areas of the state, such as Akron and Trinidad, where users tend to do more long-distant driving.

Another issue concerned the way increased congestion affects the transportation system. Increased congestion was the primary reason for calls to improve and widen existing highways in the state. Congestion was viewed as contributing to both safety and air pollution problems. Such concerns about increasing congestion were expressed in both the major urban areas and smaller towns experiencing growth problems, such as Durango.

Safety was also identified as a specific problem. While tied to maintenance problems and increasing congestion on the highways, safety was raised several times as a specific concern to system users. Participants in the Glenwood Springs area pointed to the problems on Highway 82 in particular. In this and other areas, it was suggested the state return to mandatory vehicle inspections to ensure vehicles were safe to operate.

Air quality was raised as a concern in the discussions of system quality. A complete description of responses on this topic is provided in the section on air quality.

On a positive note, there was widespread approval throughout the state concerning the quality of snow removal. With few individual exceptions, focus groups in all the regions indicated the state does a good job of clearing snow from the roads quickly and efficiently. The only concern raised was the contribution of sanding to air pollution problems.

Overall System Satisfaction

Opinions on satisfaction ranged from areas like Ft. Collins, where citizens said they were generally satisfied with the transportation system, to areas like Colorado Springs, where citizens indicated dissatisfaction. Generally, respondents indicated an overall satisfaction, exclusive of a few specific items.

In the larger urban areas, such as Denver, Colorado Springs, and Grand Junction, feelings of dissatisfaction centered on inadequate mass transportation options. Focus groups believed mass transit should be more convenient and available for day-to-day trips and not just useful for commuters. Participants noted the inconvenience of the bus system, especially outside of regular commuter times. They stated increasing frequency of service and expanding routes would be necessary to enable riders to give up their cars. The safety of riders waiting for buses was also a concern for commuters in these areas.

Members of the Colorado Springs focus group implied their mass transit system did not meet expectations and needed to be upgraded significantly. Upgrades included expanding operating hours, increasing the number and frequency of buses, and making the system more convenient for the elderly and disabled.

As previously discussed, congestion, safety concerns, and poor air quality were also identified as factors leading to feelings of dissatisfaction with the transportation system.

In rural and isolated areas, like Durango, Trinidad, and Akron, dissatisfaction often stemmed from beliefs of being overlooked by state officials and being the last place of concern for transportation planners. Lack of proximity to the Denver area definitely con-

tributed to perceptions that rural problems were not taken seriously by state officials.

Other factors that created some levels of dissatisfaction were repair and maintenance, safety, and planning and design. The country and county roads were perceived as being poorly maintained. The poor quality of repair work was believed to cause costly, inconvenient, and frustrating multiple repairs to the same roads. These maintenance problems also contributed to safety and congestion problems, particularly along I-25, from Colorado Springs to Trinidad. Planning and design were singled out several times as needing significant improvement in Montrose, Trinidad, and Pueblo. Officials were criticized for poor planning and for not correcting safety and convenience problems.

Air Quality

Air quality was a significant issue in the focus group discussions. It was linked to concerns about growth, congestion, and support for mass transit. While the level of concern over air quality varied across the state, the issue was raised to some degree in all regions. The participants' judgment of air quality throughout the state varied, depending on whether they resided in urban or rural population centers. In the principal metropolitan areas, there was a strong belief that air quality should not deteriorate.

In the Denver area, there was concern mass transit should be more fully developed to prevent local air quality from deteriorating further. In areas such as Ft. Collins and Colorado Springs, the perception was air quality was not a current problem. However, group members were very concerned that as their area grows, air quality would deteriorate significantly and problems similar to those in Denver would develop. These concerns were so strong that people in these areas said they would support increasing taxes to pay for air quality programs or to improve mass transit to keep additional cars off the roads.

Similar concerns were expressed about the increase in air pollution in the Grand Junction area. However, the perceptions of Grand Junction's current air quality problems were not sufficiently alarming for residents to strongly support mass transit development. Focus group members also expressed optimism that alternative fuels would be an effective means of reducing vehicle emissions.

Residents of some rural regions also cited air quality as a specific concern. In Glenwood Springs and Steamboat Springs, focus group members expressed strong concerns that air quality would deteriorate as increased traffic and congestion occurred with growth and increased tourism. Air pollution was viewed as increasing in these regions, so there was support for increased taxes to pay for air quality improvements or emission inspection programs. However, these areas did not support increases in statewide taxes to fund pollution control programs for Denver or the other major urban areas of the state. Support was shown for a statewide emission inspection program to keep high-polluting vehicles off the roads.

A few rural areas, like Canon City, Durango, and Alamosa, did not view air pollution as a particular problem. Citizens in these areas did not see a deterioration in air quality, so they were suspicious of pollution control programs that would be funded with new taxes. Residents of these areas were also concerned that more strict emissions standards would negatively affect commerce and commercial trucking in their regions.

Several of the groups believed that a reinstatement of the safety inspection program, whether supported by user fees, conducted by

the state, or some combination, would be good for improving air quality and safety. In some areas, respondents mentioned increasing or reforming emission standards as a means of improving air quality, but did not address implementation issues. They also viewed research and promotion of alternative fuels as a means of reducing pollution.

Spending Priorities

In the telephone survey, respondents were asked if they would like to see spending increase or decrease for various items. These items included spending for pothole repair, transportation-disadvantaged persons, improvement of existing roads, new roads, timing of stoplights, courtesy patrols, expanded bus service, sanding and snow removal, electronic highway signs, and carpool lanes. The result was a list of items, often six or more, the respondents believed needed increased funding.

Focus group discussions showed, however, that when presented with a ranking of items for receiving increased funding, residents gave much higher priority to the top two or three items on the list. Decision makers should focus on the top few items on the list when evaluating a region's funding priorities.

In most regions, the top funding priorities were either improving or widening existing roads, aiding transportation-disadvantaged persons, timing stoplights, or pothole repair. However, in many cases when pressed to choose the spending alternatives that should receive priority, pothole repair sank below the other top concerns in the region.

The major reason other spending alternatives dropped in importance was citizens often chose the most important priorities for their region. Ideally, they would like to see spending increase for many items but know they cannot afford the new taxes necessary to increase funding for more than a few options.

One exception to this general observation was the response from smaller areas like Trinidad and Alamosa. Conditions of most items were viewed so poorly that residents wanted increased spending in almost every area. The respondents from these areas did not indicate where they thought additional revenue would be obtained to fund these projects.

With the exception of pothole repair, the other major funding items remained priorities upon further investigation, especially increased funding for the elderly and disabled. The reason for the strong support was that people tended to view aid for transportation-disadvantaged persons as an important service that should be made available by society. However, it should be noted citizens generally did not understand the real costs associated with making significant upgrades in the transportation system for these individuals.

Other items viewed as being top funding priorities were improving and widening existing highways and better traffic light timing. Improving existing highways was identified as a priority to alleviate congestion and to improve safety conditions. Better timing of traffic lights was given priority because it was viewed as a low-cost solution that could be implemented quickly to alleviate congestion problems.

In addition to strong support for spending for transportation-disadvantaged persons in Denver and Colorado Springs, increased funding was an additional priority for mass transit projects. As previously discussed, in these areas, mass transit was viewed as one of the best ways to reduce congestion and mitigate existing or projected pollution problems.

The Durango participants believed quality road improvements, such as effective pothole repairs or road widening, could prevent rapid erosion of the roads. They believed quality work could save significant amounts of money that could be spent on other projects.

Willingness to Increase Taxes and Funding Allocation

Tax Increases

While the telephone survey indicated a willingness among citizens to increase their taxes to fund important programs, focus groups typically reacted negatively to the idea of a general increase in taxes.

Upon further probing, it became apparent most of the opposition to taxes was related to uncertainty about how taxes would be collected and spent. When presented with the idea of a specific tax of fixed duration, the public was much more supportive of tax increases to fund important transportation projects. However, some regions would not support new taxes for any reason. Akron, Montrose, Durango, and Trinidad were examples of regions that opposed taxes.

The focus groups showed a substantial lack of understanding of the state funding allocation process. An example was the Colorado Springs focus group. Participants were unaware of the source of funds for transportation or how funds were allocated throughout the state. There was a strong unwillingness to pay additional taxes until residents were sure the money would be allocated to their region. This opinion was prevalent throughout the state. Perceptions of the gas tax illustrated this problem. None of the participants knew how this tax was allocated or how it returned to the area from which it was collected. The general consensus was that allocation was based on population.

Overall, the public would be much more supportive of a tax increase if they were assured of a temporary tax and proper implementation of the money. Generally, the view was that higher gasoline taxes were an appropriate and fair means of obtaining increased transportation funds.

Funding Allocation

Generally, funding allocation decisions were viewed as unfair. These decisions were believed to be subject to political influence and used to fund major projects in the Denver area. While there was general acknowledgment that some redistribution of tax collections was necessary to build and maintain a statewide system, there was a persistent belief that the redistribution process was not conducted in a fair manner.

As previously stated, these perceptions stemmed from a lack of understanding of the derivation of monies for transportation and of the state allocation process. Many believed transportation dollars came primarily from taxes on gasoline; however, this belief carried considerable uncertainty. Moreover, there was little understanding of the allocation process throughout the state, creating perceptions of unfairness in revenue collection. Without accurate allocation information, citizens believed the process was politicized and unfair.

On the Western Slope, citizens believed tax dollars were diverted from the west to fund projects on the Eastern Slope. In smaller areas, people were convinced funds were diverted to the major cities in the state, particularly the Denver metropolitan area.

In areas that rely heavily on tourism, like Durango, there was a fear highway funds were allocated on the basis of population density, which did not reflect the true level of highway usage from tourism in these regions.

The Western Slope expressed strong concerns that building access roads to the new Denver International Airport would take funds away from highway improvements in their areas.

Decision-Making Input

Focus group members generally indicated they would like to have more input in the transportation decision making. Citizens indicated difficulty in making their views known. In many areas, concerns were expressed that officials made final decisions prior to a public meeting, so public input becomes ineffective. Participants indicated that if their participation made a difference in the overall planning, public input would increase.

Participants discussed concerns regarding public input at traditional meetings. They believed these meetings attracted special-interest groups and individuals with a vested interest in the outcome of the process. For this reason, there was widespread support for alternative means of gaining input from the public.

Methods suggested for increased input were voting on all transportation issues, newspaper ads advising of upcoming transportation meetings, direct mail, telephone surveys, and focus groups, such as the ones they were attending. Several participants indicated focus groups were informative, while allowing their opinions to be voiced. A participant from Fort Collins mentioned the process, Choices 95, as a good way to involve the public. These methods were all viewed as ways to get more input from the public, without the problems inherent in the traditional public meeting process.

Rural and isolated areas believed state decision makers paid too much attention to the major urban areas and overlooked the problems in their area. The Western Slope shared this perception because the public felt disenfranchised from the political and decision-making process.

Focus groups believed DOT officials should solicit input from the rural areas of the state. People in the Montrose area even suggested they would support a tax increase to station a DOT representative in the area.

Carpooling

Consistent with the findings on the telephone survey, many areas supported the idea of carpooling as a way to alleviate congestion and pollution problems in crowded urban centers. However, the support for carpooling lessened when it came to specific solutions to increase its use.

In rural areas of the state, the perceived benefits of carpooling did not outweigh the additional costs, such as reduced freedom and personal flexibility. In the urban centers, carpooling was seen as a viable way to reduce congestion problems and to help reduce vehicle emissions.

Most of the suggestions for carpooling incentives centered on tax breaks for businesses who encouraged their employees to use carpools or who provided carpool vans. There was much less support for building carpool lanes because of the high construction costs associated with these lanes. The uncertain benefits of increased carpooling did not appear to justify these high costs.

Overall, the primary incentive of carpooling was seen as the time and money saved compared with mass transit commuting. However, participants did not believe other incentives would increase carpooling.

CONCLUSIONS

Significant Focus Group Findings

The focus group meeting process resulted in many insights into the public's view of the transportation system and transportation planning. Decision makers should focus on the following areas.

Effective use of state resources is one of the primary considerations in system satisfaction. The public is most satisfied when the state identifies a problem, allocates resources, and implements a solution quickly and effectively. A prime element of satisfaction is for the state to avoid addressing the same issue year after year. Citizens believe that doing the job right the first time will free up considerable amounts of transportation revenue and significantly reduce waste.

Second, there is a general lack of understanding about the cost of providing public transportation. In almost every case, the public significantly underestimates the cost of building and operating mass transit systems. This misperception about costs is particularly true regarding the costs of building rail-based mass transit systems.

A third important finding is that citizens consistently favor improved public transit for transportation-disadvantaged persons, such as the elderly and the disabled. The public feels this service should be provided by society. Unfortunately, the public also considerably underestimates the true costs of improving transportation services for the elderly and disabled. Citizens believe that significant improvements can be made with nominal funding increases.

Fourth, while there is considerable support for an intercity rail system along Colorado's Front Range, there is very little understanding about the most appropriate use of different rail technologies. Citizens typically refer to all rail projects as "light rail." Additionally, a strong misperception also exists about the cost of building and operating rail-based systems. There is a perception that because of their efficiency, these systems are not expensive and may even be less expensive than buses.

Another important finding concerns decision-making input: citizens want to be involved in the decision-making process, but believe the input must be meaningful. Many indicate a reluctance to get involved in the process because they believe their input would not be taken seriously by officials. The perception of affecting the outcome of decisions is just as important to the public as having an opportunity to give input.

Sixth, citizens believe concerned officials are not planning for the future needs of Colorado's transportation system. There is a strong concern that without adequate planning, it will cost more than it should to solve future transportation problems. It is essential that planning be visible to the public, so misperceptions do not persist regarding inadequate planning for the future.

Postsurvey Focus Groups as a Research Tool

The experience of the research team indicates that postsurvey focus groups can be an effective tool in helping to evaluate the results of a survey. The major benefits of the postsurvey focus group are that

it provides a valuable means to validate survey responses and allows researchers to further explore the reasons for those responses. Moreover, the postsurvey focus group provides the information agencies need to effectively target plans that address public concerns.

When important issues are identified in the focus group, researchers not only learn what the public wants but also have a unique opportunity to explore the best ways for agencies to address public concern on those issues. For example, focus group discussions revealed the public wants increased input into the state's transportation decision-making process, but citizens are concerned they will not have an opportunity for *meaningful* input. The focus group process allows for in-depth discussion of the best ways to provide input opportunities that the public believes would have a significant impact on the decision-making process. In this case, such information could prove invaluable in formulating plans that respond effectively, from the *public's* point of view, to calls for increased public involvement.

It is in this response planning process that postsurvey focus groups can be most beneficial. Once the significant issues are defined by the survey, the focus group can be used as a method to define the goals of a response that will focus on citizens' principal concerns. Officials will be able to target specific areas and provide information and education in the areas that will be the most beneficial to the public's decision making.

Another important finding is the public has a positive view of the focus group process itself. Focus groups increase feelings of involvement in the transportation planning process and provide an educational opportunity for the participants.

If the goal is to increase the effectiveness of public involvement in transportation decisions, then the postsurvey focus group can be an effective means of providing enhanced public access and improving the effectiveness of responses to public concerns.

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. HIGHWAYS VERSUS TRANSIT SPENDING

An important issue came up in the survey and had to do with the question of spending transportation tax dollars for new highways or mass transit like light rail or buses. ____ [number] of the local residents agree that it would be better to spend the money on mass transit rather than on new highways. How do you feel about this?

2. TRANSPORTATION FUTURE

Think for a moment about the transportation system 5 to 10 years in the future? What do you think it will be like and why?

3. SYSTEM QUALITY

Various aspects of the ____ transportation system were ranked in terms of their quality. I'm handing out a list of

them now. Those items above the line received an above-average quality rating; those below received a below-average quality rating. Why do you think these items ranked so high or low?

4. OVERALL SYSTEM SATISFACTION

____ [number] of the ____ area respondents were not satisfied with the quality of transportation services within the state. Overall, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the quality of transportation service and why?

5. AIR QUALITY

____ [number] of the ____ respondents said they would be willing to pay more taxes to improve air quality and almost three-quarters agreed that high-polluting cars and commercial trucks should be restricted from travel on high-pollution days. Do you prefer one or the other option or both, and why?

6. RESOURCE ALLOCATION

The survey also asked which services should receive increased or reduced spending. I have another handout listing these services. The line separates those that should receive more spending from those that should receive less. Which, if any, do you feel deserve more or less spending and why? In other words, what is really important on this list?

7. WILLINGNESS TO INCREASE TAXES

There was some willingness to pay more in taxes to fund important transportation services. ____ [number] of the local respondents were unwilling to pay anything more. How do you personally feel about paying more taxes for transportation?

8. ALLOCATING REVENUES WITHIN THE STATE

____ [number] of the ____ respondents believed that it was unfair to make one geographic area of the state pay for transportation improvements in other parts of the state. How do you feel about this? Do you agree or disagree, and why?

9. INPUT INTO DECISION MAKING

____ [number] of the local respondents believed they would like more input into transportation decision making. Would you like more input and if so what kind of input would be most meaningful to you?

10. CARPOOLING

Increased incentives for carpooling were supported by ____ [number] of the respondents. Do you support increased incentives for carpooling and what types of incentives would work for you?

The opinions expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Colorado Department of Transportation. They are strictly the views of the authors.

Publication of this paper sponsored by Committee on Citizen Participation in Transportation.