

Standing Committee on Public Involvement in Transportation (ADA60)
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Public Engagement in Transportation Decision Making

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INTRODUCTION

Numerous definitions of public involvement are documented and in use, with nearly all conveying the central theme of two-way communication between members of the public and governmental entities engaged in decision making processes. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) views public involvement as “any process that involves the public in problem solving or decision making and uses public input to make decisions.” As the name implies, public involvement refers to the public becoming engaged in transportation decisions, typically through a process of two-way communication between citizens and government. The Transportation Research Board (TRB) Committee on Public Involvement in Transportation is dedicated to the research and dissemination of information designed to improve the state of public involvement practice in transportation decision making. The Committee on Public Involvement is strongly committed to facilitating effective two-way communication that results in substantive discussions between stakeholders and transportation agencies about the issues that influence actual decisions.

In pursuit of this mission, the Committee issues specific research problem statements and calls for papers for presentation and publication that address current needs and issues related to public involvement in transportation. The Committee coordinates and judges the TRB John and Jane Public Communications Contest, organizes panel sessions for TRB conferences and designs and executes workshops that share and provide practical instruction on the application of public involvement tools and techniques. These activities are implemented in collaboration with other TRB committees in an effort to ensure the relevancy of the Committee’s work as a provider of information that meets the needs of the larger transportation industry.

Within the past, present, and into the future work of the Committee, the guiding question has been: How does our profession engage the affected community in the decision-making process for their transportation system in a comprehensive, equitable, and accessible manner and provide meaningful input that informs transportation decision-making? Three constant challenges and/or opportunities to answering that question have always been the available amount of time, emerging technology, and the changing demographics of our dynamic nation.

This paper presents the past, current, and anticipated future efforts of the Committee in addressing the guiding question and its challenges.

A GLANCE BACKWARDS

Public involvement as a practice and profession became a key factor in transportation decision-making in the latter part of the 20th century, following a number of “lessons learned” from major projects that lacked good public involvement plans and programs in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Much of the foundation of public involvement in transportation projects was established through the significant legislative acts that took place in the last half of the 20th century. Simply put, for transportation projects, developing and implementing public involvement plans is the law. Yet while these “federal mandates are powerful transforming tools”, it is important to recognize that these laws often were themselves the result of citizen action and outcry and a general recognition that not including the public effectively in the decision-making process can lead to “project delays, lawsuits, and public outcry about transportation decisions made without citizen input.”

From a very practical standpoint, lack of public involvement can lead to a negative financial impact on transportation projects and programs in a number of ways, including extending the project’s development timeframe, being sued, reducing public trust in government institutions, creating controversy, and elevating the environmental document to a higher level.

The evolution of public involvement in transportation over the last 60 or so years began with the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1950 – the first piece of legislation that required “public involvement.” It required public hearings, proper notification to affected parties, and the availability of project information. From those humble beginnings a series of legislative acts and executive orders helped shape the public involvement requirements we follow today. Key legislation/executive orders/ and federal guidance are highlighted below.

Relevant Legislation or Federal Guidance ⁵	Year	Impact on Public Involvement
<i>Administrative Procedure Act</i>	1946	Required procedures for all federal agencies to develop policy and rules, including notifying the public and others agencies of an action and receiving comments from the public and other agencies. The “notice and comment” requirements were a fundamental component of active participation by the public and other interested parties.
<i>Federal Aid-Highway Act</i>	1950	Became first piece of legislation requiring public outreach
<i>Federal Aid-Highway Act Specific to Planning requirements</i>	1962	Set in place a “continuing, comprehensive and cooperative” planning process that reinforced the concept of providing notice of decisions and providing an opportunity to comment
<i>Title VI of the Civil Rights Act</i>	1964	Ensured that individuals would not be denied equal right to participate on the basis of race, color or national origin

<i>Department of Transportation Act</i>	1966	Section 4(f), the earliest statutory language directed at minimizing the negative effect of transportation construction projects on the natural environment that include local consultation
<i>National Environmental Policy Act</i>	1969	Formalized significant legislation through lead agencies the need for public notification, comment periods, meetings and a process for formal public comments on federally funded projects
<i>Intermodal Surface Transportation Act (ISTEA)</i>	1991	Extended the opportunity for public involvement in the transportation planning process
<i>Executive Order on Environmental Justice</i>	1994	Sought to ensure full and fair participation by all potentially affected communities in the transportation decision-making process
<i>FHWA's Community Impact Assessment: A Quick Reference for Transportation</i>	1996	Provided a quick primer for transportation professionals and analysts who assess the impacts of proposed transportation actions on communities
<i>FHWA's Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making</i>	1996	Provided a comprehensive compendium of public involvement tools and techniques; increased emphasis on providing meaningful access to decision-making information
<i>FHWA's Community Impact Assessment and Context Sensitive Solutions,</i>	1998	Adopted as a formal process to identify community characteristics and values and facilitate the decision-making process
<i>Executive Order on Limited English Proficiency</i>	2000	Increased emphasis on providing meaningful access to decision-making information
<i>Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU)</i>	2005	Placed emphasis on improved quality of life through exercising flexibility in solving transportation challenges. Expanded public involvement requirements and use of tools like visualization.
<i>FHWA's How to Engage Low-Literacy and Limited-English-Proficiency Populations in Transportation Decision making</i>	2006	Provided practitioners with "best practices" in identifying and engaging low-literacy and limited English-proficiency populations in transportation decision making
<i>Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21)</i>	2012	Consolidated programs and accelerated processes to fund and implement more projects.

Originally formed as the TRB Committee for Citizen Participation in Transportation, the long-term mission of the TRB Committee on Public Involvement in Transportation has been to enhance the understanding and practice of public involvement as an art and science in transportation policy implementation, systems planning and project development, environmental analysis, and all phases of the transportation process including design, construction, operations,

and maintenance. The activities of the committee have been largely defined to respond to the needs of transportation agencies, fueled by a dynamic industry that affects and is affected by a variety of societal factors.

Public involvement practitioners and public agency decision makers often go beyond what's simply required or mandated in order to meaningfully engage the public and reach consensus on projects. Communities have become more sophisticated, enfranchised and knowledgeable about the transportation planning process and their role in it. Today, it is seldom the case that the bare minimum will suffice with any project that might have adverse or beneficial impacts to individuals or communities.

THE CURRENT VIEW

Today, the “state of the practice” in public involvement does not necessarily translate into “best practices,” but rather as an “accepted practice.” However, best practices in today's public involvement arena can be summed up as attitudes, principles, communication and tools that result in better decisions by policy makers, support for the outcome of a process, and can demonstrate that the public's input was used. The activities of the Committee have emphasized the dissemination of “accepted practice” tools, techniques, and lessons learned through face-to-face, as well as on-line interaction with practitioners.

The Committee has developed the “Five I's of Public Involvement” which is a simplified task list for the development of a community engagement plan:

IDENTIFY the affected community (the target audience).

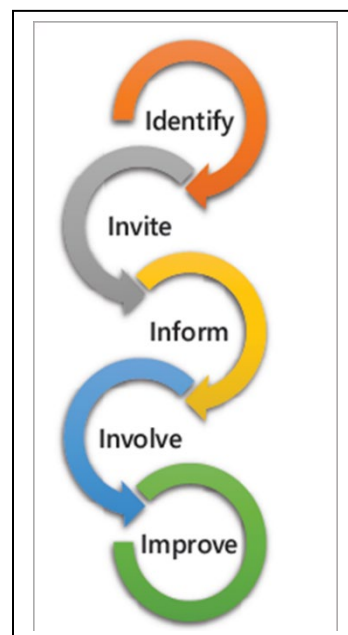
INVITE the community to participate in the decision-making process.

INFORM the community about the decision-making process for the project or plan and its timetable, their roles in the process, and the process outcomes.

INVOLVE the community in easily accessible and effective activities which provide meaningful input (issues, concerns, preferences, and tolerances) which supports the decision-making.

IMPROVE the process by reviewing the performance of each of the tasks and make adjustments accordingly to improve the effectiveness of the community engagement.

The “Five I's of Public Involvement” have been a key element used in the interactive workshops which the Committee has held annually at the TRB Annual Meeting.



People respond to information and outreach in different ways. They combine online tools that are fast, fun and visual to make it easy to participate with other media including print and face-to-face. The Committee encourages public involvement practitioners to counter the tendency to focus on one-way communication made so easy today with online websites, Twitter and e-mail. The focus needs to be on two-way communication for good input and to counter accusations of “selling” a plan or project. Conveying information in a two-way format has become easier with new software, social media and online sites and tools. However, as transportation technologies and project financing and programming become more complex, communicating with the public becomes more difficult. The Committee has recognized the need to ensure information disseminated is understandable and the collected feedback is useful in informing good decision-

making. This recognition has provided the basis of one of the committee's most successful tools: Communicating with John and Jane Q. Public competition. This annual competition has showcased engagement techniques and tools for a variety of complex transportation topics.

Collaboration has been a key component of success within the work of the PI Committee. The planning for the PI Workshop held each year at the TRB Annual Meeting concentrates on how the selected topic can involve other traditional partnering committees such as the Committee on Environmental Justice (ADD50) and the Committee on Social and Economic Factors of Transportation (ADD20), but also new committee partners such as the Committee on Roundabouts (ANB75), the Committee on Critical Transportation Infrastructure Protection (ABR10), and the Committee on Emergency Evacuations (ABR30). Outside of the Annual Meeting activities, the PI Committee has regularly partnered with the Committee on Planning for Small & Medium-Sized Communities (ADA30) to present a Public Involvement Workshop at the biannual TRB Tools of the Trade Conference held at various venues across the nation as a way to take these learning opportunities to a wider audience. This desire to spread those learning opportunities have also been made available at AMPO, ITE, and NADO conferences on topics such as social media tools, development of inclusive public participation plans, and interactive public involvement strategies.

In the past three decades, the American "public" has been increasing in its diversity – in terms of race, ethnicity, income levels, educational attainment, work schedule, access to resources, and other characteristics. This increasing diversity is perhaps the single greatest trend affecting the public involvement practice. The recognition of this challenging trend, the leadership of the PI Committee and the Environmental Justice Committee along with the Community Impact Assessment Subcommittee have sought opportunities for close communication and collaboration on shared research statements, panel sessions, and most recently on the 2018 revision of the Quick Reference Guide for Community Impact Assessment, which is often referred to as the "purple book".

Establishing the return on investment of effective public involvement has been a key component of the development of research topics generated from the Committee's work. One of the most important of the funded research projects supported by the Committee is the 2019 NCHRP 08-105 project (Measuring the Effectiveness of Public Involvement in Transportation Planning and Project Delivery) which will provide a review of existing evaluation measures and a tool that could be used by transportation agencies to evaluate the effectiveness of their public involvement efforts.

Case Study: Multiple Strategies for Broad Community Engagement in the Atlanta MPO

Public involvement for transportation planning projects has evolved significantly from the days of relying on sparsely-attended public meetings in an auditorium at the 25 percent design stage of a transportation improvement. Leading agencies today are blending interactive online tools with strategic pop-up engagement sessions to reach significantly more people including traditionally underrepresented populations. This case study from the Atlanta Regional Commission demonstrates how these new strategies combined to generate useful input that improved the decision-making process.

The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) is the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the 20-county region of the Atlanta Metro area. Once every four years, the ARC is responsible for developing the region's long-range transportation plan. While there are many policies as well as analytical processes involved in updating the Atlanta Region's Long-Range

Transportation Plan, bringing people into the process to share their input helps the agency made better, more relevant decisions.

Over two years of development of The Atlanta Region's Plan (2016 update), the Atlanta Regional Commission had 25,000+ interactions with community members via [online surveys](#), telephone surveys, and personal touch points via workshops, forums, and other meetings. This public involvement process was developed as broadly as possible to ensure ARC reached a wide demographic of people so that the resulting plan would incorporate publicly supported strategies that meet the needs of people throughout the widely diverse region.

Overall, ARC found it beneficial to combine a mix of formats, both online and in person in order to give people a wide range of ways to participate in sharing their feedback relating to policy goals and strategies. The agency placed value on both inviting people to a centralized location, as well as going out to "where people are". Sometimes this looked like a 400-person forum on a local college campus. Other times, this looked like bringing tablets and information directly to people as staff visited senior centers, festivals, or large events organized by community groups.

One way that the engagement effort was most successful was that it was organized around a cohesive theme, with a common look and feel; in this case a bright orange square with the text "What do you think?" With the simple and bright brand, ARC created a recognizable online buzz via social media as well as develop a low-cost, transportable outreach kit. The image was used as an immediately visible jpeg, easy to share on social media, and as a business card sized mini-flyer with a link to the plan website listed, and as a foam-core printed sign that could stand on an easel alongside a table with tablets and laptops for impromptu outreach booths. There was beauty in having a very minimal, very eye-catching phrase and image to draw people in.



Figure 1: Photo 20140620_153156: ARC used a bright orange image with the caption "What do you think?" and laptops to promote their online survey both digitally and at community events

The agency also developed an electronic "partner share kit" which made it easier for others to help with promotions. This "kit" included the jpeg image as well as sample newsletter text about the plan and outreach survey, in 25, 50, and 100-word counts. There were sample Facebook and Twitter posts included as well, indicating preferred hashtags. The goal was to make it very simple for our contacts at various agencies to post information on our ARC's behalf. The "kit" had everything necessary to assist with community promotions, so all that was required of the contacts was for them to forward their email to communications staff or make a post via a simple copy and paste.

Throughout the engagement efforts, ARC developed visually appealing infographics about the content heard from others, as well as reporting information on the number of and demographics of people we had reached. Sometimes this was done via a GIS map of highlighted areas corresponding with zip codes of the people who had been contacted or surveyed and sometimes with percentages listed of the various demographics of respondents. The ARC used

this information to gather feedback on how to expand the geographic and demographic reach and how to work with community members to identify new targeted tactics to reach more people.

On the back end, the ARC collected a [large amount of information](#) from the online surveys, which was used to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. The qualitative data was coded using key words. The agency took information from other engagement efforts in the form of notes and added that into one consolidated spreadsheet of comments. This spreadsheet was organized by policy topic, key word, and paired alongside key agency policy objectives and strategies. In this way, ARC was able to track and ensure that community feedback was used to directly inform the development of regional plans. Because the public feedback is organized in such a way, it has continued to be used by regional planning

staff to inform plan work and proceeding engagement efforts years later.

One of the biggest takeaways from ARC community engagement staff is that a bit of creativity can allow for a nimbleness to create engagement strategies that are low-cost and that effectively leverage both online tools and community partners. With all of the online graphic design, social messaging, and survey tools; this is easier



Figure 2: Photo 20140910_185236: ARC took the mobile outreach kit to set up their regional plan online survey at diverse events such as this panel discussion on the creative and entertainment industry in the region



Figure 3: Photo IMG_9266: In person community discussions were held throughout the region to help develop the regional policy vision and strategies

than ever to use. When paired with more traditional, face-to-face techniques, there is a huge opportunity to create a robust engagement program.

A LOOK FORWARD

The 21st century public involvement process and those who implement it must be forward-leaning and adaptable while not losing focus of the discipline's basic principles. In the continuously and rapidly changing world of communications and marketing, the proliferation of social media, smartphones, and other emerging technologies are reshaping the way the public seeks, digests, and utilizes information. Other factors such as changing demographics, advancements in connected and autonomous vehicles and shared-use mobility services, and big data all serve as disrupters to the status quo. Early, continuous, inclusive, and informed engagement will continue to be vital to the development of transportation plans and projects that reflect the ethos and needs of individual communities. The adoption of new, virtual public involvement tools and strategies to enhance traditional strategies can help the discipline to bridge the gap between the guiding principles of the Committee and future challenges and opportunities.

Social media has transformed and will continue to change the way the public seeks, digests, and communicates information. The vast majority of Americans – 95% – now own a cellphone of some kind. The share of Americans that own smartphones is now 77%, up from just 35% in 2011 ([Pew Research 2018](#)). As of August 2017, 43% of Americans report getting their news online, just 7 percentage points lower than the 50% who get their news from traditional television broadcasts. Getting digital news also increased among nonwhites (up to 45% from 36% in early 2016) and the less educated – those with a high school degree or less went up to 34% from 25% ([Pew Research 2017](#)). The success of this transformation is not without issues as there is emerging distrust of the current social media platforms which resulted from the misuse of private user data by social media companies. Whether this growing mistrust is a mere course correction within the digital industry or a trend toward an abandonment of these technologies is not clear, but will be a developing issue. The Committee will closely monitor and provide guidance to the transportation profession. Another issue involving social media is the lack of broadband access in the rural areas and the creation of a “digital divide” between the urban and rural communities of our nation. The Committee will closely monitor this unsettledness in the social media platforms, the “digital divide”, and the increasing concerns of the “dark side of data” and provide guidance to the transportation profession.

The Committee recognizes the changing demographics within our nation as the United States is becoming older and more diverse due to lower U.S. fertility rates and increases in immigration. The level of international migration from Mexico has decreased while migration from India and China has increased. Such changes in migration will have implications within the communication framework of public involvement work because of varying levels of English proficiency ([US Census 2017](#)). The generational shift beginning in 2019 will involve the Millennials and Generation Z overtaking the Baby Boomers as America's largest generation ([Pew Research 2018](#)). The traditional identity of affected communities will take on a much different dynamic than has been experienced in the past when engaging the public and the Committee will seek to address this new diversity, especially in the identification of the affected communities and the development of effective and inclusive participation in the process.

The 21st Century will bear witness to the rise of connected and autonomous vehicles and shared-use mobility options which will have major transportation and land use implications. During the past hundred years, the thrust of transportation innovation centered upon automobile

industry and highway system development. Digital technology has entered into the traditional model of transportation delivery and has created a rapid and powerful disruption. Autonomous vehicles will enable new business models around “Mobility as a Service” (MaaS). Cybersecurity will take center stage as vehicles connect and interact with each other and a number of third-party online systems. The education aspect of public involvement will be critical for easing the public’s transition into the use of new technologies and the impacts. This Committee will seek to understand these trends and strive to support the transportation profession in informing the public as well as maintaining the public engagement in the decision-making.

CONCLUSION

Whether glancing backwards, surveying the current view, or speculating on the future, the clear, constant perspective is that public involvement practitioners and the transportation agencies to which they serve need to truly understand the “public”. They must have cultural awareness, have the ability to actively listen, and have for implementation a variety of effective outreach techniques and tools. They must then develop from those skills and tools a participatory strategy to engage the affected community in the decision-making process for their transportation system in a comprehensive, equitable, and accessible manner and provide meaningful input that informs transportation decision-making. The practitioners must keep in mind the three constant challenges and/or opportunities have always been the available amount of time, emerging technology, and the changing demographics of our dynamic nation.

As TRB enters its second century, this Committee will continue to build upon the legacy of decades of collaborative work within and outside of TRB to support the development of educational opportunities, timely research projects, and recognition of best practices within public involvement.

REFERENCES

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2. Update on the State of the Practice: Public Involvement in the 21st Century (March 2013)

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