

Keys to Effective and Satisfying Citizen Participation

I conclude from my research at ACIR, and from over 25 years of practical experience in government, that there are three keys to successful and satisfying citizen participation programs:

- ° First, governments need to adopt the philosophy that citizens are experts, just as much as any other type of expert. No one knows better than the citizens themselves what problems they are experiencing and what remedies would be acceptable to them. Just as we expect a doctor to ask the patient to describe symptoms, and then insist that the doctor explain the options for healing before prescribing drastic surgery, we should expect government to listen carefully to its citizens' concerns and reactions.
- ° Second, advisory committees should be used only as one element in a balanced program of citizen participation including such elements as open public meetings, freedom of information, full media coverage, surveys, hearings, conferences, and more.
- ° Finally, citizen participation takes time, money, and effort. It's neither free nor painless. Government will get what it pays for. A half-hearted program will not generate a first-class citizen response. Only a substantial commitment of public resources and patience will yield the desired results.

1/ ACIR, Citizen Participation in the American Federal System, Report A-73 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government printing Office, 1980).

2/ U.S. General Accounting Office, Public Involvement in Block Grant Decisions: Multiple Opportunities Provided, But Interest Groups Have Mixed Reactions to States' Efforts, Report HRD 85-20 (Washington, DC; December 28, 1984).

CITIZENS ADVISORY COUNCIL - A NEW EXPERIENCE FOR PAT, by Michael J. Scanlon and presented by Larry D. Bowin, Port Authority of Allegheny County.

The Port Authority of Allegheny County -- popularly known as PAT -- has operated since 1964 in the greater Pittsburg area, providing transit service to an area of approximately 730 square miles and a population of about 1.4 million persons. On a typical weekday, PAT transports more than 300,000 riders.

The area served by PAT until a few years ago was one of the world's leading centers of steel-making and related heavy industry. Today it is an area in transition -- from blue collar to white collar. Although the

center city is undergoing its second major construction renaissance, unemployment is at a high level. That, combined with losses in population, has caused transit ridership to fall.

The area also is a complex mosaic of hills, rivers and valleys interspersing some 130 separate municipalities served by PAT. It is an area of chaotic and haphazard highways and streets often leading only into deadends. It has more bridges than any comparable urban area in the U.S. When deteriorating bridges and crumbling streets have to be closed for repair or reconstruction a regular and repetitive occurrence -- traffic gets tied into knots; bus trips have to be detoured, lengthened and slowed. Bus route detours alone cost the Port Authority nearly \$2 million per year.

Add to all of this snow, sleet, ice, rain and excessive heat and humidity, and you have some real problems trying to operate a transit system that will satisfy the needs of everyone all of the time. It is no exaggeration to say that there is no more difficult nor more demanding urban area anywhere in this country in which to run a bus system than Allegheny County. One illustration is the fact the PAT has to operate 162 routes and that is about twice as many as are needed in Philadelphia with its neat grid layout of streets (although the latter [SEPTA] transports three times as many passengers).

What does this mean? If you are a transit manager in Pittsburgh, you have to contend with more dissatisfied customers and communities than you would like. You will have more than your share of complaints and grievances. And you will not even be able to make a routine trip on your own time to the supermarket without being confronted by demands for more service...or a request for a job.

In other terms, what you have is a community relations problem. The big question in your mind is how best to cope with it-- how to respond to every rider, every neighborhood, every business ever willing to tell you how to do your job. One of the unique characteristics of public transit is that many people who have had only casual contact with the transit system feel they are expert on how and where to run buses.

Over the years, PAT Management has worked with and sought to cooperate with consumer, community, business, minority and other citizen groups, as well as public officials. (In Allegheny County alone, there are close to 4,000 elected officials with whom we communicate.) Out of such informal liaison efforts have come an affirmative action program, a successful minority business enterprise program, modifications in capital improvement programs, computerization and improvement of the route information department, development of a consumer services section, and an aggressive marketing-public relations program.

Yet, the public perception of PAT, as generally reflected by newspaper letters to the editor (often based on mis-information) persists that the

transit system is not being managed on a cost-efficient basis and that its Board and management have not been listening to the transit clientele and the public as a whole. This image grew as it became evident that financial problems which have plagued PAT for years were approaching a bonafide crisis stage. The public's ears meanwhile remained blissfully closed to facts -- that the financial crisis is the accumulative consequence of never having had a guaranteed and dedicated tax source of operating funds and that PAT was and is facing the loss of some \$16 million per year in Federal operating aid.

In the hope of changing the popular misconception of PAT, Board Chairman James Roodey and Executive Director William Millar, shortly after taking office in early 1984, publicly announced that a prime goal would be to make the Port Authority more sensitive and responsive to the needs of riders and the community.

In that frame of mind, PAT sponsored the formation of a citizen advisory council as a means of improving communication between PAT, its customers and the public generally. It was hoped that impartial, non-paid volunteers could assist PAT in handling consumer concerns and heading off major problems stemming from insufficient inter-communication.

The driving force behind the move was Marilyn Skolnick, PAT Board member who chairs the board's Consumer Relations Committee. After compiling considerable information about consumer efforts of transit agencies in other cities, she presented a proposal to the Board and it was accepted. The guidelines, as outlined by Chairman Roddey, specified that the citizen group:

- o Should not merely function as a panel to hear complaints, since such matters already were being handled by the agency's Consumer Services staff;
- o Should be composed of persons who are regular users of public transit and representative of different geographical areas;
- o Should serve as a mechanism for mutual exchange of information, transmitting salient financial and operating data to consumers, and, in turn, relating to PAT management major consumer concerns;
- o Should be voluntary, fully independent of the Port Authority, and not restricted in size.

The public was thus notified through press releases distributed to all media outlets, letters to community and business organizations, and membership request forms placed on PAT buses and trolleys. Approximately 70 persons were appointed on the basis of the regularity of their use of PAT transit and their willingness to participate voluntarily in meetings and work sessions.

At its regular monthly meeting in June, the PAT Board adopted a resolution officially establishing what was named the Allegheny County Transit Council (ACTC).

The first meeting took place the evening of July 12 at the Downtown YWCA, night-time hours having been agreed upon as most convenient for the majority of members. Attendance at that meeting, totaling 70 participants -- as well as at ensuing meetings -- exceeded advance expectations by far, demonstrating a high level of interest and enthusiasm. Also attending were several members of PAT's Marketing and Operating staffs, together with the PAT Chairman and Executive Director, plus local media representatives.

In the first six monthly meetings, most time was spent on organizational matters and orientation by PAT managers on PAT's functions and problems. In the process, the Council divided itself into six subcommittees, each assigned to work on community relations problems involving PAT's operating locations.

Thus, between monthly membership meetings, there has occurred numerous sub-committee meetings and planning/work sessions. Each meeting has required a considerable amount of staff time and some expense. Informative material had to be compiled and reproduced for each member in sizable quantities. Special arrangements had to be made for each meeting, even including transportation for some members.

A substantial amount of staff and secretarial time and effort has been expended in the preparation, editing and typing of agenda, letters, meeting minutes, numerous documents and other services required by the Council -- not to mention the many hours spent by staff members in evening and daytime meetings. In addition, substantial expense has been incurred by the Port Authority for postage, rentals of meeting rooms, printing, handout materials, transportation, messenger services and other items. We believe, however, that staff time and expense will be reduced following the early organizational development phase.

At the outset, it was decided that the Council should include up to 10 members representing each of the six PAT operating divisions. Such democratic representation may be a worthwhile objective, but it does create a slow and cumbersome process requiring much time, patience and supportive work on the part of staff personnel.

Despite its dependence upon the Port Authority staff for clerical and other service, the Council, in order to maintain credibility, seeks to develop and sustain an image of autonomy and independence. Its independent thinking was recently demonstrated by presentation to the Port Authority Board of an unanimously-adopted resolution stating that the Council favors complete cessation of transit service as preferable to drastic service cuts contemplated by PAT. The reasoning was that the impact of a transit shutdown would generate public support for a dedicated transit tax.

The Council also has become increasingly aware of the need to develop a broader understanding of operating and financing mechanisms and problems with which transit managers must live day by day. For that reason, the Council has decided to use a \$2,500 personal contribution from PAT Chairman Roddey to plan and stage a public informational conference on mass transit issues. While PAT staff will be asked to participate as speakers and resource panel guests, Council members will be expected to handle planning, agenda setting and all organizational details.

After eight months of experience with this advisory program, the final verdict is still in the distant future but some general conclusions can be drawn.

On one hand, in this age of grass-roots action and growing public awareness of community issues, public programs cannot proceed on schedule without citizen involvement and participation in the planning and execution stages. Citizen action can be a way of gaining support, and preventing conflict and repeated delays. We also believe that citizen involvement results in better public projects.

The ACTC hopefully will be able to bridge the communication gaps that exist between the Port Authority and the public it serves. More specifically, the Council can play a key role in helping to build community and governmental support for enactment of a dedicated transit tax urgently needed by PAT to maintain service and develop a stable financial base. Efforts to obtain such predictable funding for local transit have been strongly and publicly endorsed by the ACTC.

On the other hand, aside from the staff time and expense it requires, the citizen group tends to extend its activities and discussions into areas beyond its province. In early meetings, the Council devoted much time to prolonged discussions of management matters and problems, such as labor union negotiations and contracts. This is natural, is to be expected and is, in my judgement, a symptom of dedicated people trying to understand and solve large problems. It's healthy!

It is important to point out that the formation of a citizen council does not automatically relieve the transit agency of the necessity to be responsive to any and all other groups throughout the service area. If a neighborhood group insists that its area should have more service, it is the operating staff managers -- not the citizen group -- who must make the determination of operating and economic feasibility.

In summary, our experience with the advisory council is positive and encouraging. We are fortunate to have attracted some very capable and enthusiastic members willing to devote much time and effort to make the transit system more responsive to the public it serves. While there have been growing pains particularly in the early stages, we believe the advisory council will evolve into a well-organized advocacy group and serve as a key communications link between PAT's Board of Directors and the public-at-large.