

Paper Number 00-0648

## **Public Involvement in Transportation Design Projects**

By

Jana Lynott, AICP  
David B. Keever, Ph.D.  
Science Applications International Corporation  
7980 Boeing Court, Suite 300  
M/S CV-48  
Vienna, Virginia 22182  
(703) 394-4180

Jana.M.Lynott@CPMX.SAIC.COM

David.B.Keever@CPMX.SAIC.COM

### **Abstract**

Transportation decision-making in the United States tends to follow a linear progression of planning and project development stages: planning, design, construction and operations/maintenance each managed, funded, and perceived by the public as separate projects. During the past decade, public involvement has increasingly become a recognized component of these first three stages of project decision-making, namely, regional planning, corridor studies and environmental assessments. Less common is the continuation and integration of public involvement into the design, construction, and operations and maintenance stages as well.

This paper will present the major characteristics of the public involvement stages with a highlight on the nexus between environmental assessment and preliminary design activities. A case study and assessment of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge project is presented.

Keywords: Public participation, environmental assessment, preliminary design,  
Woodrow Wilson Bridge

Transportation Research Board  
79<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting  
January 9-13, 2000  
Washington, DC

## **Introduction**

The 1990s have seen a proliferation in the acceptance of public involvement as an integral part of the transportation planning process. Numerous agencies around the country have expended substantial project resources to implement proactive public involvement programs. Guidebooks have been written on the principles and techniques of public involvement (<sup>1</sup>). Transportation planning is a challenging task that requires public officials to understand the needs and concerns of diverse communities and balance the trade-offs between needed mobility improvements and neighborhood-level impacts of those improvements. Increasingly, citizens are demanding to be involved at each stage of planning and project development to assist in this effort. These demands originate from a variety of causes including frustration with urban congestion, concern for the natural and social environment, and desire for sound public investments.

By understanding public involvement in the context of the full program development process, agency representatives can design public involvement programs that address the unique challenges of each stage and build a public involvement base that will traverse each stage, thus positioning an agency to more efficiently utilize limited resources, increase public understanding, and better justify difficult decisions and trade-offs.

This paper presents the scope of public involvement in the context of six major stages of transportation planning and project development. Following an overview of each of these stages, a case study example of a successful design phase public involvement program using the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Project's Stakeholder Participation Panel (SPP) process is presented. An assessment of the value of these design activities is discussed with implications for future research.

## **The Spectrum of Stages**

Transportation decision-making in the United States tends to follow a linear progression of planning and project development stages, with planning, design, construction and operations and maintenance (O&M) each managed and funded as separate projects. Public involvement has become a recognized component of these first three stages of project decision-making; namely, regional planning, corridor studies and environmental assessment. Less commonly, it has been integrated into the design, construction, and (O&M) stages as well. Table 1 outlines the typical scope of public involvement in each stage of transportation decision-making.

## **Common Themes**

Public involvement is typically initiated with one or more of the following goals in mind:

- Obtain public input so that programs better address the mobility needs of the traveling public;
- Enhance understanding and awareness of the planning process, transportation needs, and public expenditure on transportation improvements;
- Build consensus among stakeholders on the type of transportation system desired and support for project priorities;
- Influence funding decisions; and,
- Fulfill legal requirements.

**Figure 1: Spectrum of Public Involvement In Transportation Projects and Programs: Major Characteristics and Trends**

	Regional Planning	MIS	EIS	Design	Construction	Operations & Maintenance
Purpose	Input on broad-based plan/concept Education/Awareness	Obtain input on Corridor/Sub-area planning study Education/Awareness	Obtain input on project specific planning study Education/Awareness	Obtain input on site-specific design solutions Education/Awareness focus targeted to participants involved in co-design General information provision to general public	Information Provision on project specific construction impacts Maintain positive rapport with impacted community	Information Provision on time of repairs, congestion/incident management, maintenance of traffic, environmental compliance
Focus of Activity	Regional/Sub-regional Focus	Sub-area/Corridor Focus	Project specific focus	Site specific focus	Site specific focus	Site specific focus
Timing	2-3 Years to develop plus updates	2-3 years	2-4 years	6 months – 2 years	1 year to 1 decade	Variable Continuous or project specific
Point of public involvement	Early and Continuous	Early and Continuous	Early and continuous	First 20-30% design, then episodic	Periodic contact with interested parties to assess outreach efforts Ongoing communication with general public	Periodic, as needed
Engagement Methods and Techniques <sup>1</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vision planning workshops</li> <li>• Citizen Advisory Committees (CAC)</li> <li>• Exhibits tied to “County Fair” models of engagement , Open houses, or other major public events</li> <li>• Regional surveys, opinion polls, focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public workshops</li> <li>• CACs</li> <li>• Open Houses</li> <li>• Newsletters</li> <li>• Others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public workshops</li> <li>• CACs</li> <li>• Open Houses</li> <li>• Newsletters</li> <li>• Speaker’s Bureau</li> <li>• Others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CACs</li> <li>• Open houses</li> <li>• Newsletters</li> <li>• Elected Official’s Briefings</li> <li>• Others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media events</li> <li>• Variable messaging</li> <li>• Traffic advisories</li> <li>• Web sites</li> <li>• Automated email response</li> <li>• Neighborhood liaisons</li> <li>• Construction updates in neighborhood locations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media outreach</li> <li>• Newsletters to interested individuals/ organizations</li> <li>• ITS methods</li> <li>• Others</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Note: Most, if not all, techniques could be implemented in each stage. The techniques change from broad community input techniques to those that obtain input from directly impacted areas or stakeholders. General project information continues to be provided to the general public during all spectrum stages.

	Regional Planning	MIS	EIS	Design	Construction	Operations & Maintenance
	groups				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Others</li> </ul>	
Participants and Primary Interest Groups	<p>All inclusive</p> <p>Regional interest groups (Board of Trade, Regional Chamber of Commerce, environmental groups)</p> <p>Outreach to under-represented groups in region</p>	<p>All inclusive</p> <p>Regional interest groups</p> <p>Commuters in a corridor</p> <p>Outreach to under-represented groups in corridor</p>	<p>All inclusive</p> <p>Regional interest groups</p> <p>Commuters in corridor</p> <p>Outreach targeted to under-represented groups within study area</p>	<p>Targeted participation of representatives of primary stakeholder groups, especially those from the area of direct impact.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traveling public</li> <li>• Impacted neighborhood groups</li> <li>• Media representatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traveling public</li> <li>• Local/regional Interest groups</li> </ul>
Depth of Issues Addressed	<p>Value-oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growth v. no-growth</li> <li>• Transit v. roads</li> <li>• “Smart Growth”</li> <li>• Others</li> </ul>	<p>Mode-oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transit v. roads</li> <li>• Pedestrian/bicycle modes</li> <li>• Travel Demand Management methods</li> <li>• Others</li> </ul>	<p>Alternatives-oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding and buy-in on traffic modeling, air quality assessment, other environmental assessments that support selection of a preferred alternative</li> </ul>	<p>Design-oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decisions on roadway, interchange, and transit alignments and configurations</li> <li>• More detailed development of Community Enhancements</li> <li>• Decisions made during EIS stand, not rehashed but referred to for educating newcomers on rationale for EIS decisions</li> <li>• Unresolved issues from planning stage due to need to know geometrics (noise mitigation, aesthetic treatments)</li> </ul>	<p>Construction impact-oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposed roadway closures</li> <li>• Maintenance of traffic plans</li> <li>• Media management/update plans</li> <li>• Travel Demand and Supply management planning and implementation with affected stakeholders</li> </ul>	<p>Service oriented</p> <p>(could also be impact-oriented when maintenance projects cause delay)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General public awareness of state of the transportation system and operational conditions</li> <li>• Traffic management center announcements and information for specific critical corridors, areas, and conditions</li> <li>• Planning for and use of selected advanced technologies based on public’s ability to utilize and cost effectiveness</li> </ul>

To achieve these goals, a number of common principles guide all effective public involvement programs regardless of the system planning and project implementation stage. Every public involvement program should have a strong educational component. It should be proactive in anticipating “hot” issues and in involving participants who reflect the community as a whole. Programs should be open and inclusive to demonstrate public accountability and not preclude any good idea from coming forward. The Transportation Research Board Committee on Public Involvement outlines several additional indicators that can be used to measure the success of a public involvement program. Some of these include:

- Accessibility of the decision-making process;
- Diversity of views represented;
- Opportunities for participation;
- Project/decision acceptability; and,
- Cost avoidance.

### **Trends and Challenges**

While the purpose and principles of effective public involvement apply to each stage of transportation planning and project development, trends can be observed as programs move from planning to O&M. For example, the geographic focus narrows from region-wide to site specific, changing the depth of the issues addressed and refocusing outreach efforts at the neighborhood level. A different set of issues and degree of specificity emerges as project development is started, implying different educational needs for the public.

One of the greatest challenges to effective public participation is stimulating the involvement of a broad cross-section of participants who are representative of the diverse perspectives of the community as a whole. Each stage of the spectrum requires balanced representation although outreach tools may change as the definition of community moves from the larger metropolitan area to the neighborhood level. Numerous articles have been written on why civic involvement is low: too busy, belief that one’s involvement will not make a difference<sup>(1)</sup>, and the “technological transformation of leisure”<sup>(2)</sup>. By understanding the representation challenge specific to each stage in transportation program development, public involvement practitioners can design their programs accordingly to address these barriers and improve the effectiveness of their programs.

It is often difficult to get citizens interested in regional and corridor planning when the results of their efforts may not be seen for years. The tendency during these early planning stages is a dominance by interest groups, particularly the environmental community. Business interests tend to lack the patience to commit to any lengthy process and assume, often correctly, that they have the political power necessary to re-direct efforts in their favor later in the process. In order that interest groups not dictate outcomes that affect everyone, an effective outreach program is essential. Participation should be tracked by geographic area and perspective with follow-up outreach to those communities and organizations that can help balance the viewpoints at the table. Getting their involvement often requires linking activities to other fun, community events, providing resources for ample mass media coverage as well as a clear articulation of how these planning phases will guide future project decision-making and priority setting.

For example, techniques used by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (WASHCOG) during its “Getting There” vision planning process included transportation fairs and focus groups. The agency also conducted a scientific and professionally administered opinion survey to obtain statistically

valid results. Their “Vision Van” was an eye-grabbing display easily transported to any neighborhood event, shopping center or transit station.

Since 1992, when President Clinton issued Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice, increased attention has been given to the need to draw out traditionally underrepresented groups such as low-income residents, many of whom are transit-dependent, minority and non-English-speaking populations, senior citizens, and persons with disabilities. WASHCOG undertook a significant outreach effort to involve typically underrepresented communities. Their approach was to work with pilot communities in specific geographic areas within the region characterized by concentrations of one or more underrepresented groups. Meetings were held in the pilot communities with co-sponsorship by neighborhood organizations. On-site childcare and translation was provided and attention given to proper room acoustics to facilitate better communication with the hearing-impaired and non-native English speakers. While these techniques were applied to the regional planning stage, their applicability to project development stages has merit.

Citizens typically become involved most actively when projects have a direct impact on property values and neighborhoods <sup>(3)</sup> and <sup>(4)</sup>, a pattern seen most frequently during the EIS and design phases. The challenge at this stage of project development is getting the interests of the general public (often the traveling public) at the table so that mobility interests can be balanced with neighborhood interests. To do this proactive public outreach is essential.

Design and construction phase public involvement programs target outreach at the site-specific level. It is not crucial, and often not appropriate, for anyone and everyone in the region to participate actively. Larger forums to obtain public input are usually replaced by smaller, advisory groups of citizens who are likely to volunteer their time for focused discussion over a number of weeks or months. This is not to say that participation on these advisory groups need not be balanced and representative, only that the cross-check is done against a smaller geographic area, namely the neighborhood level and users of the planned facility. At the site-specific level, stakeholder representatives should be invited to participate and advocate the various needs and interests of those impacted. This form of targeted participation need not be interpreted as exclusive. Meetings can be kept open to the general public for observation and comment during specified agenda items with more active participation reserved for the targeted participants.

Consensus is generally harder to achieve in the planning phases than it is in design due to the preponderance of value-oriented discussions and numerous stakeholders. As projects move to design, the site-specific geographic boundaries focus discussions on more tangible, less values-driven outcomes. Many if not all of the available public involvement techniques can be applied in each stage of transportation system development. Modification to each technique will depend on the unique challenges of any particular project at a particular period of program development. The Woodrow Wilson Bridge project offers a tangible case study of these public involvement trends and challenges across two stages of project development; namely, the EIS and design phases.

## **The Woodrow Wilson Bridge Project as a Case Study**

The Woodrow Wilson Bridge is the southernmost river crossing over the Potomac River in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. As part of the Interstate-95/495 corridor, it opened to traffic in 1961 with a structural design capacity of 75,000 vehicles per day. Today it carries more than 190,000 vehicles and by 2020, is expected to carry more than three times its originally intended capacity. The lack of capacity, inadequate merge areas and no shoulders on the existing facility combine to make it among the most congested and least safe stretches of the Capital Beltway.

Between 1989 and 1997, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) of the corridor was prepared. The five-mile project corridor includes replacement not only of the aging Wilson Bridge but also the reconstruction of four nearby interchanges, two in Virginia and two in Maryland. In November 1997, the Record of Decision (ROD) on the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) was signed by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), naming the Coordination Committee's<sup>2</sup> preferred alternative as the Selected Alternative. This alternative (Alternative 4A) comprises two, six-lane side-by-side drawbridges to be built slightly south of the existing six-lane bridge alignment.

A key element in the advancement of the project has been a highly proactive public involvement program, which was initially implemented during the Planning/EIS phase. During this five-year EIS phase, there were public comment periods at more than 30 Coordination Committee meetings, 14 town hall meetings, 25 open houses and four public hearings. Eight citizen work groups collaborated with study staff to develop recommendations that were then presented to the Coordination Committee directing the EIS effort. A Study and Design Center was open to the public five days a week where citizens could obtain project information and have their questions answered by knowledgeable staff persons.

The FEIS and corresponding ROD provided a commitment by the FHWA for additional public involvement during the design phase and a foundation for the design and implementation of Stakeholder Participation Panels. These panels were initiated in December 1998 as the centerpiece of the project's design phase public involvement program. During the next six months, four citizen panels met with project planners and design engineers to collaboratively provide input on parkland mitigation and enhancement plans, offer new ideas on interchange alignments, and clarify the needs and interests of the surrounding communities and users of the planned facility.

### **Lessons-learned from the EIS phase**

The public involvement program for the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Project was refocused for the design phase to reflect more intense site-specific design activities. Program designers sought to build upon the strengths of the EIS public involvement program and improve areas of relative weakness. A number of lessons were gleaned from the EIS public involvement program that guided the design phase public involvement program.

Following the issuance of the Record of Decision on the Environmental Impact Statement in November 1997, a formal survey evaluation of the public involvement program was conducted. As part of this survey, work group participants, the most active citizens of the EIS public involvement program, were asked if they felt their group's membership accurately reflected the opinions of the general public. They were also asked if the Coordination Committee was responsive to their group's recommendations. Sixty percent of work group respondents answered "yes" to these two questions. While their responses indicate that the majority felt membership was balanced and the decision-makers responsive, overall they were less affirmative in their responses to these two questions than to those regarding the educational/ideas generation and administration of the work group process. The public involvement team paid particular attention to the need to ensure balance and responsiveness in developing the design phase public involvement program. The full results of this survey are presented in a 1999 Transportation Research Board publication entitled, *In the Possibilities are the Solutions: Assessment and Implications of the*

---

<sup>2</sup> The Coordination Committee was a group of 14 front-line federal, state, and local elected officials plus senior agency representatives who guided the environmental assessment and coordinated the public outreach effort.

*Public Involvement Process During the Environmental Impact Study of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge* by David Keever, Geraldine Frankoski, and Jana Lynott (<sup>5</sup>).

The five-year EIS demonstrated that multiple avenues available for public participation worked well in meeting the needs of individuals with different levels of interest and time availability. Thus, while the focus of the public involvement program would center around the stakeholder participation panel process during design, the project would continue to stay in touch with the general public by holding public hours at the project office, distributing newsletters, and offering a website rich in up-to-date project information.

The design phase Stakeholder Participation Panel process was structured to involve citizens intensively early in the design effort when their input could have the greatest potential influence on final design. Panel worksessions were usually held for an average duration of 2-3 hours in the late afternoon or early evening at a convenient community location, and many times in the project office where resources, maps, diagrams, and meeting facilities were readily available. Over a six-month time period corresponding to the first one-third of the design phase, panel members worked actively with project staff to identify issues of concern and develop design concepts that could address those concerns.

### ***Panel Membership***

Unlike the Planning/EIS phase where citizens from the larger metropolitan area self-selected themselves as work group participants, the SPP process relied on a form of targeted participation of neighborhood citizens and representative user groups. Nominations were obtained from elected officials and other community-based leadership organizations. Underpinning the involvement of elected officials in the nomination process was the assumption that they would draw visibility to the process and increase panel members' level of commitment while at the same time eliminate any perceived bias that might result from decisions in the project office. Their involvement also strengthened the relationship between the project and community leadership. Program coordinators provided elected officials and other nominators with guidance on the best mix of neighborhoods and perspectives. They also suggested membership criteria such as the desire for panel members to engage in learning and understanding of multiple perspectives, to be flexible, and to accept the design of the selected alternative. Community diversity—by race, gender, and socioeconomic status was explicitly encouraged. By in large, the nominations received did exemplify this diversity in perspective and stakeholder interests. All nominations were accepted as the final membership.

Membership was balanced among the local residents from the various counties and states in the project area, the citizens directly impacted by the project (e.g., daily commuters in the corridor), local and regional business representatives, environmental and historic resource advocates, and representation from the disabilities community. Membership was open to stakeholders who were co-litigants challenging the EIS, provided they respected one very important ground rule—involvement efforts would not revisit decisions agreed upon in the FEIS/ROD. The four or five panelists who straddled this line between litigant and panelist accepted this framework and made substantial contributions to the panel process and design work.

### ***Non-Panel Member Participation***

The Stakeholder Panel discussions were open to the public with agendas and meeting dates/times posted in advance on the project Web site. The worksessions were physically organized so that only panel members were allowed to sit at the table and participate in the dialog. Guests were requested to sit at the perimeter and hold their comments until the public comment period. Occasionally elected officials would

attend. More frequently, city and/or county staff would observe meetings and, on occasion, answer questions for clarification of County/City policies and activities.

### ***The Panel Process***

A key ingredient in the success of these stakeholder panels was the presence of staff members from the engineering team and the use of professional facilitators who could keep the meetings on track, draft recommendation chronicles and coordinate outside work requested by the panel with other team members. Moreover, some panel members had participated extensively during the EIS phase and came to the design phase well-informed. Other participants had less in-depth knowledge and needed additional resources and support to develop an equivalent level of project understanding. A Resource Guidebook for each panel was provided, offering general information to all panelists and site-specific information based on the charter of the panel. In a collaborative design setting, panelists would also exchange knowledge and ideas among themselves with little effort from the facilitators or project staff.

Public comment periods at each of the panel meetings allowed the public more than 30 opportunities during a six-month period to state an opinion or offer an idea in a forum that was, by design and habit, proactive in its approach to evaluating citizen ideas.

To advance members' responsibility as liaisons with the general public, a constituent update was part of every panel meeting. These updates provided an opportunity for members to let others know what they were hearing from their community organization, homeowner's association, and neighborhoods. This agenda item encouraged panelists to develop regular and sometimes formal gathering sessions in their community, spread information and get more design-related ideas that could be taken up by the panel. This activity also promoted the notion of equality among panel members; namely there were no chairpersons for the panels.

Four overarching process steps were followed:

- Establishment of the panel's charter, expected outcomes, and membership
- Issue identification, clarification and prioritization;
- Solution generation and development of recommendations; and,
- Information meeting and documentation

Following the identification of panel members, an initial meeting of all stakeholder panels was held to provide an opportunity to meet one another, meet project staff, and receive a general update of the project since the conclusion of the EIS. In addition, panel members were given a draft charter of the panel's work and outcomes which was ultimately modified and accepted by the panelists. This "contract" provided the guidance for subsequent discussions and allowed facilitators to keep discussions focused on the expected outcomes.

During their initial meetings, panel members brainstormed and clarified a list of approximately 25 to 30 issues, sometimes more, sometimes less depending on the panel's charter and focus areas. These issues were subsequently clarified and organized into major categories. The categories were labeled and prioritized in terms of importance to the design task. No formal prioritization process was employed other

than identifying a sequence of discussion activities which would help inform subsequent discussions and decisions. Facilitators worked with each of the panels to schedule topics according to priority and develop an overall project design schedule. Typically, project designers would present the latest information or design concepts on a particular feature or topic, answer questions posed by the panel members and then discuss alternative options to be considered. Often panel recommendations required additional analysis by the design team and future panel deliberations.

Formal panel recommendations were forwarded to the project decision-makers in the form of written recommendation chronicles. These one-to-two page chronicles recapitulated the panel's recommendation, their rationale, background decision points and as decisions are made, and a response from project decision-makers. During the six-month process, panelists were able to witness changes to the initial designs ideas based on their input.

During the issue generation and clarification stage a few issues were determined to be beyond the charter of the panel. These issues usually pertained to decisions or conclusions made during the EIS phase and were occasionally challenged by panel members. Strong facilitation was required at the initial meetings to clarify the boundaries of the box. Occasionally, panelists were able to successfully negotiate their issues back on the table. In order to be responsive to panelist concerns, while at the same time respecting the process and the desire of all of the panelists to stay focused on the design task, project staff and agency officials would use a variety of techniques to address the issues, but outside the normal panel process. For example, agency representative would meet with interested panel members outside the regular panel meetings to discuss issues such as; how traffic data were derived and the reliability of the data, an agency's policy on the provision of HOV lanes, and the air quality conformity analysis.

The panel process has been educational for panel members and project staff. In order to gain valuable insights from panelists, panel members and designers had to establish a vernacular, neither too technical nor overly simplistic, as well as other means (e.g. graphics) of communicating ideas. The language provided a foundation for improved understanding of issues and engendered trust. Because of the iterative nature of the design work, coupled with the multiple stakeholder perspectives, designers needed to adjust the pace and scope of their work to match stakeholders' understanding and concurrence on the proposed design element.

As part of the overall public outreach effort, public information meetings are scheduled to be held in both Virginia and Maryland to present the general public with approximately 60 percent design plans. These public information meetings create another opportunity for the panels to reconvene with designers in a small group setting and track design progress since their recommendations were submitted at 30 percent design.

## **Panel Outcomes and Assessment**

The success of a public involvement program is largely measured by the level of satisfaction of those who participated. At the conclusion of this six-month intensive stakeholder panel effort, a two-page assessment form was distributed to each of the panel members to determine whether participants found the process to be successful, identify strengths and clarify areas of the public involvement program that could be improved upon. Assessment questions included those pertaining to the accomplishment of objectives, attitudinal changes as a result of participation, representation, general observations on strengths

and weaknesses, and recommended follow-on activities. A subset of the total assessment outcomes is provided below. While not a generalizable set of findings, this assessment does offer preliminary insights into the nexus between the EIS and design phases of public involvement.

On average, the panel member could complete the written assessment form in about seven minutes. Slightly more than seventy-five percent of Virginia panel members completed assessment forms. Given the later start of the Maryland panel, a formal assessment of the Maryland panel will be completed once the panel finishes its 30% design work.

Panel	Number of survey respondents	Total number of panelists	Response rate
Telegraph Rd	10	17	59%
Route 1	17	17	100%
Jones Point Park	9	13	69%

Response rates to the assessment were high and tended to reflect the overall interest in the Stakeholder Participation Panel Process.

### ***Accomplishment of Objectives***

Panelists were asked whether the objectives of the panel process were accomplished. Since the panelists had been engaged in the definition of the panel's charter, they were able to provide a self-referencing response to this question. Eighty percent of the 36 respondents felt they were. The five specific program objectives were then listed and each respondent was requested to determine whether each was accomplished and to rank order these five in order of most important to least important. Thirty-two of the 36 respondents ranked,

*“to permit direct citizen influence on elements of the design process”*

as the number one objective of the public involvement program. This outcome supports the notion that a meaningful public involvement process will be one in which citizens perceive their volunteered time is well spent and has made a difference. The second and third ranked objectives were:

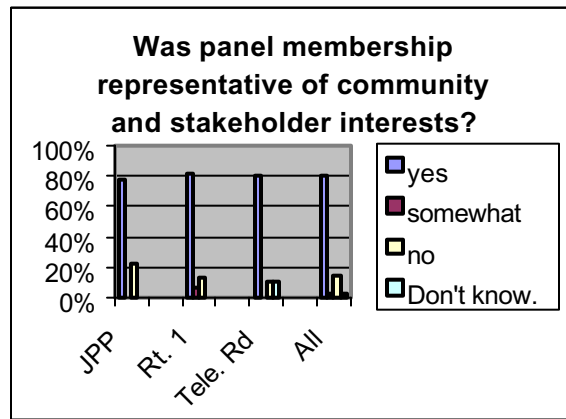
*“to provide designers with insights into how the project could best serve the community”*  
and,

*“to allow all members of the public an opportunity to provide opinions on design elements.”*

The objectives, “to keep officials apprised of public viewpoint through key citizen representatives” and “to give opposing views a forum for discussion and compromise” were found to be of somewhat lesser importance to respondents. By and large, panel members felt that each of the five objectives had been accomplished.

### ***Community Representation***

An important goal of the public involvement team was to ensure that panel membership reflect the community as a whole. Eighty-three percent of the panelists who responded to the survey agreed that their



Five of six panel members indicated that membership was representative of community and stakeholder interests.

panel's membership was representative of community and stakeholder interests. This response was consistent across all three panels.

### ***Consensus-Building and Compromise***

The assessment form also examined the assumption that citizens would be more likely to compromise on some points of project design as a result of their participation in a process that involves the development of a shared understanding of design trade-offs and viewpoints of others. As the following table illustrates, respondents were as likely to have changed their views as not. Only three respondents said that they would be less willing to compromise on some points of project design.

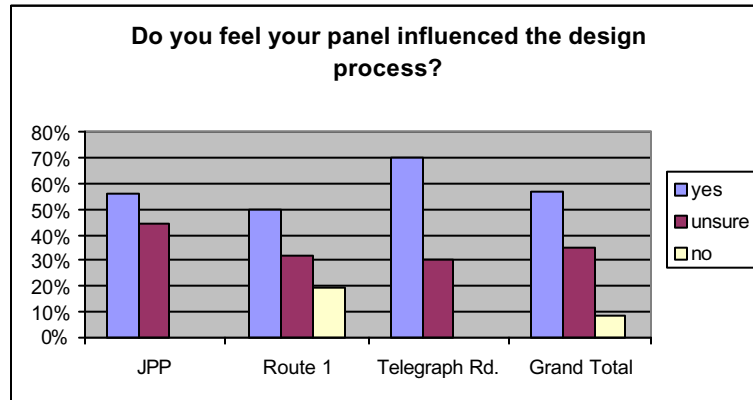
<b>Now that you have participated in this consensus building process, which best describes your thoughts?</b>	<b>JPP</b>	<b>Route 1</b>	<b>Telegraph Rd.</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>% Respondents</b>
My views on project design have not changed as a result of the panel process	4	9	2	15	42%
I am more willing to compromise on some points of project design	3	8	6	17	47%
I am less willing to compromise on some points of project design	1		2	3	8%
(blank)	1			1	
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>36</b>	

Manv panelists indicated a willinacess to chanae viewpoints based on the panel process and outcomes.

### ***Influence on Outcomes***

Every effort was made in the public involvement program to ensure its authenticity and enable panel members' contributions to be reflected in final design. The liaison design engineer and environmental manager had active roles at panel meetings plus direct and on-going interaction with panel members.

Formal, written recommendation chronicles requiring decision-maker response were established. The success of the panel structure and process is evidenced by the large number of participants who felt their panel had indeed influenced the design process.



Nearly 60% of all respondents felt that the panels

Nearly 60 percent of all respondents felt that the panels had influenced design. Just over 30 percent were unsure, and only a total of three individuals felt that they had had no influence. As additional responses to specific recommendations not yet considered by the agency decision-makers are made, the percentage of positive responses is expected to increase.

Panelists' positive perception of their influence is supported by the tangible responsiveness of the Virginia Department of Transportation.(VDOT). By August 1999, project decision-makers had deliberated on all of the Virginia panel recommendations except those that would require coordination with outside decision-making bodies. Of those recommendations within the purview of the Technical Coordination Team<sup>3</sup>, 92 percent had been approved, with two of these recommendations having been partially approved. No recommendations had been rejected. This demonstrates a significant improvement in project responsiveness over a typical design phase public involvement program.

## Summary

While the level of public involvement exhibited by the Stakeholder Participation Panel process is fairly common during the planning phases of a transportation project, this intensive approach is relatively new for design phase activities. As agencies devote more effort in the upcoming years to transportation and infrastructure improvements and operations, careful attention to the role of public involvement in all phases of planning, project development, and O&M will be needed. At the current state of the practice, case studies and other anecdotal information are the primary sources for developing such programs and measuring their success.

<sup>3</sup> The Technical Coordination Team is composed of Federal and State agency representatives, as well as transportation officials from the City of Alexandria and Fairfax County. Virginia panel recommendations were forwarded to the TCT who deliberated their feasibility and forwarded their recommended actions to the Project Management Team.

To advance our collective understanding, the following table summarizes the process and outcomes of the Wilson Bridge Project EIS and design phase Stakeholder Participation Panel process, according to a set of key program indicators of a successful public involvement program. The assessment framework under development by the TRB Committee on Public Involvement offers a useful approach for comparing key indicators across projects and could be used for additional case studies that test the underlying hypothesis of this paper, namely, by taking into consideration all stages of transportation system development during the initial design of a public involvement program, transportation projects will benefit from more efficient and effective use of public funds. Figure 2 summarizes the key indicators of a successful public involvement program and contrasts the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Project EIS phase with the design phase.

**Figure 2 – Indicators of A Successful Public Involvement Program**

<b>Indicators of a Successful Public Involvement Program<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>Improvement Study Public Outreach Program (EIS Phase)</b>	<b>Stakeholder Participation Panel Process (SPP) (Design Phase)</b>
<i>Program Design</i>		
Accessibility to the Decision-Making Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work group presentations to Coordination Committee prior to major decisions</li> <li>• Early series of Town Hall Meetings timed to EIS problem definition, identification of evaluation criteria, alternatives development</li> <li>• Public testimony and written comment prior to selection of preferred alternative. FEIS selection by agency per Coordination Committee selection of preferred alternative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designed so that salient design findings and recommendations would get to agency decision-makers. Formalized through Recommendation Chronicles with structured feedback mechanism.</li> </ul>
Diversity of Views Represented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All-inclusive, self-selected participants</li> <li>• Multiple avenues to become involved depending on time availability and level of interest</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targeted participation through nominations by elected officials and other key community and regional organizations;</li> <li>• Panel members asked to confirm broad representation.</li> </ul>
Opportunities for Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timed to key EIS decision points: Purpose &amp; Need, Evaluation Criteria, Alternatives Development, Selection of Preferred Alternative</li> <li>• 14 Town Hall meetings to identify issues and solution ideas and analyze trade-offs.</li> <li>• 30 Open Houses</li> <li>• Comment Periods at more than 30 CC meetings</li> <li>• 4 Public Hearings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timed to first 30% design activities</li> <li>• Direct participation in design activities as a panel member</li> <li>• Indirect participation as an observer of the SPP deliberations with public forum opportunities</li> <li>• Over 30 stakeholder meetings open to the general public with public comment periods.</li> <li>• Ability to directly approach agency and elected representatives</li> </ul>
Integration of Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Substantial integration and consideration of comments. Approximately 600 comments considered and responded to in the EIS phase.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reprioritization of design activities based on stakeholder input</li> </ul>
Process Expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff liaison to each work group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional facilitators/design team members led all meetings and coordinated production of minutes, recommendation chronicles and outside coordination with other team members</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> "Assessing the Effectiveness of Project-Based Public Involvement Processes: A Self-Assessment Tool for Practitioners," developed by the TRB Committee on Public Involvement in Transportation, January 1999, Distribution Draft

<b>Project Context</b>		
Project/Decision Acceptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A professionally-administered, statistically-valid survey by the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Improvement Study concluded that 85% of the metropolitan region is very or somewhat satisfied with the Selected Alternative</li> <li>• A professionally-administered, statistically-valid survey by the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce concluded that nearly 60% of voters from the City of Alexandria favor a 12-lane bridge (the Selected Alternative).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 60% of participants felt that they had influenced design</li> <li>• 92% of recommendations approved by agencies as of July 1999</li> </ul>
Mutual Learning/Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizens developed more than 350 river crossing solution ideas for staff as initial point of alternatives development process</li> <li>• Substantial learning occurred in small group work based on exchange of ideas among project staff and citizens</li> <li>• New ideas for transit, ramp alignments, and community enhancements obtained from citizens</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Panel members provided background information about their communities (i.e., traffic counts) and brought many of the solution ideas forward</li> <li>• Sense of ownership of recommendations and outcomes developed</li> <li>• One panel member stated, "I felt the other panel members were looking out for my interests."</li> </ul>
Cost Avoidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoided protracted litigation with local governments on key issues in the project area. Estimated savings of approximately \$2M.</li> <li>• Enhanced understanding and support of local business and residential communities to provide indirect support for project progress. Difficult to quantify.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To be determined</li> </ul>

## **Acknowledgements**

The success of the public involvement program is directly related to the many citizens who volunteered numerous hours of evening meetings to serve on one of four Stakeholder Participation Panels. Through their dedicated and continuous participation, everyone has benefited in understanding community concerns and developing design solutions that are more reflective of community interests.

Were it not for the leadership, funding, and agency support of the Federal Highway Administration, Virginia Department of Transportation, and Maryland State Highway Administration none of these public involvement activities would have been possible. The success of this program has largely depended upon the collective effort of the design team and panel members in collaborating in the development of design solutions that are sensitive to community concerns. Although designed and facilitated by the project's public involvement practitioners, the program relied on the active participation of the project engineers, environmental resource manager, landscape architects, and others, who made a substantial contribution of time for evening meetings and additional analysis between stakeholder panel worksessions, reflecting an increasingly interdisciplinary approach to project planning and design.

## References

---

<sup>1</sup> Howard/Stein-Hudson Associates, Inc., and Parsons, Brinckerhoff, Quade & Douglas. *Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making*. U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, Federal Transit Administration. July 1996.

<sup>1</sup> Dukes, E.F. *Resolving Public Conflict: Transforming Community and Governance*. Manchester University Press, New York, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Putnam, R.D. Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6, No.1, January 1995, pp. 65-78.

<sup>3</sup> ICF Kaiser Consulting Group, Washington Management Consulting Initiatives, Inc., SR Beard Associates. *Assessment of Public Involvement in Transportation Planning for the Washington Metropolitan Region*. Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board. October, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Keever, D. , G. Frankoski, and J. Lynott. *In the Possibilities are the Solutions: Assessment and Implications of the Public Involvement Process During the Environmental Impact Study of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge*. In Transportation Research Record Paper Number 990971 for Publication, TRB, National Research Council, Washington, D.C. 1999.