

State of the Practice: White Paper on Public Involvement

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Public involvement is the process of two-way communication between citizen and government by which transportation agencies and other officials give notice and information to the public and use public input as a factor in decision making. In the past decade a radical transformation has occurred in the way transportation decisions are made. A new decision model has emerged and continues to be refined. The model assumes that public input into the assessment of transportation needs and solutions is a key factor in most transportation decision making.

EXPLOSION OF INTEREST IN PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT: THE NEW PARADIGM IN TRANSPORTATION DECISION MAKING

Several factors have contributed to this change. Since the passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA), there has been a federally mandated emphasis on early, proactive, and sustained citizen input into transportation

decision making—with special outreach efforts targeted at traditionally underserved populations. ISTEA’s directive was reinforced by the passage of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) near the end of the decade. States and localities have developed protocols and guidelines to interpret these mandates. In widely varying ways, they have transformed their transportation agencies and blended these mandates with local customs and expectations.

Federal mandates are powerful transforming tools, but the drive for public involvement is rooted deeply in other societal forces. ISTEA and TEA-21 evolved from growing trends that began in American government 30 years ago: the general devolution of power away from the federal government and toward state and local government, and the empowerment of groups and individual citizens to have a voice in policy decisions that affect them and their communities.

The demand for public involvement also results from a rapid rate of social change and the complexity of modern life. The current mandates codify lessons learned in the 1970s and 1980s—lessons that many transportation agencies learned after the fact from project delays, lawsuits, and public outcry about transportation decisions made without citizen input.

BENEFITS OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

There is general agreement that a well-conceived and well-implemented public involvement program can bring major benefits to the transportation policy process and lead to better decision outcomes. Beneficial results include the following:

- **Public ownership of policies/sustainable and supportable decisions:** By involving citizens in the assessment of needs and solutions and identifying troublesome issues early, public involvement can promote citizen “ownership” of policies. Although most transportation projects have some negative effects, citizens are more willing to accept these when they accept the need for the policy or project, participate in developing the alternatives, and understand the technical and regulatory constraints. To the extent that citizens are involved in the decision, their support will be sustained over time.

- **Decisions that reflect community values:** The public involvement model involves consultation with many segments of the community. Because this is a more collaborative process, decisions inevitably are more reflective of community values.

- **Efficient implementation of transportation decisions:** Decision makers understand the concerns of the public and can be more sensitive to those concerns in the implementation process. The model strives to reduce the risks of litigation and avoid revisiting decisions, which can significantly reduce costs.

- **Enhanced agency credibility:** The process of public involvement often transforms agency culture by forcing agency decision makers to interact with their constituents. As a result, transportation stakeholders develop a better understanding of agency operations, and agency officials have a better understanding of public thinking. This mutual education improves the agency’s relationship with the public.

APPROACHES TO PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT: WHAT IS “GOOD PRACTICE”?

Although the practice of public involvement is evolving, during the past two decades consensus has emerged about some fundamentals of good practice, including objectives, guiding principles, and general notions about how to select tools for particular processes.

Objectives

We often focus on process when we discuss public involvement, but the key objectives of good public involvement practice revolve around outcomes. Ultimately, the reason to use a decision model that incorporates public involvement is to improve the decisions. In this context, a good decision is one that not only incorporates good planning and engineering practices and results in efficient use of resources, but also best reflects the interests of all stakeholders.

One important objective of a good public involvement process is the extent to which the process builds consensus on the path to decision. In exchange for participation in a fair and open process, citizens often are willing to support the outcome of the process even if their preferred alternative is not selected. This result, sometimes known as “informed consent,” is the desired outcome on highly controversial projects. It allows projects to move forward even though all stakeholder desires are not accommodated.

Involving citizens without informing them is dangerous. Another objective of a good public involvement process is to inform citizens about transportation issues, projections, the planning process, and budgetary and engineering constraints.

Finally, a good public involvement process must have as an objective the incorporation of citizen input into the decision process. A “black box” that has public involvement inputs but no clear effect on the outputs is not a successful public involvement program. The decision-making process must be open and clear and must reflect citizen input.

Guiding Principles

Several general principles guide a successful public involvement effort:

- In designing public involvement programs, distinguish public involvement from public relations and public information. Although the three are linked, their purposes are different. A public information campaign is a form of one-way communication between the agency and the public, generally striving to inform the public about ongoing issues or developments. Public relations programs usually involve the dissemination of information, but their emphasis is on the promotion of a particular policy or solution—selling a fait accompli.

Public involvement programs include many elements of both public information and public relations, but they add another dimension. Essential to a good public involvement program is dynamic two-way communication, which promotes public feedback and uses that feedback to transform the decision process and outcome. Ideally, a public involvement practitioner acts as an “honest broker”—informing citizens about various options and constraints, providing opportunities for citizens’ voices to be heard, and mediating differences. Practitioners who keep these distinctions in mind can avoid the pitfalls involved in “selling” a policy or a program. They also can avoid violating legislative or agency strictures against advocacy or lobbying.

- Public involvement programs should be inclusive, involving decision makers and all interested stakeholders. Public involvement programs should include as many groups and individuals in the community as practicable. Many of these groups and individuals will surface easily because they are interested in the decision outcome. Some groups and individuals are more difficult to reach because of cultural or economic isolation or because they are users of the facility who do not reside in the immediate project area. The good

practitioner of public involvement knows the community and is proactive, seeking out groups and individuals, particularly those who will be affected significantly.

This inclusiveness almost always includes a heavy emphasis on partnering—achieving mutual understanding of the problem and formal or informal agreements to work together to find and implement a solution. Partnering activities can be conducted with other agencies, units of government, metropolitan planning organizations, toll agencies, neighborhood associations, and other third-party groups such as chambers of commerce and environmental organizations. Partnering makes sense conceptually and practically. In a world where resources are limited, partnering can represent an efficient and effective approach to gathering citizen input and developing an implementable solution.

- Communication with participants should be respectful. The attitude of public involvement practitioners, agency officials, and members of the public should be one of mutual respect. Practitioners should perfect the art of listening to constituents. All opinions should be given serious consideration, and input always should receive prompt and respectful replies.

- Public involvement activities should begin early and be proactive and ongoing throughout the plan or project development. One key to a successful public involvement effort is to begin the process of public dialogue early. The temptation to save time and resources by initiating public involvement activities midway through the process should be avoided. Such an approach engenders public distrust and often requires reexamination of some decisions. Appropriate public notice should be given for all decisions; the notice should conform with or exceed local and federal regulations.

- The decision process should be defined, structured, and transparent. The decision process should be clearly delineated at the start of each project. Participants should

understand the process and be aware of critical decision points where they can have influence. Of particular importance is communicating to the public and advisory committees that public involvement is only one input into a complex decision process. Transportation officials remain the decision makers. However, decision processes should be structured so that outcomes reflect public input.

- Agencies should provide appropriate leadership to public outreach efforts.

Whereas agencies should ensure that public involvement programs are structured as “honest brokering” programs with no predetermined outcomes, they also must give appropriate leadership to the process. An agency spokesperson or “champion” must be available to articulate agency policy, perspectives, and operating procedures throughout the process. Ensuring provision of adequate resources for public involvement, including staff time and budget for information materials and other outreach expenses, is also an essential aspect of agency leadership. When agencies fail to take leadership, the public process flounders, and neither the public nor the agency is well served.

Designing Strategies and Choosing Tools

Many tools are available to use in public involvement programs. A key challenge for the practitioner is to assess the needs and audience for each project and strategically choose the most appropriate ones. Every public involvement effort should begin with a project assessment by the study team. What are the objectives of the plan or project? Who is the likely audience? What will be the level of impact on the community? Any special barriers to communication should be assessed at this time. Frequently it is useful to supplement the knowledge of the agency and the consulting community with the input of public officials and community leaders. On more important projects it is often appropriate to conduct a

series of community interviews. Survey research to identify issues that should be addressed also can be helpful at this stage.

Once this information is collected, a public involvement plan can be formulated. The plan should specify the tools and techniques most appropriate to the audience and the allocation of resources needed to support those tools and techniques. The plan should be sensitive to the differentiation within the audience and consideration should be given to the appropriate level of detail. The level of controversy of a project will affect the techniques used.

Space does not permit extensive discussion of the variety and appropriateness of all the available tools and techniques. Several excellent references describe a wide range of tools, discuss when they are most appropriately applied, and provide successful examples of their use. The Federal Highway Administration has published a study of available techniques (1). A number of states have also provided guides for practitioners. A good example is Minnesota (2). In addition, the Committee on Public Involvement in Transportation has prepared a training module for beginning public involvement practitioners and maintains a website (www.ch2m.com/trb_pi) that provides additional resources and references.

CHALLENGES TO PRACTITIONERS: AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

The practice of public involvement continues to evolve. As we move forward into the new millennium, public involvement practitioners must effectively address a number of challenges to develop best practices.

Removing Institutional Barriers

Transportation agencies must do more than give lip service to the importance of public involvement. Agencies must make a serious commitment to include the public in decision making and change their organizations and practices to reflect that commitment. At a minimum, this means developing consistent policies that validate the legitimacy of public involvement, dedicating budget and staff to public involvement. They must also commit to partnering with the public and other agencies to improve decision making. For many organizations this will involve a dramatic culture change as agency employees from the top down adopt a new paradigm of policy development and implementation.

Ensuring a Broad-Based Audience and Improving Communication Tools

Some audiences are difficult to reach for economic or cultural reasons. Some stakeholders live outside the project area and are not targeted for involvement. Others choose not to participate because of lack of interest or time constraints. The growing trend to require public involvement in decision making in both the public and the private sectors is beginning to overload the public's ability to respond. Many transportation agencies are in the habit of structuring public involvement opportunities around public meetings. This concentration of resources on public meetings can lead to the overweighting of the voices of activists and the distortion of community voice.

Improved techniques must be developed to respond to stakeholder time constraints, provide information to help people accurately assess the importance of the issues to their quality of life, and attract and communicate effectively with a broader audience. These include the use of electronic tools, mass communication techniques, public opinion surveys, and baseline research.

Dealing with Complexity

As transportation technology and financing mechanisms become more complex, communicating clearly becomes more difficult. In an age of sound bites and limited attention span, public involvement practitioners must develop ways to capture and maintain public attention and convey complex information, as well as receive complex feedback. In particular, the Internet and new multimedia programs present promising options to communicate complex information effectively and widely.

Dealing Effectively with Issues of Timing

A number of timing issues are obstacles to conducting successful public involvement efforts; developing effective ways to deal with these issues will be critical in the future. These issues manifest themselves in a variety of ways.

Transportation and planning policies typically are developed over long periods, and transportation solutions take years to implement. The length of time required for decisions on many projects makes it difficult to focus public attention on critical issues, particularly in high-growth areas.

These problems present a twofold challenge. Public involvement practitioners need to develop innovative ways to sustain public interest in transportation information. Currently in many states, public involvement is done on a project-specific basis. Agencies need to develop more effective ways of conducting ongoing outreach for longer-term issues such as state plans.

In addition, agencies must continue their efforts to streamline the planning and decision processes. The need to address critical transportation problems is driving this effort in many states. But collapsing the time horizon for the decision process also will

make it easier for the public to have an effective voice. Several quantitative evaluation processes that focus on measuring the performance of alternatives against a broad range of public values offer high potential in this arena.

Developing Standards and Assessment Tools

A challenge to the profession is to develop commonly accepted methods for evaluation of public involvement programs. Agency heads and managers consistently and correctly question the benefits of costly public involvement programs, which sometimes drive up the cost of planning and design. Typically, public involvement practitioners argue that public involvement expenditures are justified in that they prevent delays, lawsuits, and costly reassessment of policies. But such a response has been insufficiently quantified. If public involvement programs are to become a routine part of how agencies do business, consistent assessment methods must be developed. Performance measures for public involvement should relate to how well the expectations of participants were met, costs in relation to benefits, and effects on decision making. The Federal Transit Administration–Federal Highway Administration Interim Policy and Guidance on Public Involvement suggests some measures, and the Committee on Public Involvement in Transportation has an ongoing effort in this area.

Developing Professional Standards and Training Programs

Practitioners of public involvement come from a wide variety of backgrounds. The practice must continue to draw strength from all of these contributions, and establishing basic standards to which all public involvement practitioners can be assumed to adhere will be necessary. Training programs or professional credentials or certification likely will be

necessary to implement these standards. The goal should be to ensure adherence to a consistent set of best practices.

VISION FOR THE NEXT DECADE

As we move into the next century, transportation problems will multiply, transportation budgets will grow, the range of technical solutions will increase, and the demands of the public to be involved in policy decisions will become more insistent. Transportation decision makers need to apply the lessons learned during the past 20 years as we attempt to include the public in the complicated and technical process of arriving at transportation solutions.

Public involvement programs should become a routine part of the development of all transportation policy—not just project specific - but routinely and seamlessly incorporated into the way transportation agencies do business.

As practitioners design public involvement strategies for individual projects, there should be a common set of expectations about what constitutes good practice. Energy and discussion should focus on how to assess strategically the needs of the project at hand, not whether or when to involve the public.

Agencies should routinely set aside budgets for conducting public involvement programs within accepted parameters.

Citizens should accept their responsibilities—to put in the time and energy to understand the needs of and solutions to transportation projects that affect them and their communities, and to accept the results of a fair and open process.

This new paradigm of a mutually respectful, fair, and open process constitutes the core of the committee's vision for transportation decision making for the next decade.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Marcy Schwartz of CH2M Hill is Chairman of the Committee on Public Involvement in Transportation.

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