Recommendations to Enhance Quality Engagement

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Contents

Introduction

This report is intended to provide the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) with clear recommendations on how best to perform public engagement.[1] Though the guidance and recommendations within this document can be applied to demographic groups of all kinds, special consideration has been given to engaging disadvantaged populations, also called "underserved" or "hard-to-reach" populations. Disadvantaged populations include minority, low-income, limited English proficiency, and low-literacy groups. Rural populations are also of concern, so this report further notes how these public engagement techniques can be applied to a rural context.

Research Question and Methodology

In advance of an update to its Long Range Transportation Plan, IDOT commissioned a team of researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago to study ways in which it could improve and enhance its public engagement practices, especially those involving underserved or disadvantaged populations. The agency wished to increase the quality and quantity of public feedback received and extend its reach into disadvantaged communities.

To answer this question, the project team undertook a long-term research effort, which began with a review of the literature on public participation generally and in a transportation context specifically. This research was directed at developing both a theoretical foundation and a knowledge of specific instances of successful (or unsuccessful) public engagement. Engagement with disadvantaged populations was also a focus of this research, as was civic technology and its potential to enhance the participation process. Additionally, the team conducted interviews with IDOT employees who had experience in carrying out public engagement as well as several consultants in the field. These interviews showed that engagement expertise does exist within the agency, but it is unevenly distributed across the organization. This is perhaps due to a past reliance on consultants. It was also indicated that the agency made heavy use of traditional techniques to engage the public, such as open houses or town hall meetings.

In addition, two real-world case studies were identified and examined, which necessitated interviews with community college professor Rebecca Townsend and Katherine Caskey of the Minnesota Department of Transportation's Office of Transportation System Management.

Report Structure

The report begins with a summary of the recommendations developed and the rationale behind them. It then moves on to the benefits and drawbacks of engagement, as well as some of the legal considerations associated with it. The report also examines disadvantaged populations, the unique considerations that must be made in involving them in a public engagement effort, and some of the barriers to participation that these populations face. Following this, there is a theoretical examination of public participation and the different frameworks practitioners[2] may employ when performing it. IDOT's current practices are also considered. Finally, the "Recommendations" section is composed of eight pieces. Each piece contains a description of the recommendation, a list of pitfalls or things to consider when performing it, contexts where it is especially appropriate, and an examination of a real-world example illustrating its impact.

Interspersed with these recommendations are a pair of case studies. The first concerns the use of community college students in Connecticut to perform public engagement for a local MPO. This project was chosen because of its novel approach to engagement, its potential to engage disadvantaged groups (many of the participating students were themselves members of these groups), and its general applicability. The second case study focuses on the past and present efforts of the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) to improve its public engagement practices. This case study includes an examination of the department's currently ongoing Minnesota GO project to update its 20 Year Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan and Minnesota State Highway Investment Plan. This project exemplifies what a thoughtfully planned and executed public engagement effort looks like.

Recommendations

The bulk of this report is composed of eight recommendations, which include: (1) Know Your Audience, (2) Use Existing Community Resources, (3) Perform Informal Outreach and Use Nontraditional Locations, (4) Match Engagement Technique with Goal and Context, (5) Enhance Staff Capabilities through Training, (6) Build Institutional Memory through Knowledge Management, (7) Measure and Assess, and (8) Use Technology to Enhance and Complement Outreach. Interviews indicated that IDOT already does many of the techniques recommended; however, the degree to which this occurs varies greatly. This report seeks to provide a practical framework for action and an examination of why all of these recommendations are important and how they complement one another. In other words, it is designed to illustrate how a practitioner can go about fulfilling all of these recommendations to the fullest degree. Additionally, many of these recommendations have both short-term and long-term relevance, as their application across multiple projects over time should increase IDOT's capacity for public engagement.

Care has been taken to provide practical examples illustrating these recommendations throughout. In some cases, further insight on these examples or recommendations can be found in the Appendices, which contain materials designed to deepen understanding and provide practitioners with a list of practical steps to take in order to fulfill these recommendations.

Rationale for Recommendations

Academic research and interviews both indicated that, ultimately, there are no real shortcuts when it comes to achieving quality public engagement; this report is predicated on that conclusion. Robust public engagement takes time, planning, and resources in the form of both money and staff commitment. There is no getting around this. However, there are ways to perform engagement more effectively and efficiently, which the below recommendations will explore. There is some overlap between many of the recommendations below, and they all complement one another to some degree. They represent a suite of practices which, if properly adhered to, will enhance one another.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Know Your Audience
Outreach efforts should be specifically tailored to the community of interest, taking into account cultural, linguistic, and other differences. The development of strong relationships between agency employees, community leaders, and individuals is key. In building these relationships, there is no substitute for "pounding the pavement" and reaching out to local officials and legislators, heads of nonprofits or social service agencies, local business owners, religious leaders, and even activists. Their unique perspectives, professional expertise, local connections, and insights into the community at large are of incalculable value to practitioners. These individuals can often serve as conduits to groups who are difficult to reach or who have historically been disengaged from the planning process.

Recommendation #2: Use Existing Community Resources
This recommendation is based upon the idea that communities already come with their own unique sets of resources—both human and otherwise. To enhance their outreach efforts, practitioners should leverage their relationships with local officials, community leaders, and other prominent individuals to tap into community networks that already exist. As theorist Matt Leighninger has said, "The best involvement projects map their communities, figure out what people belong to, and convince leaders within those groups and organizations to recruit people they already know."[3] This is not to mention the fact that there are a host of community gathering places, organizations, and institutions which could serve as excellent venues for performing engagement or provide gateways to groups and individuals that have not historically been engaged.

Recommendation #3: Informal Outreach and Nontraditional Locations
As practitioners know, it can sometimes be difficult to achieve a healthy attendance at open houses and town halls, the two traditional public involvement techniques. Fortunately, practitioners do not have to limit themselves to these forms of engagement. Indeed, festivals, shopping centers, high school football games, laundromats, state fairs, and other community gathering places can be excellent opportunities to connect with the public. Very simply, *practitioners should go to where people are already meeting*. This enables them to interact with a large number of people, including many who would normally not involve themselves in the public engagement process.

Recommendation #4: Match Engagement Technique with Goal and Context
In the interest of both effectiveness and efficiency, the practitioner must select public involvement techniques in line with the aims of the public involvement effort. This selection will involve several considerations, including time, cost, audience, and the quantity and quality of input needed. The public meeting or open house, while mainstays of public engagement, are not always the best forms of public engagement.

Recommendation #5: Enhance Staff Capabilities through Training
The agency can develop its in-house public involvement expertise by providing training in the areas of facilitation and cultural competency. Doing this can lead to a fuller appreciation and understanding of public engagement agency-wide. It can also increase staff's ability to effectively interact with diverse populations.

Recommendation #6: Build Institutional Memory through Knowledge Management
The development of a centralized repository for information relating to engagement could be a benefit to practitioners agency-wide. Such a resource could serve as a centralized contact database and also contain case studies and lessons learned from previous projects. Consistent and long-term usage of this system will increase its utility to practitioners of all skill levels.

Recommendation #7: Measure and Assess
To the extent that it is able, the agency should track the effectiveness and costs of its various outreach techniques to determine the most efficient ways to allocate resources. What the agency decides to measure will depend heavily on its goals for the engagement process.

Recommendation #8: Use Technology to Enhance and Complement Outreach
To complement its face-to-face outreach efforts, the agency should take advantage of the many technological tools available that can enable it to connect and interact with the general public. These tools are also well-suited to customization and analysis.

Benefits and Drawbacks of Public Engagement

Benefits

The benefits of successful public engagement are numerous. Firstly, the public engagement process gives citizens some ownership of the planning process. Not only can this create better outcomes, it can also result in decisions which are more reflective of community values. This can help mitigate potential conflicts between governments and citizens and even reduce the risk of litigation. An agency may also achieve enhanced credibility among the general public.[4] "Indeed, in some cases, one of the strongest effects of participatory processes is precisely that of increased trust in institutions."[5]

The National Academy of Science's *Public Participation in Environmental Assessment and Decision-making* makes similar points:

> "When well done, public participation improves the quality and legitimacy of a decision and builds the capacity of all involved to engage in the policy process. It can lead to better results in terms of environmental quality and other social objectives. It also can enhance trust and understanding among parties. Achieving these results depends on using practices that address difficulties that specific aspects of the context can present."[6]

Irvin and Stansbury (see Table 1) identify several advantages associated with public engagement, noting that it can have a positive impact on the decision-making process and produce better outcomes.[7]

Public engagement can help cultivate social capital, increase awareness of important social issues, and foster leadership at both the individual and organizational level. In other words, it can help create stronger, more engaged communities served by active and knowledgeable leadership.[8]

Table 1 Advantages of Citizen Participation in Government Decision Making

	Advantages to citizen participants	Advantages to government
Decision process	Education (learn from and inform government representatives) Persuade and enlighten government Gain skills for activist citizenship	Education (learn from and inform citizens) Persuade citizens; build trust and allay anxiety or hostility Build strategic alliances Gain legitimacy of decisions
Outcomes	Break gridlock; achieve outcomes Gain some control over policy process Better policy and implementation decisions	Break gridlock; achieve outcomes Avoid litigation costs Better policy and implementation decisions

(Source: Irvin, Renee, and John Stansbury. "Citizen Participation in Decisionmaking: Is It Worth the Effort?" *Public Administration Review* 64.1 (2004): 55-65. *Wiley Online Library*. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.)

Drawbacks

With the benefits of public engagement being generally agreed upon then, why is its integration with government decision-making so inconsistent? This is because performing quality public engagement is no easy task, and there are some significant drawbacks associated with it. Engagement is time-consuming and requires extensive planning. It may also require a large amount of travel on the part of practitioners. For some engagement initiatives, specialized materials in the form of posters, displays, brochures, and surveys will need to be created, which will of course increase costs.

It is also possible that public engagement could engender controversy and conflict, leading to project delays, significant changes to existing plans, and even legal action. For government officials, public engagement can be particularly unpleasant, as they must interact with a general public that could be extremely hostile and ill-informed. In a study of California public managers, Pierce and Pierce found that “everyone involved . . . had personal experience with—or could relate to descriptions of—instances of the public-acting-badly and civic engagement gone-wrong. These experiences were personally painful and often degraded the quality of decision-making and policy implementation.”[9]

Many of these drawbacks are outlined in the table to the right. As is shown, a poorly executed public engagement effort can actually result in negative outcomes for both the government and the general public:[10]

Table 2 Disadvantages of Citizen Participation in Government Decision Making

	Disdvantages to citizen participants	Disdvantages to government
Decision process	Time consuming (even dull) Pointless if decision is ignored	Time consuming Costly May backfire, creating more hostility toward government
Outcomes	Worse policy decision if heavily influenced by opposing interest groups	Loss of decision-making control Possibility of bad decision that is politically impossible to ignore Less budget for implementation of actual projects

(Source: Irvin, Renee, and John Stansbury. "Citizen Participation in Decisionmaking: Is It Worth the Effort?" *Public Administration Review* 64.1 (2004): 55-65. *Wiley Online Library*. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.)

Another important point to consider is that the members of the public that do choose to participate in engagement opportunities are, by and large, self-selected. Because of this, there is no guarantee that those who show up to these opportunities are actually representative of the general public both in their views and their demographics. In short, not only do practitioners have to worry about low-attendance at meetings (a perennial concern for practitioners), they also have to consider if the ones who do show up comprise a representation of the affected region’s population. If not, then a process that was intended to achieve a democratic, community-driven outcome could produce nothing of the sort.

Legal Considerations

Public involvement in transportation planning is not just an exercise in democracy; it is also the law. Transportation planning and public involvement have long been linked to one another through various government laws and regulations at both the local and national level. The Transportation Research Board's Committee on Public Involvement in Transportation dates the beginning of this trend to the Federal Highway Aid Act of 1950, which required public hearings, the provision of project information, and notification to affected parties—practices that are now staples of any public engagement effort.[11]

Some of the most important legislation was passed in the 1960s, an era during which a broad legal foundation for public involvement was established. These laws were partly a response to growing public resistance to the way many highways were constructed in this period. In the 1950s and 1960s, countless neighborhoods and communities across America were destroyed to make way for highways. The areas targeted for demolition were often inhabited by minority or low-income populations—groups who did not possess sufficient political or economic power to resist these projects. The approach used by planning agencies during this time—sometimes described as the DAD ("decide, announce, defend") approach—has been characterized as unjust, discriminatory, and insensitive to the local environment. To correct for this, regulations were put in place to more fully incorporate public input into the planning process. One of the most important of these was the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, which required that agencies using federal funds must consider the social, economic, and environmental effects of any potential project; it also formalized the public notification and comment process.

The Civil Rights movement also had an impact on agency operations, with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 being particularly important, as it prohibited discrimination in federal activities. As stated in Section 601 of Title VI: "No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."[12] Title VI was particularly relevant to transportation infrastructure projects, as many of them are funded in part by the federal government.

Since the 1960s, as can be seen from the table below, there have been a flurry of laws, executive orders, and regulations that have altered how agencies incorporate the general public into their planning processes.

Key Legislation and Guidance on Public Involvement and Transportation Planning

Relevant Legislation or Federal Guidance	Year	Impact on Public Involvement
Administrative Procedure Act	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
Federal Aid-Highway Act	1950	Became first piece of legislation requiring public outreach
Federal Aid-Highway Act Specific to Planning requirements	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
Title VI of the Civil Rights Act	1964	Ensured that individuals would not be denied equal right to participate on the basis of race, color or national origin
Department of Transportation Act	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
National Environmental Policy Act	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
Intermodal Surface Transportation Act (ISTEA)	1991	Extended the opportunity for public involvement in the transportation planning process
Executive Order on Environmental Justice	1994	Sought to ensure full and fair participation by all potentially affected communities in the transportation decision-making process
FHWA's Community Impact Assessment: A Quick Reference for Transportation	1996	Provided a quick primer for transportation professionals and analysts who assess the impacts of proposed transportation actions on communities
FHWA's Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making	1996	Provided a comprehensive compendium of public involvement tools and techniques; increased emphasis on providing meaningful access to decision-making

		information
FHWA's Community Impact Assessment and Context Sensitive Solutions,	1998	Adopted as a formal process to identify community characteristics and values and facilitate the decision-making process
Executive Order on Limited English Proficiency	2000	Increased emphasis on providing meaningful access to decision-making information
Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU)	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.
FHWA's How to Engage Low Literacy and Limited-English Proficiency Populations in Transportation Decision making	2006	Provided practitioners with "best practices" in identifying and engaging low-literacy and limited English-proficiency populations in transportation decision making
Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21)	2012	Consolidated programs and accelerated processes to fund and implement more projects

(Source: Gazillo, Stephen, Ben Strumwasser, Mia Zmud, Anne Morris, David Kuehn, Jennifer Weeks, and Claudia Bilotto. *Update on the State of the Practice: Public Involvement in the 21st Century*. .pp 4-5: *Transit Public Health Link*. Transportation Research Board Committee on Public Involvement in Transportation, Mar. 2013. Web. 3 Feb. 2016.)

While these regulations are extensive, practitioners can always go further to achieve quality public engagement. In fact, going beyond minimal compliance may be increasingly necessary. As Gazillo et al. note, "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 impacts to individuals or communities."[13]

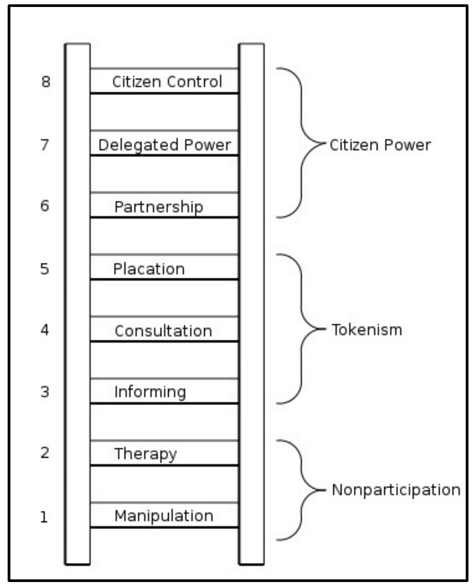
The consequences of failing to adequately involve the public can be severe. The construction of New York's expressways under the direction of master planner Robert Moses in the postwar era—and the attendant destruction of hundreds of buildings, businesses, and homes—is now held up as a textbook example of the disastrous consequences of building transportation infrastructure without adequately taking into account the needs and character of the surrounding community. Questionable planning practices can also create legal trouble for agencies, not to mention bad publicity. One of the most noteworthy examples of this occurred in the 1990s, when the Bus Riders Union, a grassroots organization composed mainly of low-income users of Los Angeles' bus system, was able to successfully halt major changes to the city's bus service by arguing in court that they would disproportionately impact minority populations.[14]

Ways of Thinking about Public Participation

Though this report is concerned with public engagement in the context of transportation, there is a large body of literature that studies public engagement more generally and that seeks to develop a framework with which to understand it. Several of these frameworks are examined below, and each represents a different way to think about public engagement.

Ladder of Citizen Participation: A Distribution of Power

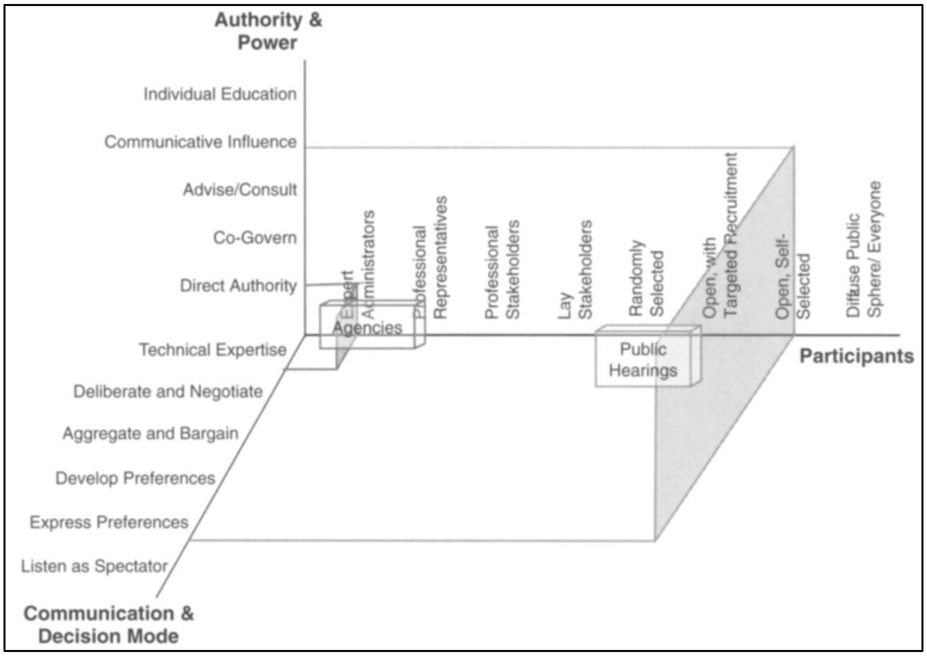
Sherry Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation" from 1969 is "perhaps the most cited work in the literature on participatory democracy."[15] Arnstein argues that the real value to public participation is embodied by the degree to which power is redistributed to "the have-not citizens" to enable them to shape decisions in the public sphere.[16] "She posits a "ladder" of empowerment with eight rungs: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and finally, citizen control."[17] While useful, Arnstein's model envisions public participation as closer to a zero-sum struggle for power rather than an opportunity for governments and citizens to collaborate. In this model, participation in and of itself is good.



(Source: Arnstein, Sherry. "The Ladder of Citizen Participation." *Lithgow-schmidt.dk*. N.p., n.d. Web. 2 May 2016.)

Democracy Cube: Dimensions of Engagement

Theorist Archon Fung is more measured in his approach and notes that unbridled public participation is not always desirable in every situation. Indeed, there is evidence that citizens are more reluctant to support proposals concerning complex issues (such as transportation) if those proposals were crafted by "people like them"—members of the public who lack technical knowledge.[18] Fung instead evaluates participation techniques through the framework of the "Democracy Cube," (see below) which is composed of three "dimensions": "who participates, how participants communicate with one another and make decisions together, and how discussions are linked with policy or public action."[19] Practitioners should shape their outreach efforts according to which of these criteria they are most interested in addressing to the greatest degree.



(Source: Fung, Archon. "Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance." Public Administration Review 66.S1 (2006): 66-75. ArchonFung.net. Dec. 2006. Web. 3 Feb. 2016.)

Thick, thin, and conventional": Categorizing Engagement Practices

Theorist and public involvement practitioner Matt Leighninger classifies public participation techniques into three different categories: thick engagement, thin engagement, and conventional engagement.

"'Thick' forms of engagement enable large numbers of people working in small groups to learn, decide, and act together. These practices include many different forms of dialogue, deliberation, and action planning."[20] This kind of participation is the most intensive and meaningful, but it is also the rarest.

"Thin" engagement attracts more participation from individuals rather than groups. It can involve voting, signing a petition, "liking" a Facebook post or engaging in a crowdsourcing exercise. Under thin engagement, the actions of any one individual have minimal impact. However, the actions of many individuals can have a powerful, cumulative impact. Other common engagement techniques, such as polls, open houses, and informational booths at community events, also fall under the heading of thin engagement.

"'Conventional' engagement is the default mode for official public participation."[21] Conventional engagement is perhaps best represented by the traditional public meeting or hearing. While by far the most common form of engagement, it is also considered to be fairly ineffective. Opportunities for conventional engagement are often scheduled at inconvenient times and places for many residents, which can lead to low turnout. In addition, the structure of typical public meeting can seem intimidating or frustrating to some because of fears of public speaking or a dissatisfaction with the time normally allotted to participants. There is also evidence that the formal and highly public nature of the setting may cause citizens to frame their feedback in purely personal terms, neglecting the concerns they may have for the wider community.[22]

Spectrum of Public Participation: Degrees of Partnership and Impact

The model that was encountered most frequently in the literature was the "Spectrum of Public Participation" from the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2). "[The Spectrum] is organized around the principle that the level of public participation is directly tied to the level of potential public influence on the decision or action being considered. This potential influence can vary anywhere from none at all to total."[23]

The Spectrum identifies five stages of participation: (1) Inform, (2) Consult, (3) Involve, (4) Collaborate, and (5) Empower (see graphic below). It also outlines the various "promises to the public" that are associated with each stage, along with some example techniques that could allow governments to fulfill these promises (see graphic below). This tool was referenced extensively by the EPA, the Transportation Research Board (TRB), and various transportation authorities and planning organizations.

To complement its Spectrum, IAP2 has also developed a list of "Core Values" to provide practitioners with ethical and practical guidance. The TRB's Committee on Public Involvement has identified these Core Values as a strong set of principles for planners and practitioners to adhere to. They are as follows:

1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision making process.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.[24]

While all the frameworks have their uses, the IAP2's provides the practitioner with the most actionable guidance and resources. It is most helpful when the practitioner has a clear idea of their intentions when performing engagement. Is the agency just seeking to spread the word about a decision that is already been made? Or is it looking to truly partner with the public to develop new plans and solutions? The Spectrum takes into account both of these extremes and helps the practitioner make a more purposeful selection of engagement techniques. Because of this, it will be referenced several times throughout this report.

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation: Increasing Levels of Impact

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Public participation goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the public	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Example techniques	•Fact sheets •Websites •Open houses	•Public comment •Focus groups •Surveys •Public meetings	•Workshops •Deliberative polling	•Citizen advisory committees •Consensus-building participatory •Decision-making	•Citizen juries •Ballots •Delegated decision

(Source: "Spectrum of Public Participation." *IAP2.org*. International Association of Public Participation, n.d. Web. 4 May 2016.)

IDOT Practices

Interviews indicated that IDOT has many employees who appreciate the value of public involvement in the planning process and who have some expertise performing public engagement. However, there is evidence that this expertise is unevenly distributed across the agency. This is most likely due to the fact that consultants have been used extensively to perform the necessary engagement functions in the past, a practice which may have prevented many staff members from gaining exposure to engagement concepts and practices. It was also indicated that there is relatively high staff turnover among positions that have some relation to public engagement, which could diminish agency capacity for performing engagement.

Engagement efforts can differ District by District, but agency-wide there seems to be a heavy reliance on traditional engagement practices such as formal public meetings and open houses. Outreach for these events has been described as labor-intensive, and they are normally promoted through newspaper ads, mailing lists, and local officials. The average turnout for these events has been estimated at 20 to 25 people, with 2 to 10 formal comments received. Staff indicated that it was usually engineers who facilitated these engagement opportunities, though communications staff will play a more prominent role in the engagement process in the future.

There are training opportunities available to staff on topics related to public engagement, such as environmental justice and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. However, engagement training is not required, so it is incumbent upon staff to take advantage of these opportunities.

The agency follows the Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS) approach, a set of which prioritizes the early and continuous involvement of all affected stakeholders in developing consensus transportation solutions that will be in harmony with the surrounding physical and cultural environment. "It puts project needs and both agency and community values on a level playing field and considers all trade-offs in decision making."[25] IDOT was the first agency in the nation to adopt CSS principles by statute in the mid-2000s. These principles have since been codified in various IDOT materials, including the Bureau of Design and Environment manual used by the Division of Highways.[26]

The need to avoid "decide, announce, defend"

In relying so heavily on periodic, formalized meetings, the agency runs the risk of appearing to embrace the problematic "decide, announce, defend" (DAD) approach that was mentioned earlier.[27] Under this approach, project decisions have, for all intents and purposes, already been made before the engagement process even begins. The public's input is sought only because regulations require it, and they do not play a meaningful role in the decision making process. This approach can engender mistrust and cynicism among the community. If there is a perception that an agency is simply "checking the box" and treating public engagement like a formality, community members will respond tepidly or not at all, forgoing the engagement opportunities that are available to them. The DAD approach could also create an adversarial dynamic between the agency and community members, spurring opposition to the project among some groups and individuals who feel that they were not adequately involved in the decision-making process.[28] Both of these responses will impact the agency's ability to obtain quality and representative public feedback, one of the main objectives of public engagement to begin with. And particularly stubborn or well-organized opposition could delay a project or eliminate it completely.

There are many things the agency could do to dispel any perception that it is operating under a DAD mindset. The "Recommendations" contained within this report have been developed with this in mind. However, the below "Key Features of Successful Public Engagement" are also instructive and their visible inclusion in any engagement plan would signal that the agency is serious in its efforts to involve the public in the decision-making process.

Key Features of Successful Public Engagement

The below list represents several recurring themes associated with successful public participation. They are less recommendations than they are best practices, and any practitioner would do well to keep them in mind when designing and carrying out an engagement effort.

The need to begin early
This was perhaps the most common piece of advice encountered in the literature.[29] Early engagement can increase a project's chances of success, as the public is given the opportunity to shape the project according to their needs and preferences. Early engagement also allows agencies to make project changes more easily and economically.[30] In addition, starting as early as possible gives practitioners the time they need to build trust-based relationships with important community leaders and stakeholders, whose guidance is necessary in developing an effective public involvement plan

The need to be flexible
Practitioners perform public engagement, in part, to find out what the public thinks about a certain plan or policy. Sometimes what the public thinks will be unexpected or inconvenient for planners and adjustments will need to be made. As Matley says "you may be sure about your technical data, but you can never be sure of the perspective and information that members of the public will bring to the table. Plan for enough time and resources and be prepared to be flexible."[31] Practitioners of course do not need to obtain unanimous agreement from the public, but achieving general consensus (the usual goal) could take longer than expected.

The need for a variety of techniques
There is no engagement technique that is perfect for every occasion, population, or individual. An online survey will of course overlook individuals who do not use the Internet, and any public meeting, no matter when it is scheduled, will inevitably be inconvenient for some. That is why it is important for practitioners to deploy a variety of engagement techniques in multiple venues and through multiple mediums so everyone is given a chance to participate in the process.[32]In addition, as we will see, different techniques lend themselves to the collection of different kinds of input.

The need for transparency and informed consent
This does not refer to the need for the public to possess knowledge of the issues at hand. Rather, it refers to the use of public input and the public's right to know what influence their participation will actually have on the planning process. It is crucial that practitioners clearly communicate what role the public's input will play in agency decision-making. This helps manage expectations and builds trust between practitioners and participants. If participants do not properly understand how their input will be used, they will believe that the practitioners (and by extension the whole agency) operated in bad faith. Not only will this sow discord in the community, but it will most likely also discourage community involvement in the future.

Disadvantaged Populations

Engaging with disadvantaged groups is a perennial concern of departments of transportation (DOTs), metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), and state agencies of all kinds. Disadvantaged populations, for many of the reasons listed below, have historically been underrepresented in transportation decision-making. A slew of laws and requirements have sought to change this by mandating meaningful involvement by disadvantaged populations in planning for transportation projects. However, there are a host of barriers that stand in the way of achieving this.

Lack of Familiarity
Disadvantaged groups may be unfamiliar or intimidated by the traditional engagement process (defined as a public meeting or open house). They also may not be very engaged in civic or political matters generally, and so are not moved to become involved in transportation planning.[33]

Barriers to Communication
Many disadvantaged individuals are immigrants and possess a limited understanding of English. "Limited English Proficiency" (LEP) individuals may be uncomfortable speaking with public officials due to their difficulty in expressing themselves. These individuals may also find it difficult to understand English language presentations and materials unless bilingual accommodations are made. LEP issues aside, many Americans, regardless of their immigration status, possess limited literacy skills. A National Assessment of Adult Literacy found that 14% of the population (or over 30 million Americans) had a "Below Basic" prose literacy ability, with "Below Basic" described as possessing "no more than the most *simple* and *concrete* literacy skills."[34] Cultural differences can also interfere with communication, as different cultures have different attitudes towards making decisions, sharing information, and building relationships, among other things.[35]

Historical Issues
Some immigrant groups may inherently fear anything associated with government because their primary experience with government in their native countries was defined by repression and corruption. Thus they are reluctant to get engaged. In addition, many disadvantaged groups, both immigrant and native-born, have been historically marginalized in the political process, which has instilled in them feelings of resentment, powerlessness, and suspicion. Some communities may also remember past instances in which their voices were not heard in the planning process, and these grievances may discourage their participation.

Immigration Status
Some members of disadvantaged populations are undocumented, and they fear that involvement in the planning process will invite government scrutiny of their legal status.

Practical Considerations
On a more basic level, some individuals simply work long or irregular hours or have familial obligations which prevent them from attending the traditional public meetings that are a staple of transportation planning outreach. Practitioners can mitigate this by taking care to schedule events

at more convenient times, such as in the evening rather than the working day, and by providing child care at events. However, ultimately there is no arrangement that will suit everyone. Meeting locations may also be too far away for some individuals to travel to. This is especially true if they rely on public transportation.[36]

Distrust and Pessimism

Finally, these groups may not take advantage of engagement opportunities for the same reasons as millions of other Americans: they do not have faith in the government and do not believe their input will make any difference in the final outcome.[37]

Overcoming these barriers

There is no one-size-fits all solution to any of these problems, as they will manifest themselves in different ways depending on the region and population of concern. Practitioners must employ a variety of tactics and techniques to successfully address them.

The following recommendations are intended to help with this. While these recommendations represent a good course of action for projects of any kind concerning any sort of population, an effort has been made to demonstrate their relevance to disadvantaged populations and groups.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Know Your Audience

Description
Each community comes with its own unique set of cultural and practical considerations. This is as true for an overwhelmingly white audience in a small town as it is for a group composed of first generation immigrants in an urban area. Practitioners should recognize this and tailor their involvement efforts to take into account the unique features of their intended audience. The degree to which practitioners must customize their outreach will depend upon the group in question. For example, when conducting outreach in a rural area, customization could be as simple as not holding engagement opportunities on a Wednesday evening, as that is a popular time to attend church. But other populations may require more involved and costly accommodations. For instance, successful engagement with a group of LEP individuals may require the hiring of a translator and the production of bilingual materials, in addition to visualization materials to aid understanding. Populations may differ as to preferred venues as well. For some, city hall or a government building would be acceptable. However, undocumented individuals or those who are suspicious of government may be more receptive to events that are held in community centers or houses of worship.

In order to develop their approach, practitioners must become familiar with the needs, culture, and circumstances of the affected community. They can do this in the three ways outlined below:

Relationship Building
Practitioners should strive to build relationships with a wide variety of stakeholders and members of the affected community. These relationships can be the lifeblood of a good public engagement effort. It is through ongoing conversations with these various stakeholders and community members that the practitioner can learn the most about the targeted community. The practitioner can gain intimate knowledge into the culture and history of the group in question, identify additional community groups or members who could be of use, and learn about important community institutions and events that could serve as good venues for engagement. Beyond serving as sources of information, these relationships can be leveraged during the engagement process to inform and directly connect with the community.[38]

Building these valuable, trust-based relationships takes time, which is why practitioners should begin doing this as soon as possible in the project life cycle. This is especially true when dealing with cultures that place more value on establishing relationships. “For example, Asian and Hispanic cultures, it has been argued, may attach more value to developing relationships at the beginning of a shared project, placing more emphasis on task completion toward the end than European-Americans.”[39]

IDOT practitioners should re-commit themselves to building personal relationships with the communities in which they work. They should also consider if their list of contacts provides an accurate reflection of the community at large, and if the contacts they have are the ones who can best facilitate contact with disadvantaged populations. For example, a practitioner could have an excellent knowledge of, and rapport with, local officials and fellow IDOT employees. However, that same practitioner may be lacking when it comes to social service agencies, local clubs and organizations, and faith communities—all organizations that can provide gateways to disadvantaged populations.

The practitioner should strive to develop a network of relationships that is as rich and diverse and the communities in which they operate. To do this successfully will require an ongoing commitment on the part of the practitioner; community engagement should be seen as less of a project specific endeavor and more as a continuous process directed towards building long-term working relationships between IDOT, its practitioners, and the community at-large.

Field Visits

There is no substitute for first-hand experience, and if possible, practitioners should undertake field visits to the affected area in advance of beginning the public involvement process in earnest. As Aimen and Morris note, field visits give the practitioner the chance to discern the physical and socioeconomic characteristics of a community. They represent "an opportunity to hear the languages spoken on the street, experience some of the everyday transportation problems, notice the age of cars parked in residential driveways, see who works the second-shift, identify areas where people gather, and examine the absence or presence of foot traffic on the street."[40] Practitioners can also use these visits as opportunities to engage with everyday citizens, business owners, local officials, and community leaders.

Research

Practitioners can learn a great deal about a given community without leaving their office. Online research can yield important data on the ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of the area and help identify organizations and institutions—such as nonprofits, social service providers, places of worship, notable businesses—that may be of interest. Practitioners may also want to consult with other colleagues within the agency as to what kind of past experience the agency has had working with the community in question or search agency archives for any relevant documents concerning the region and projects within it.

Issues and Considerations

It takes time to build the knowledge and connections necessary to execute a quality public engagement effort, and this is undoubtedly the biggest cost associated with this recommendation. This is all the more reason to begin this process as early as possible, and, indeed, to re-conceptualize it as an ongoing requirement of the job.

In the interest of accomplishing as much as possible during a meeting with a stakeholder or community leader, practitioners should come with a prepared list of questions and topics to be covered. However, they should also be prepared for the conversation to veer off topic, especially during first-time meetings. Stakeholders and other attendees may bring up past unsatisfactory experiences with IDOT or other government agencies, which have no relation to the current project. To put it another way, practitioners should be ready for the interviewee to vent. In response to this, they should stress their willingness to listen and their commitment to the engagement process. While somewhat unpleasant, these experiences are valuable in that they enable practitioners to understand the project in the context of the community. And they provide lessons on how to avoid making the same mistakes.

Practitioners may also be unable to answer certain stakeholder questions or concerns, as some project details may not be finalized as of the meeting date. The practitioner should carefully note these questions and concerns and follow up with the person who raised them when they are able. This will help build trust and aid in stakeholder understanding.

Another cost to be considered is travel. For meetings in remote areas, it might be wise for practitioners to schedule multiple meetings on a single date so as to eliminate the need for multiple trips. Practitioners could also utilize phone conversations (or even email). This is especially useful in relationship maintenance. However, face-to-face contact is the most valuable.

If the practitioner does not take the time to do their homework on a specific population, either through conversations with stakeholders or more traditional online research, they run the risk of alienating their target audience or not engaging them at all. For example, Weeks cites an incident in which employees from a state department of transportation presented to church congregations from the main pulpit, a place reserved for the ministry. They received a poor reception until they realized their mistake and began presenting from other platforms.[41]

Contexts Where Appropriate

The amount of research, both first-hand and traditional, that a practitioner will have to perform on a given area or population will depend upon their existing level of knowledge. If the practitioner's background itself mirrors the target population or the practitioner already has a great deal of experience working in the community, then minimal research may be required.

It is especially important for practitioners to build relationships with leaders within disadvantaged communities or with those who have direct access to them (such as social service agency employees), as these populations are more difficult to reach and are more likely to be suspicious of or resistant to outreach efforts. Not only can these leaders provide the practitioner with unique insight into how best to engage with these populations, they can also serve as "legitimizers" of the process and, ultimately, champions of the project within the given community.

No matter where practitioners' efforts happen to fall on the IAP2 Spectrum, taking the time to "know your audience" is a crucial step to executing an effective public engagement effort. Information gleaned from these activities can help practitioners select the best engagement method to use, lead to a more fruitful conversation with the affected community, and build responsive, trust-based relationships with community members.

Example: Focus Groups to Explore the Needs of Immigrant Populations in Minnesota
A joint effort between the Minnesota Department of Transportation and researchers from the University of Minnesota's State and Local Policy Program (SLPP) led to a series of statewide focus groups on the transportation needs and habits of the state's burgeoning immigrant population.

Researchers began the project by using Census data to identify both urban and rural areas with large concentrations of one or all of the following immigrant groups: Hispanic, Somali, and Hmong. They then made use of local resources by approaching these populations through community centers and English language classes—locations where these groups felt comfortable. Immigration concerns and past experience made these populations especially suspicious of government, so the researchers had to make it clear that they were not government representatives and that their input would be kept confidential. They relied on a trusted community contact to deliver the formal invitation to participate, which was produced in three languages.

Once participants were recruited, community groups with first-hand knowledge of these populations helped the researchers tailor their engagement practices to specifically address the characteristics of each group. For example "for the Minneapolis Somali focus groups, SLPP separated the men and women into two rooms based on the recommendation of a Somali social organization with whom they partnered and who advised that Somali women tended to defer to the opinion of males in group discussions."[42]

Each focus group was roughly two hours long and had an attendance of 10-20 individuals. Over a period of five months, seven focus groups were held across the state in rural towns and the Twin Cities region. These ethnic populations were kept separate from one another in the interest of gathering community-specific information.

Using the input gained from participants, researchers were ultimately able to draft a report on the unique transportation needs and attitudes of these often overlooked groups, increasing MnDOT's knowledge of these populations. In addition to identifying increased investment in public transit and car-sharing programs as potential areas of investment, the study also resulted in the extension of a bus line to a meatpacking plant in rural Minnesota where many Somali immigrants were employed, something officials would not have done had they not undertaken this study.

It should be noted that the costs of this project were fairly significant, being estimated at $16,500, "not counting administration or overhead costs or other fringe benefits applied to labor, or the tuition waiver" [for a UM research assistant].[43] Nevertheless this effort has increased the use of focus groups by MnDOT and the department has partnered with SLPP researchers since then on different transportation-related topics.

Recommendation #2: Use Existing Community Resources

Description
The most efficient way to go about doing public engagement is to tap into the community leaders, networks, and institutions that already exist and have prominence within the affected community.

This recommendation, though broad, is meant to remind practitioners that they are not starting from zero with each project. Each community or region offers its own set of resources that can allow practitioners to learn about, connect, and engage with its inhabitants. These resources can come in many forms: elected officials, business owners and major employers, local activists, community groups, schools and colleges, churches and faith-based organizations, social service agencies, community centers and gathering places—essentially, any person or institution that ties a community together can serve as a means of achieving community engagement.

Prominent members of the affected community can connect practitioners with organizations that may be interested in participating in the engagement process, such as social service agencies, advocacy organizations, and faith communities. In fact, some of these individuals may have direct connections with these groups either through membership (a church congregant, for example) or employment (the head of a social service agency which serves disadvantaged populations). They may also be able to identify individual community members who could be of use to the project team. For example, one interview subject recounted a story in which his team had enlisted a local mayor to select and personally recruit a member of the public to participate in a working group. The team had previously had trouble identifying a suitable group member from the rural region, which was sparsely populated and had shown little interest in earlier engagement opportunities.

Utilizing trusted and well-known community leaders lends the agency's activities credibility within the affected community. Some agencies have recognized this and have gone as far as hiring local leaders and other community members to help them perform outreach. In the San Antonio area, the local MPO recruited a prominent community member to serve as a "beacon," a community ambassador, to help them publicize and facilitate events within that region's African American community. Similarly, the Twin Cities' Metro Transit made use of "contracted community organizers on community engagement in the transit study process. The transit district employed organizers as 'trusted advocates' to gather data from transit riders, which was more effective than if staff from the district had led the outreach themselves."[44] In general, this approach lends itself well to communicating information by word-of-mouth, an approach that is "especially effective with traditionally underserved populations because the ambassador or beacon is someone they know and trust to give them good advice. The relationships are already established and people rely on the network to give them good information."[45]

On a related note, the public seems to be more receptive to communications from familiar local officials and legislators than they are from "outside" parties. Anecdotal evidence gleaned through interviews indicates that letters from local officials and legislators are a more effective means of informing the public and spurring them to participate in the process than letters from IDOT itself.

This echoes findings from a study on Chicago's participatory budgeting process that showed newsletters from aldermen to be one of the most effective ways of publicizing engagement opportunities, especially among very low income (less than $14,999) individuals.[46]

Some leaders (the head of the local Chamber of Commerce or the pastor at a prominent church, to name two examples) can provide practitioners with entry into the meetings and gatherings of existing community groups. Indeed, both literature and interviews indicate that these events can provide practitioners with some of the best opportunities to speak with engaged members of the community. Rather than commit to the time and expense of holding its own meetings, IDOT can efficiently reach community members in places where groups are already formally meeting.

Similarly, existing, well-known community institutions and gathering places are also valuable resources, as they provide practitioners with the opportunity to interact with community members in places where they are comfortable and are already congregating. This technique is effective in getting the involvement of community members who might not otherwise be engaged in civic life. It could involve outreach in places like the public library, a community center, a grocery store or other locations where the target population is currently meeting.[47]

Issues and Considerations

The main disadvantage of relying on existing community resources is that practitioners run the risk of not reaching members of the community who may not be tapped into existing networks or involved more generally in community life. Some of these people are members of the same disadvantaged populations that are of such interest to practitioners. This can be somewhat mitigated if practitioners reach out specifically to organizations and agencies that maintain direct connections to these populations. Practitioners should also utilize a variety of community resources and outreach methods.[48] If a member of the public cannot be reached at an open house, perhaps they can be reached at a church meeting, and if not a church meeting, then perhaps a county fair.

Practitioners should also take into account the points of connection that *do* exist between disadvantaged communities and the larger community. For example, after failing to engage the local Hmong population in Marysville, CA in a bridge redevelopment project, the project manager drew upon the knowledge of local residents to identify teachers and clergy whom the Hmong trusted. These individuals were then utilized to invite members of the Hmong community to participate.[49]

Contexts Where Appropriate

Every project should, to some extent, utilize existing community resources. However, the resources used will differ greatly depending on the nature of the affected community. Some communities may already enjoy a high degree of connectedness and cohesion, and it may be relatively easy for practitioners to tap into existing networks and institutions. Others may be more fractured and more work may be required to engage residents and identify any especially committed members of the public.

It should be noted that this tactic can be used to engage individuals who would otherwise be considered isolated. For example, a church meeting or service may be the only time all week an elderly farmer ventures off his land.

This technique has application at every point along the IAP2 spectrum. Existing institutions or community gathering places can serve as sites for disseminating simple fact sheets or holding in-depth engagement exercises. And local leaders and organizations can be useful not only by publicizing project information and developments, but also by serving (or identifying those who would serve) on formal committees and advisory boards.

Example: The Use of Schools
While churches, community centers, and libraries are often cited as some of the best institutions to reach out to when performing engagement, schools can also be excellent places to disseminate information, stage events, and obtain feedback from students and parents.

Chicago's experience with participatory budgeting in 2013 demonstrates that schools can be a useful way to spread information through flyers and handouts sent home with students. In the city's 45th Ward, where this technique was used most extensively, it was found that "focused engagement through schools was highly effective at boosting turnout."[50] The Ohio DOT recommends this tactic as well and suggests that school-oriented groups (such as PTAs) would also be good targets for engagement.[51] And for planners and practitioners seeking to understand a given community, teachers and administrators can also be helpful in describing the needs and composition of their students and the surrounding area.

In addition, practitioners should not be afraid to engage students themselves in their outreach efforts. In 2008, the Georgia DOT (GDOT) administered an online survey to high school students who resided in a sparsely populated rural region of 32 counties that also had a high percentage of low-income and minority populations. To gain the schools' buy-in, the GDOT contacted the superintendents of education for each of the 32 counties as well as four independent city districts early in the project by both telephone and mail. GDOT explained their intentions with the survey, the importance of reaching populations of all kinds (including those who may not have Internet access at home), and included a copy of the questions to be asked. In order to administer the survey, the department had to accommodate a few requests from the districts. For instance, it was forbidden from requesting any personal information from respondents. It also provided paper copies of the survey (complete with prepaid return envelopes) at its own expense to districts that requested them. In the end, the department was able to gain the participation of 14 county districts and two independent districts.

By going through high schools, the department was able to reach a diverse population and successfully administer an online survey to those whose access to computer and Internet technology could otherwise be limited. By sending paper surveys home with students, the department was able to successfully reach parents as well. Over 4,400 surveys were completed using this technique. [52]

Case Study: Manchester Community College and the PICEP2 Model

Background

In 2010, with the help of a grant from the Federal Transit Administration's Public Transportation Participation Pilot Program, Professor Rebecca Townsend of Manchester Community College (MCC) in Connecticut developed a novel approach to engaging disadvantaged populations. She enlisted her own students—themselves members of the communities of interest—to perform the outreach necessary to achieve quality public engagement. Under this model, called the Partnership for Inclusive, Cost-Effective Public Participation (PICEP2), "students are taught how to conduct culturally-sensitive and locally-situated deliberative discussions in their own communities to meaningfully engage people in transit planning who are young, racial or ethnic minorities, or have low incomes."[53]

Townsend based this model on the "ethnographic" approach to studying communication, the idea that different cultures possess different styles of communication. Successful outreach depends upon a proper understanding of these differences in communication styles.[54] Because of this, it follows that "members of the networks planners need [to reach] can serve as informants; they best know the intangible ways of speaking that will enable participation."[55] In other words, because the students who conducted the outreach effort were also members of the populations they were engaging, they "spoke the same language" as their audience. In an analysis of the project, Townsend concluded that target populations' "distinct ways of speaking" must be recognized by planners and incorporated into the engagement process.[56]

This project was done to aid the Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG)—the planning organization of the Greater Hartford region—in its transit needs assessment effort. In 2011 it received a Core Values Award from the International Association for Public Participation. Townsend was also honored by the White House as a "Champion of Change for Transportation Innovation" in 2012.

Process

Though the students already possessed cultural and linguistic fluency by virtue of their background, there was a need for a formal training and orientation process. Students were given a briefing on transportation issues by a series of speakers from government and industry. They also assisted in developing a discussion guide and questionnaire for use during the engagement sessions. Additionally, students reviewed ethical guidelines and the IAP2 Code of Ethics for Public Participation Practitioners before initiating any public engagement.

In the next phase of the project, students were divided into teams based on members' geographic proximity to one another. To find participants, students leveraged their personal connections to existing community groups and were also assigned groups by their professor. These groups included businesses, religious institutions, homeless shelters, and clubs. For the actual engagement component of the project, students convened and facilitated 30-60 minute discussions on residents' public transportation needs and experiences, administering a questionnaire and documenting their findings in notes and audio recordings. In many cases, these research teams visited these groups at the times and places they were already meeting, making it easier for participants to take part in the engagement process.

Results

The first PICEP2 program utilized 95 students who ultimately met with 29 different community groups. These group participants skewed younger (the mean age was 28), most likely due to the relative youth of the student practitioners themselves. Participants were racially and ethnically diverse: 59 percent of participants described themselves as non-white and 16 percent did not speak English at home. Most participants had minimal experience in civic engagement and less than 10 percent had ever attended a public meeting. Thus the student practitioners successfully engaged a diverse group of stakeholders who were often left out of the planning process.

Engagement session participants were surprised to find themselves consulted on transportation issues, as they viewed themselves as having little power. And they were impressed by the students' willingness to meet them at their preferred meeting locations, as it demonstrated respect for their time and a willingness to listen. Students' cultural fluency, as well as their enthusiasm for the work, elicited positive reactions among participants, many of whom had never been a part of such an effort. Ultimately, the project resulted in the collection of a great deal of frank commentary and feedback, an outcome facilitated by the open atmosphere created by the students and the familiar settings in which outreach took place.

To conclude the project, the students' findings were presented to an audience of local government representatives, community members, transit officials, and planners from the Capitol Region Council of Governments of the Greater Hartford region. CRCOG was intrigued and impressed with the findings, noting that the project "had resulted in new public outreach methodologies" [and provided] "useful input from individuals (especially lower income and minority residents) that [CRCOG] would traditionally have difficulty reaching."[57][58] Even after the initial grant expired, CRCOG continued to work with Townsend and MCC up until 2012, giving students a key role in performing outreach in the Manchester area for a Transportation Enhancement Study. In its annual public outreach assessment for that year, CRCOG concluded that the program had been used "to great effect, in terms of numbers of participants and volume of suggestions received."[59] The program also further confirmed to CRCOG the need to customize outreach efforts and work with existing community groups.

It should be noted that this project laid the foundation for a working relationship between the school and the MPO, which now holds events on campus on a semi-regular basis.

Implications and Usage

Community college students are especially good candidates for performing public engagement because they are rooted in the communities they are intended to serve and they are less transient than students at most universities and colleges. (85% of the students who graduate from

Manchester remain in Connecticut after they graduate.) Their existing personal and cultural connections to the various communities in the area, many of which are considered disadvantaged, allow them to convene successful engagement sessions, despite their lack of formal experience. This project was a particularly good fit for MCC, as many of its programs included a service learning or community engagement component. Though students in public speaking and communication classes were enlisted for this project, it is easy to imagine other classes and areas of study—political science, public administration, urban planning—that could accommodate this program.

To conclude, it is worth noting that the PICEP2 is very inexpensive. In terms of labor, it only requires "several hours of student research and faculty time in setting up the project" (Townsend "Mapping Routes to Our Roots" 234) and the actual dollar cost is less than $1000. While this method may not be appropriate in all contexts, Townsend's experience demonstrates that the students and faculty of these institutions may be untapped resources. This is underscored by the fact that there are over 1,000 community colleges in the U.S., with nearly 50 schools across the state of Illinois.

Potential Issues

Though the PICEP2 project was largely viewed as a success, neither Townsend nor her students were told exactly what their findings would be used for and how they would inform the MPO's actions. This is something that any future practitioner should avoid, as any participant in a public engagement opportunity should have a clear understanding of how their input will be used in the planning process.

It may be difficult for practitioners to identify a suitable educator to implement this technique. Townsend was uniquely qualified because she had previously been involved in transportation planning as a citizen representative to a regional planning commission. And as the developer of the project, she was especially committed to it. The agency will have to spend some time locating willing and geographically appropriate educators. It will also have to provide them with background training in regards to planning and transportation. Based on Townsend's experience, educators attempting this technique for the first time should expect the first iteration of this project to require much more work than the second. To develop the project initially was labor-intensive, but once the materials were prepared it was much easier to execute. To aid in the development of this technique, replication materials have been provided (see Appendices).

Recommendation #3: Perform Informal Outreach and Use Nontraditional Locations

Description

Public participation does not have to take the form of the traditional open house. Agency staff can interact with, and receive input from, the general public in a variety of everyday settings, such as shopping centers, community centers, and farmers' markets. These settings can be good places to distribute information (via displays and handouts), administer surveys, and engage in meaningful conversations with citizens. They can also be well-suited to connecting with people who are normally disengaged from the political process, especially disadvantaged populations. "For those members of the public who are not culturally familiar with the concept of the "public meeting," using non-traditional venues within their communities [provides] them with a level of comfort."[60]

While some locations well-suited to this type of outreach can be identified using online research, practitioners should also draw upon their network of local stakeholders. They should ask local stakeholders to identify important community events (local sporting events, festivals, state and county fairs) as well as local gathering places that are generally well-attended in the community. With the proper planning, these represent excellent occasions to engage the general public.

Anecdotal evidence from an internal review of projects done by the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) indicated that informal outreach was more productive than formal outreach. The formal outreach opportunities (public meetings, open forums) mostly attracted those who wished to complain, whereas the informal opportunities (maintaining a booth at community event, face-to-face meetings, visits to local businesses) resulted in higher quality feedback.[61] This is consistent with other evidence from practitioners that formal outreach events tend to attract angry or disgruntled attendees.[62]

Issues and Considerations

The main disadvantage of informal outreach is that it is not systematic. Whoever practitioners interact with or receive feedback from is just the "luck of the draw." This is problematic if the practitioner is looking to reach a specific population. However, it can be mitigated by selecting events that are located in an area with a high concentration of the population of interest or events that may have special appeal to a certain segment of the population.

There are also the costs in time and materials. While ideally staff could go to multi-day events (like fairs) for the duration, that may not be feasible. Practitioners should be somewhat strategic if they can in selecting the days they attend these events, maintaining a presence on days that are expected to draw big crowds. Weekends are most likely the best days for many events, but practitioners should not assume this. Instead, it is recommended that they consult with some of their local contacts to get their opinion on the best times for engagement and even on the best places within the event to maintain a presence. The number of staff required depends on the size of the event and the kind of presence the agency chooses to maintain (e.g. one table or kiosk; large, interactive displays; tables at scattered locations). However, as a rule, two people should be the minimum number assigned to a table. Though this kind of outreach can be labor-intensive, it should be noted that it does not necessarily need to be publicized in advance.

Participants should have the opportunity to fill out comment cards and surveys. Staff should be mindful of how participants are filling these materials out, as participants often do this incompletely or incorrectly. This is especially important when it comes to filling out demographic information. If participants do not properly fill this portion of the card out, practitioners will not be able to accurately track participants. It should be noted that staff may need to design and produce these materials to specially suit a specific purpose or project, which would be an added expense.

The face-to-face conversations between staff and the public could be invaluable. However, conversations could veer off topic from the issue the practitioner is trying to get feedback on. Practitioners should be aware of the importance of staying "on-point" and obtaining the kind of input they need. To that end, they should attempt to document their conversations with the public, even if it is just brief note-taking. They should also make it a priority to get as many members of the general public as possible to provide their name and contact information.

Contexts Where Appropriate

Informal outreach and the use of nontraditional settings are tactics that can be used in every type of geographic context, from urban to suburban to rural. It is especially applicable in rural settings, as it is difficult to find large concentrations of people in these areas. Special occasions such as state and county fairs and local festivals can attract elderly or geographically isolated citizens who do not normally venture too far from their homes. This provides a rare occasion to connect with these people face-to-face. Again, practitioners must draw upon local knowledge to select the best venue.

These techniques can also be useful in engaging racial and ethnic minorities, due to the tendency of those groups to cluster together in specific geographic areas. At locations or events within these specific areas, these disadvantaged populations will make up most or all of the attendees. As previously noted, some members of disadvantaged populations are reluctant to involve themselves in anything associated with government. Engagement opportunities in nontraditional locations allow these populations to voice their opinions in an environment that is nonthreatening to them.

In the context of the IAP2 spectrum, informal outreach is located in the "Inform" and "Consult" stages. It is well-suited to imparting a lot of information to the public in the form of brochures, displays, and face-to-face conversations. It is also a means to obtain feedback from the public in the form of written and oral comments. However, by its nature it does not lend itself to in-depth participation over a long period of time.

Example: Georgia Department of Transportation Uses Local Gathering Places to Engage Community Members

In an effort to improve the pedestrian safety of the Buford Highway outside Atlanta, Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) and DeKalb County were able to obtain invaluable information from the surrounding Hispanic community by performing public outreach inside popular shopping centers. The shopping centers, the Mercado del Pueblo and the Plaza Fiesta Mall, were identified by way of interviews with local stakeholders and selected based on their input.

At the Mercado del Pueblos shopping center, outreach was performed between 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. on a Sunday, a time period suggested by mall staff. The team was allotted a space in a high traffic area (the bakery) from which to administer surveys. In addition, four interpreters were present to engage shoppers. This effort resulted in 168 completed surveys.

A similar but larger outreach effort took place at the Plaza Fiesta Mall. Surveys were conducted on a Sunday between 4:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m., which was again done at the suggestion of mall representatives. Shoppers were able to complete surveys (in English or Spanish) at four tables set up around the mall. In addition, eight interpreters who were provided by the mall moved around and engaged shoppers face-to-face. In total, 345 surveys were completed this way. Practitioners at both locations provided giveaway items such as balloons and small soccer balls to draw traffic to their tables.

This effort took place in 2006, when tensions in the immigration debate were high. Locally, some politicians called for increased enforcement of immigration laws. "These actions led to heightened anxiety among residents and created other public involvement challenges. Residents expressed reluctance to attend meetings assuming these were U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement stings, and business owners/operators became wary of opening their doors to strangers for fear they were Internal Revenue Service agents."[63]

These political tensions, as well as practical considerations regarding linguistic and cultural differences (the area also contained concentrations of Korean, Vietnamese, and Chinese immigrants), caused the project team to abandon their original plan to put on a series of structured design charrettes. It was therefore decided that less formal outreach in casual locations was crucial to engaging those people who would normally be resistant or suspicious of such efforts in more traditional settings.

Recommendation #4: Match Engagement Method to Goal and Context

Description
The Environmental Protection Agency, in its online *Public Participation Guide*, stresses the importance of the intentional selection of public participation tactics and tools. Practitioners must select the level of public participation that is desirable and feasible for a given project, being careful not to overcommit themselves to “a level higher than the decision-makers are willing or able to engage stakeholders.” The selected level of participation should then inform practitioners’ thinking in regards to what tools or methods to use.

From the EPA:

> Don’t always assume a public meeting is appropriate simply because that’s what you’re accustomed to doing. Rather, think carefully about the purpose of the participation event and select the tool based on that purpose and the attributes of your particular situation. A low-trust situation may call for an entirely different tool than one where trust is abundant. Similarly, the number of involved stakeholders or participants and where you are in the decision process will also influence your choice of tools.

From interviews, it was discovered that IDOT’s general public outreach technique was the open house or public meeting. These techniques do have their virtues, but are only two of many available to practitioners. What is more, they are not suited to every occasion. For example, if a practitioner is looking to obtain in-depth feedback from a wide array of participants, a breakout group is an excellent technique to use. It is also a good way to disperse any organized and particularly vocal opposition. Similarly, if a practitioner is looking to engage and educate an audience that has very limited knowledge of planning concepts, budgets, and other issues related to transportation decision-making, a more interactive exercise, such as a game, might be appropriate.[64]

While there are many engagement techniques out there, the practitioner need not use anything overly elaborate. Ultimately the engagement process is about having a conversation with the public. The depth, nature, and influence of that conversation is up for the practitioner to decide.

Issues and Considerations
In selecting engagement techniques, the practitioner faces many different constraints and considerations. Costs, in both money and staff time, should be taken into account, as should the timeline of the project. The practitioner also needs to consider the volume and nature of the feedback sought. If the practitioner desires to obtain citizen feedback on the agency’s transportation priorities, that can be done with a dot exercise at a state fair.[65] But a location-specific project that affects many different stakeholders, especially those from disadvantaged populations, is going to require many face-to-face meetings between the practitioner and various community groups and leaders.

Practitioners should also consider their audience. For rural populations, smaller and more informal meetings are suggested. This helps defuse suspicions of “outsiders” coming in and it also puts people at ease, especially those who have never attended an engagement opportunity.[66] In holding a meeting for a resurfacing project in a rural area, the Indiana DOT discovered that more intimate techniques were especially useful for this population:

> It started the meeting as an open forum, but found that very few residents spoke up. In an attempt to generate conversation, they placed a staffer and a few residents at different tables. The Indiana DOT discovered that because the residents knew each other, they were uncomfortable speaking up in front of each other. Once the public was divided into smaller groups, they became comfortable, began talking to each other and the DOT, and provided the DOT with valuable information.[67]

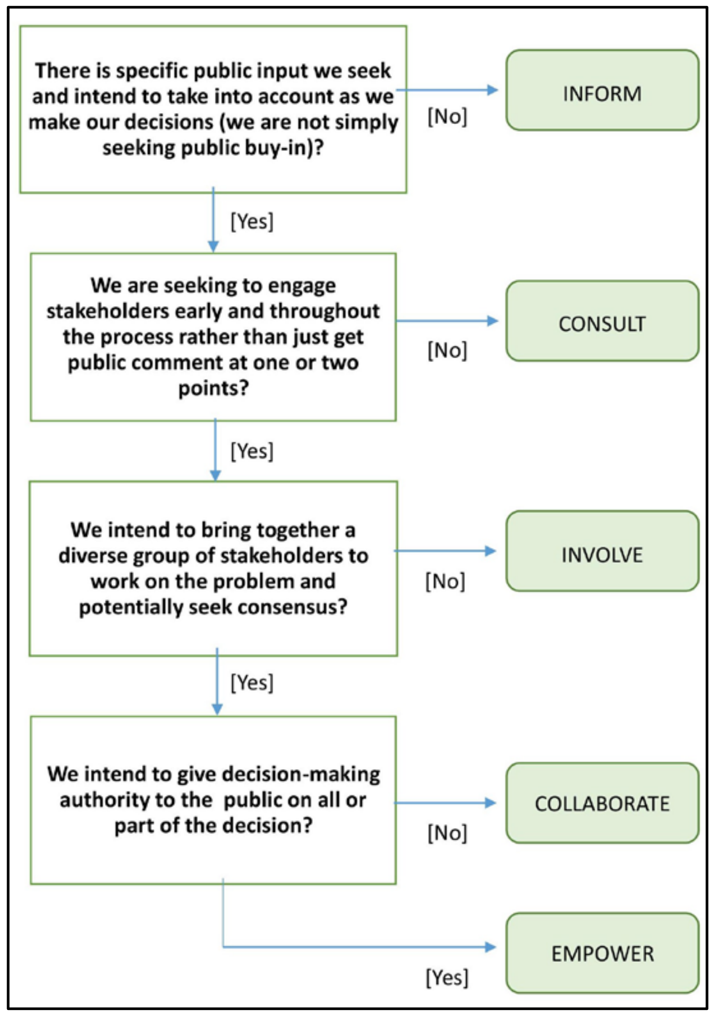
When dealing with an audience that possesses little technical knowledge or does not speak English fluently, the practitioner should be sure to employ a high level of visualization to aid understanding.

Practitioners should also remember that they do not need to choose just one outreach technique. In fact, good engagement efforts include multiple techniques of varying levels of "thinness" and "thickness" to obtain feedback representative of the community at large.

Contexts Where Appropriate

The intentional selection of engagement techniques is something that should be practiced with every project. The IAP2 Spectrum can be especially helpful here, as it provides a framework for practitioners to think about what kind of technique is needed depending on their aims. In selecting techniques, practitioners should ask themselves to what extent they are looking to bring the public into the decision-making process (see graphic).

Once practitioners identify which stage of the spectrum is most appropriate for their purposes, they can select from the engagement tools associated with that specific stage. As noted above, audience characteristics should also play a role in determining what tool to use.



(Source: "Public Participation Guide: Process Planning." *EPA.* Environmental Protection Agency, n.d. Web. 15 June 2016.)

Example: Community Planning Organization of Southwest Idaho (COMPASS) and the Shift to Informal Engagement

Seeking to overhaul its public participation practices to reach a wider cross-section of the public, the Community Planning Organization of Southwest Idaho (COMPASS) adopted a more informal, intimate approach to engagement. Through a series of focus groups held in the mid-2000s, the MPO learned that there were a host of factors which discouraged members of the public from participating in the engagement process. Focus group participants revealed that they were intimidated by the standard participation opportunities and did not wish to speak in front of large audiences. It was also discovered that the elderly disliked evening meetings, non-native English speakers were uncomfortable speaking to public officials, and that transit-dependent populations still found it difficult to attend events, even if they were centrally located.

In light of these findings, for their 2006 and 2010 updates to their Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) *Communities in Motion*, COMPASS shifted from holding a few large-scale, formal events to convening many small, informal ones including focus groups, "Community Cafes," and "Meeting-in-a-Bag" events. Community Cafes were held in local coffee shops in the early evening, near public transit if possible. Members of the public were invited to speak with staff and give them feedback on the LRTP. "COMPASS found that Community Cafés could be much more effective than large public meetings. The advantage of the Community Cafés and other small-group formats was their intimate size and lack of formality."[68]

"Meeting-in-a-Bag" kits were distributed to volunteer hosts who were recruited through a mix of community events, press releases, and online resources. The hosts convened meetings in a variety of locations, including community centers, places of employment, and their own homes. The materials within the bag contained everything needed to hold a meeting, including "maps, draft plans, comment forms, host instructions, DVDs [and] markers."[69] Hosts used these materials to generate discussion and commentary, which they recorded and then passed onto the MPO. This tactic was used specifically to increase convenience for participants and to reach disadvantaged populations. In some instances, "Meeting-in-a-Bag" gatherings were held in tandem with existing events, such as a church dinner for low-income or homeless individuals.

In a further effort to involve disadvantaged groups, COMPASS held a series of focus groups by partnering with a variety of organizations such as the American Association of Retired Persons, church groups, and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC Program). The MPO met these groups at the times and places at which they were already meeting and thus spared themselves from having to plan and publicize meetings of their own.

The MPO was ultimately satisfied with the results of these techniques and felt that they successfully brought new individuals into the process who had otherwise been unheard or marginalized. While this approach was more successful than their previous efforts, it did come at some cost. Scheduling and planning the many events was time-consuming for staff, as was identifying and assisting "Meeting-in-a-Bag" volunteers. The direct costs of these techniques, though, was relatively low. "For the 50 'Meeting-in-a-Bag' meetings held in the spring of 2010 for the *Communities in Motion* plan update, the direct cost was $5,000 including bags, materials, and advertising."[70]

Recommendation #5: Enhance Staff Capabilities through Training

Description

In its 2012 report, *Update on State of the Practice: Public Involvement in the 21st Century,* the Transportation Research Board's Committee on Public Involvement identifies a lack of training as one of the three major shifts affecting public involvement today.[71] The committee flagged this issue in a previous report in the year 2000, and the situation has not improved:

> [In fact] 60 percent of the practitioners surveyed [in 2012] continue to indicate a lack of trained staff continues to be an obstacle to conducting successful public involvement programs. There appear to be several reasons for this lack of trained staff including, the limited practical experience and/or academic background of those coming into the profession, the retirement of baby boomers who came into the profession when advocacy planning was at its peak, the assumption that technology can supplant face-to-face connections, and the erratic and limited availability of available training courses.[72]

Two kinds of training are of special concern here: public engagement/facilitation training and cultural competency training. Public engagement training teaches practitioners about the importance of public engagement, the ideas underlying it, and some of the practical techniques associated with it. Cultural competency training focuses on improving practitioners' effectiveness in working across cultures. "Cultural competency training starts from the assumption that there is a body of knowledge and practice that agencies and individuals should strive to possess to better perform their work in a diverse and changing society."[73]

Cultural competency training can involve role-playing and be participatory in nature. Training could focus on how to interact with cultures of all kinds or just a specific culture. In the latter case, it may be helpful for practitioners to partner with community leaders or groups from the targeted culture itself. This kind of training has been done by other governmental agencies, including social service agencies and police departments.

The two kinds of training are not mutually exclusive, as there could be specialized facilitation training that focuses on underserved populations. An outside organization, such as the Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement at UIC, could be consulted to develop such a training in the future.

Issues and Considerations

Training is not a cure-all, and it is ultimately "limited in its ability to influence an agency by a number of constraining factors, including staff turnover, the need for sustained leadership support, and the continuing need for resources to disseminate and implement training principles."[74] In other words, training takes a major commitment on the part of staff and leadership in order to be effective. As can be seen in the below example, however, training can be strategically employed for certain one-time projects, and its lessons and principles can be applied to other projects and contexts.

One of the major drawbacks of public involvement training is cost, which Aimen and Morris estimate at $1000-$1500 per participant, plus staff time.[75] If possible, practitioners could pool their resources with another organization to share the expense. Another way to manage costs would be for practitioners to be especially selective about who to enroll in such training programs, enrolling only the staff member who has or will have the most responsibility for public engagement. And those who attend such training could then be invited to share what they learned with other agency employees upon their return, perhaps even producing a formal (albeit abbreviated) presentation for their colleagues. Training webinars could also be developed internally and be made available to staff for later viewing.

Training is of course aimed at individuals, but proper knowledge sharing could spread the benefits organization-wide. Indeed, if the organization as a whole begins to see the value of training and internalize its lessons, this could safeguard the program from changes in staff and/or leadership. The impression gained from interviews was that IDOT does have a robust training program for technical issues, but the public engagement component is not as strong as it could be. At the same time, it was also indicated that there are indeed resources and opportunities for enrichment, but it is up to the individual employee to take advantage of them. Perhaps a greater emphasis from leadership on training or even the implementation of training requirements could boost participation in programs already offered.

Contexts Where Appropriate

As can be seen from the below example, specific disputes can prompt the establishment of training programs. In the case of Arizona, the training they embraced was of a more general form of public involvement training and not necessarily one that focused on cultural competency.

All practitioners should understand the importance of public engagement and some of the key techniques associated with it. However, a practitioner working in an overwhelmingly white rural area and a practitioner working in a majority-minority urban area should not necessarily be using the same techniques or conducting themselves in the same way. If the practitioner shares a previous working knowledge of the targeted population or comes from a similar background, they will be less likely to need cultural competency training.

Good training can assist practitioners in better implementing techniques associated with the entire IAP2 Spectrum. And as is mentioned below, IAP2 offers public involvement training oriented specifically around their Spectrum and Core Values.

Example: The Arizona Department of Transportation and the Role of Training in Developing a Quality Engagement Effort

The Arizona DOT provides a good example of the potential usefulness of employee training programs. After a decade of conflict regarding the widening of Highway 179 in Sedona, the agency realized that its current approach to public engagement was not getting it any closer to realizing the project. To more effectively inform the public, incorporate its ideas, and deal with opposition, the agency put over a dozen project managers and engineers through a five-day course that was developed and administered by the IAP2.

The training, which was divided into three modules—"Planning," "Communications," and "Techniques"—was interactive and designed to stimulate dialogue between training staff and participants. Though it was not specifically designed for the Arizona project, participants were able to focus in on techniques and issues related to the project through their active participation.

Following the training, ADOT staff opened a community field office and revised its participation plan to make it more collaborative. The agency also put on a series of design charrettes, for which staff received special training through the National Charrette Institute. As a result of this shift, the department was able to effectively engage the public and finally succeeded in completing a long-desired highway widening project that had been previously stymied by a lack of public support. ADOT was able to incorporate residents' desire to maintain the natural beauty of the area, widening and renovating the two-lane highway to make it safer, while abandoning plans for a standard four-lane highway. Specific resident suggestions were also incorporated, including roundabouts and designated pull-outs for taking photographs.

Though the project was successful, it should be noted that there were there were some costs associated with it. The five-day IAP2 training was $1,200 to $1,750 per person, which does not take into account the cost of taking away staff from their normal duties. Another fact worth mentioning is that agencies entered a period of budget cutbacks shortly after this project was completed, making it more difficult to maintain staff training programs. This demonstrates both the precariousness of training programs and the need to build in-house expertise among staff, as experienced, well-trained staff are able to convene trainings of their own.

Recommendation #6: Build Institutional Memory through Knowledge Management

Description

IDOT already has many employees who are experienced and knowledgeable when it comes to public involvement, but the benefits of their expertise are not easily available to staff statewide. Good knowledge management can be helpful with this, as it allows the agency to compile lessons from its own experiences and organize the findings in such a way as to make them readily accessible to staff.

From interviews, it was revealed that IDOT is indeed moving to establish a centralized knowledge-sharing resource. This is a promising development. Ideally, the agency could use this to catalogue and share best practices and also record detailed contact and background information on stakeholders and other participants. One useful action would be to build a database or library of case studies or debrief reports evaluating the level of success of each project. The documents could describe what kind of outreach techniques were used, what kind of engagement practices were employed, and the amount and quality of the feedback received. It could also make note of any special circumstances surrounding the project and any characteristics of the region that might be helpful. To facilitate this, a template report could be developed to aid practitioners in efficiently recording this information post-project. The intentional and ongoing effort to catalogue this information could be a big help to practitioners, especially those who are inexperienced with engagement. Indeed, resources such as these could be a way to preserve the lessons learned by experienced staff who are retiring or departing.

Issues and Considerations

The usefulness of such a resource depends upon how often it is consulted and maintained by staff. If staff are not made aware of it or fail to see its value, then its potential will remain untapped. The successful establishment of a centralized repository for information related to engagement requires the long-term support of management and a willingness to formally incorporate its use into official procedures. Once staff is acclimated to its continued usage, it should enable them to save time in developing and implementing public involvement plans.

Contexts Where Appropriate

An easily accessible "toolbox" of public engagement techniques and information could be helpful in any project big or small. Ideally, over time the toolbox will grow to include cases concerning a variety of regions and populations, providing insight and guidance to practitioners statewide. As noted above, a key consideration will be the degree to which it is utilized by staff on an ongoing basis.

Example: Miami-Dade MPO and the Development of Online Resources

The Miami-Dade Metropolitan Planning Organization provides a compelling example of strong knowledge management. To keep track of its many contacts and to facilitate better communication, the MPO maintains a Public Involvement Plan (PIP) database which contains "over 1,000 businesses and organizations that the MPO's Public Involvement Office can call upon when organizing community outreach events, mailing newsletters, and for other correspondence."[76] The database is also used to record and track any comments or feedback received during engagement events.

To complement the database and provide practitioners with insights on the characteristics of the area, the MPO also developed the Transportation Outreach Planner website, which contains a wealth of information on the communities within the southeast Florida region. The "Customized Demographic Reports" tab allows practitioners to quickly access specific demographic information about any geographic area within the MPO's jurisdiction. An even more impressive tool is the list of "Community Background Reports," a collection of two to four page reports on dozens of municipalities within the Miami-Dade region. The reports briefly describe a given community's boundaries, community type (i.e., municipality or neighborhood), history, community dynamic, and business landscape. This is an excellent resource for any planner looking to get quick information on a specific city or neighborhood.

Finally, there is a "Public Outreach Strategies" library that contains two to eight page write-ups on various public outreach strategies detailing how they can be used, what demographic groups they are appropriate for, what steps are needed for each, case study examples, and a list of further resources. This website was by far one of the most practical and comprehensive online resources offered to practitioners that was encountered during the course of this research. While a project of that size is probably not feasible for IDOT at this time, it is a powerful example to aspire to.

Recommendation #7: Measure and Assess

Description
Practitioners should, as much as they are able, perform ongoing evaluation of their efforts by recording detailed information regarding their engagement activities. Some of the information that might be recorded includes: the number and variety of engagement opportunities offered; the times, dates, and locations of those opportunities; the quality and volume of feedback obtained from participants; and the costs to obtain that feedback. Where possible, practitioners should also be sure to document the demographic information of participants and their past history of engagement (for example, have they ever participated in a public meeting or community planning effort before?). The Transit Cooperative Research Program has underscored the value of these activities:

> Evaluation serves multiple purposes as a part of an overall public participation strategy. First, it provides evidence of what public involvement activities are achieving and their tangible results. Second, evaluation helps agencies know if they are attaining their stated goals. Third, it demonstrates whether or not resources have been effectively and efficiently allocated. Fourth, it gives an understanding of why outcomes occurred and the value gained through public involvement. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it identifies which elements of the program are working and which are not.[77]

The kind of information an agency may seek will be dependent upon its goals. Indeed, there should be a direct link between goals aimed for and information measured. Some aspects of performance that agencies may be interested in assessing include: "effectiveness (participation rates compared with opportunities); efficiency (participation compared with cost); quality (usefulness of the input); and impact (the result of participation on final outcomes)."[78]

IDOT currently does not do any kind of cost analysis in regards to participation. Developing a methodology for measuring cost-effectiveness can be difficult, but in light of resource constraints, it would be advisable that the agency begin to evaluate its efforts in terms of efficiency. (A real world example of cost analysis performed by the Minnesota Department of Transportation can be found in the Appendices.)

Proper evaluation will include a mix of both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Some qualitative elements can be quantified (i.e., participants express their level of satisfaction with the engagement process via a 1-5 scale), but not all. Qualitative data helps contextualize quantitative findings and ultimately enables a richer analysis. For example, if inclement weather suppresses attendance at an outdoor community event where practitioners planned to engage large numbers of the general public, this should be noted, as it will help agency staff better judge the usefulness of the event.

Issues and Considerations
Assessment carries with it its own unique set of considerations. Practitioners must be careful to properly design metrics so that they measure what they are intended to. In some ways this will involve properly identifying inputs, outputs, and outcomes. "Practitioners often experience

difficulty differentiating between [the latter two]. Outputs are the direct products and services delivered by a program or agency. Outcomes are the results of those outputs."[79] For example, in printing and distributing a paper survey, inputs would be the money and time needed to print and distribute surveys. Outputs would be number of surveys completed and collected. Outcomes could be broader in scope but might include a consideration as to what impact the survey had on the agency's actions or decision-making process. According to Morris and Fragala, more accurate measures of effectiveness "focus on outcomes such as reflecting the community characteristics and values as opposed to process issues such as the distribution of a certain number of newsletters."[80]

Another factor to take into account is the value of data collection weighed against its costs. A literature review on this subject undertaken by the Florida Department of Transportation notes:

> The relative importance of both cost-effectiveness and measurement of outcome creates a certain tension in performance measurement for public involvement. Measuring the outcome of public involvement activities typically will require agencies to engage in additional data collection activities, some of which will incur additional costs. It is important, therefore, that the cost of data collection for monitoring proposed indicators be warranted in light of the value of the information to the agency's effectiveness and that the number of indicators be limited accordingly.[81]

Practitioners also must consider how to evaluate different techniques relative to one another. To some extent, the data regarding different outreach techniques can be assessed according to the same criteria. For example, during the Minnesota GO project, all information received from the public, either via online survey, town hall meeting, or face-to-face interaction, was classified as "measured feedback." This helped MnDOT staff analyze the costs of each engagement technique. (Example: the agency's dot activity at the Minnesota State Fair netted 10,422 responses at a cost of $14,785, resulting in a $1.42 cost per measured feedback; see Appendices for more information on how MnDOT performed its analysis.)

Importantly, though, this analysis did not measure the quality or value of the technique. Not all inputs received from the public are equal in depth and meaning. Both a 20-minute conversation with a member of the public and a completed three-question survey are valuable inputs, but they are not equivalent. While they both count as measurable inputs, comparing them directly is "apples and oranges." There is no formula that can tell practitioners that a certain number of completed surveys is equal to a certain number of face-to-face interactions. The practitioner will ultimately have to use their best judgment in comparing these techniques.

Practitioners should also be mindful of who they are actually reaching with these techniques and ensure that their efforts are directed towards obtaining input from the desired populations and demographic groups. This is especially true when it comes to disadvantaged populations. The recording of demographic information where possible can be helpful in this. If practitioners monitor to what extent they are reaching disadvantaged populations, they can adjust their methods and tactics in real-time to achieve greater representation.

Contexts Where Appropriate

Assessment is appropriate for any project, big or small. For longer term projects, practitioners should plan on performing periodic assessments to gauge their progress and determine if they need to make adjustments to their public engagement efforts or reallocate resources. For shorter term projects that do not allow for that, evaluation could take place at the project's conclusion.

Evaluative practices align with the notion that public engagement is not a one-time event. Rather, it is an ongoing process. By recording this information over a long period of time, practitioners will be able to better assess the overall effectiveness of their agency's activities and make adjustments if needed. Since this is not an actual outreach technique, it has no place on the IAP2 Spectrum. However, it can help determine which techniques within the Spectrum are the most effective in terms of cost and quality.

As mentioned above, ongoing evaluation can be useful in determining if the pool of participants reflects the community at large, and so this practice has special relevance to engagement efforts involving disadvantaged populations or diverse communities.

Example: Metroplan Orlando and the Comprehensive Use of Clear Metrics

The *Public Involvement Plan* put forth by Metroplan Orlando (the MPO of the Orlando region) for its 2040 Long-Range Transportation Plan provides a good example of how objectives and measurements can be paired to enhance public involvement. The plan lists ten objectives to be achieved, divided into two categories: "Objectives for Outreach" and "Objectives for Input." For each objective, there are associated metrics, as well as a list of strategies provided. Also listed are the tools and measures which are used to evaluate it. This is illustrated with the below example (3):

Objective #2

Hold at least 30 percent of outreach events with groups either directly or indirectly representing traditionally underserved populations, including young people. (An example of indirect representation would be employees of a nonprofit organization that works with underserved populations. This group would be able to accurately convey their clients' transportation needs.)

Strategies:
- Coordinate with faith-based organizations, disability advocacy groups, senior centers, social service groups and others serving these demographics to identify potential locations for Community Conversations.
- Coordinate with schools in targeted communities to send 2040 Plan information home with students.
- Work with board and committee members to identify specific underserved groups in their communities that would benefit from transportation planning information.
- Work with local government and agency partners to identify community events targeting underserved audiences.
- Translate materials for non-English speaking or visually-impaired audiences, where appropriate.

Evaluation Measures:
Participation Log, Surveys

(Sour ... n. pag.
Metro

As can be seen from the graphic, practitioners are given clear, quantifiable goals as well as advice on how to go about achieving them and information on how performance will be measured. This provides clear guidance for the practitioner as to what they should do going forward.

Following the execution of this plan, a *Public Involvement Report* was produced, which analyzed the degree to which the MPO succeeded in its stated objectives. The results for each objective were broken down and the experience in executing the suggested strategies associated with each is described in detail. The evaluation results for "Objective 2" (above) were as follows:

> Of the 48 outreach events MetroPlan Orlando participated in, 42% (20 events) were with groups that directly or indirectly represented underserved populations. This exceeded the objective by 12%. A Transportation Superhero contest targeting elementary and middle school students yielded more than 100 creative entries on how to solve transportation issues in 2040.[82]

The authors proceed to lay out the all the strategies used by practitioners to achieve these goals Practitioners worked with various community group such as "faith-based organizations, advocacy groups, senior centers, and social service groups."[83] They also placed a special emphasis on engaging with young people of all ages, presenting before elementary and middle-school children at Boys & Girls clubs and summer camps in three different counties, and engaged them in an art-based exercise. Each objective received this same level of detailed analysis.

Case Study: Minnesota Department of Transportation: *Hear Every Voice,* Minnesota GO, and the Development of Quality Public Engagement Practices

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) can provide some lessons for IDOT in its long-term effort to improve it engagement practices. Two projects within the agency are especially instructive: the development of its *Hear Every Voice* policy document and the ongoing engagement process associated with Minnesota GO, the update to its 20-Year Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan and Minnesota State Highway Investment Plan.

Hear Every Voice

In the late 1990's, MnDOT undertook an effort to re-evaluate its public engagement practices and develop a comprehensive approach that could be used by its employees in developing and executing agency Public Involvement Plans (PIPs). The effort was informed by new federal regulations concerning public engagement, as well as a series of focus groups composed of randomly selected citizens from several Minnesota cities. The resulting policy guide, the *Hear Every Voice Handbook*, was published in 1999.

Among other things, the original handbook contains an impressive list of public involvement techniques and describes MnDOT's past experience with them. Techniques are organized according to what public involvement purpose they are meant to achieve. Practitioners who have had experience using a given technique describe how it contributed to their project and what drawbacks were associated with it. Each technique is associated with a specific practitioner, so any MnDOT employee who is interested in using, for example, a "Civic Advisory Committee," can consult with a practitioner who has used it in the past.

Hear Every Voice received widespread praise upon its initial release from government entities at the local, state, and national level. However, by the agency's own admission, the report "languished" within the agency:

> Most MnDOT employees did not realize the potential value of the handbook to their work. In hindsight, the lack of a MnDOT champion and assignment of staff responsibility within the organization marginalized the awareness and application of the handbook content. Additionally, a comprehensive deployment strategy and training program were not considered at the time.[84]

Interestingly, it was external stakeholders, not MnDOT staff, who signaled that the document was not being implemented properly. Through an annual omnibus survey sent to a random selection of Minnesota residents statewide, the department learned that the public rated its outreach practices poorly and saw the department as somewhat untrustworthy. Pressure also came from legislators, whose constituents had complained of a lack of transparency.

Public Participation Effectiveness Initiative

Recognizing this problem, in 2007 MnDOT began to revise the original handbook and initiated a campaign within the agency to educate its employees on public involvement. It also explicitly adopted the IAP2 model. The *Hear Every Voice II* initiative resulted in a new handbook crafted to "reflect the evolution of public engagement since the previous handbook edition, provide guidance and understanding of the MnDOT approach to engagement, and serve as a platform for ongoing improvement of engagement activity within the Department."[85]

Accompanying this was a comprehensive, 13-class training curriculum designed to educate MnDOT employees on how to perform public involvement and its importance in the planning process. Courses included "Stop the Pain and Increase the Gain: Public Participation and MnDOT," "Productive Advisory Groups," and "Designing as if Stakeholders Matter: Engaging Underrepresented Stakeholders."[86] These courses were offered for two years and the webinars of some are still available for viewing on MnDOT's website.

MnDOT also redesigned its website, increasing the presence of public participation efforts and opportunities. Indeed, it is easy for both citizens and government employees to locate information on MnDOT's approach to public participation, upcoming participation opportunities, and its past history in engaging citizens in planning projects. Several training webinars on performing public participation are freely available for anyone to watch. In addition, the website features a case study library on both local and national public participation projects. The educational materials freely available on the agency's website are impressive for their breadth and practicality.

The agency has also engaged in some transparent self-assessment. In 2012, it produced a comprehensive report assessing the (*HEV*) program entitled *Engaging with Hear Every Voice: Best Practices in Community Involvement.* The report identified several "lessons learned" from past MnDOT projects. It also analyzed the findings of a series of focus groups made up of both MnDOT employees and the general public.

Current Practice and Minnesota GO

Though the *HEV* overhaul created some useful resources for practitioners, the department felt that it had trouble fully operationalizing it. It is now looking to formalize its engagement practices and is in the middle of a long-term effort to create a practical set of tools and resources that can be used by staff performing engagement all over the state. Staff envision that some of these tools will take the form of one-pagers that will outline certain engagement practices, providing best practices, cost considerations, assessments of effectiveness, and other useful information. The agency hopes that this will prevent staff from having to "reinvent the wheel" every time they perform public engagement. Another plan for the long-term is for the agency to build an MnDOT-specific case study library that is regularly updated with new examples for practitioners to draw lessons from. The department also reports that they are beginning to clarify and formalize outreach duties and tasks so that each relevant staff member understands their responsibilities. All of these projects are ongoing and are long-term priorities for the department. In general, staff report that engagement is assuming greater importance in the planning process.

Currently, one of the most interesting and instructive MnDOT projects is Minnesota GO, an updating of the department's 20-Year Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan and Minnesota State Highway Investment Plan. In the context of the Minnesota GO project, the department has been a little riskier in their engagement methods, experimenting with new forms of outreach and generally employing a wider array of techniques. The department has a put a greater emphasis on going to where people already are. It has made it a priority to have a presence at community events (fairs, festivals, plays), the most prominent of which was the state fair; in this way they have gained hundreds of inputs of measurable feedback. They have also held events on the corporate campuses of major employers, utilized Facebook ads to recruit respondents to an online survey, and employed an impressively varied use of technology, among other things. In addition, they have partnered with a nonprofit organization to reach disadvantaged populations, specifically refugee and immigrant populations in the Twin Cities area. In a break from past practice, the agency has closely measured the cost of these outreach opportunities against the amount of feedback generated, allowing them to determine which techniques are most effective.

The agency also started asking for participants' demographic information where possible—something they had not done previously. This is complemented by the fact that the team engages in monthly reviews of both the quantitative and qualitative data collected. This has allowed practitioners to make adjustments to their outreach plan in a timely and responsive manner. In fact, in light of data showing that they were not reaching satisfactory numbers of members of disadvantaged population, the agency reallocated online resources and scheduled events in geographic areas that were at that point underrepresented in the process (See "Use Technology as a Complement to Outreach").

The Minnesota GO project team continues to engage in self-assessment and actually plans to use the annual omnibus survey mentioned earlier as a way to gauge public satisfaction with their efforts.

It should be noted that a lack of resources is an ongoing challenge for the department, making its efforts to determine the cost-effectiveness of each outreach method particularly worthwhile. Another perennial challenge is simply trying to find the right level of engagement for a given project. Again, good data-recording practices can aid in this, as can the development of the "toolbox" of engagement tools and resources and building a case study library. Increasing the department's institutional memory might ultimately prove to be the best solutions to these problems.

Lessons for IDOT

MnDOT, especially through its Minnesota GO project, embodies several of the recommendations within this report. The project team, among other things, deployed varied outreach techniques, used nontraditional locations, made data-driven adjustments to its activities, partnered with existing community organizations and businesses, and utilized a range of technological tools. In doing so they have provided an excellent example in how to go about strategically executing an effective, comprehensive public engagement plan.

But that is not all. The agency is also laying the groundwork for future success by focusing on several practical long-term objectives—the creation of a practitioner's "toolbox," the development of a case study library, and the formalization of engagement duties within the organization—that are intended to assist staff in mounting robust public engagement efforts in the future. The department, in both the short- and long-term, is trying to systematically achieve better engagement by learning from its own experience and turning what it has learned into actionable pieces of advice.

Recommendation #8: Use Technology as a Complement to Outreach

Description

The rise in digital technology was identified by the Transportation Research Board Committee on Public Involvement in Transportation as one of the most significant trends currently affecting public involvement. [87] Indeed, just as the Internet and smartphones affect the way individuals communicate with one another, so too do these technologies affect the way public organizations interact with the general public. Digital technology opens up new avenues for engagement and lends itself well to analysis and customization. Below are some recommendations on how best to use these new tools.

Social Media

Social media, in the form of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and more, is an increasingly prominent tool for public organizations. It can be used to inform the public about upcoming engagement opportunities, direct them to other online resources, or even solicit their input. Unsurprisingly, young people have the highest rates of social media usage (89%), while Americans over 65 years have the lowest (43%). However, use is increasing in all age groups. Interestingly, African American and Hispanic users of social media use it slightly more than white users, and they both have expressed a greater desire for the government to post more information on social media.

The civic engagement think-tank Place Matters lists several "key considerations" in regards to agencies' use of social media to engage underrepresented populations:[88]

- Many agencies or organizations that serve low income communities and communities of color use social media because they understand that many of their constituents use these tools on a daily or at least regular basis.
- However, not everyone wants to use their social media accounts for civic purposes, and it can take time and effort to cultivate a user base.
- Social media is typically most effective at driving interest and engagement when topics are at a neighborhood level (for example, if photos of a neighborhood are posted and discussed by local users).
- As with interactive websites, responsiveness of the public agency is key to the successful use of social media for outreach and engagement. Public comments made via social media can be unrealistic, unrelated to the topic at hand, or misleading and can lead to unrealistic expectations on the part of other users. Responding quickly to questions and comments and posing very specific questions can help avoid these problems.
- It can be hard to evaluate the effectiveness of social media at reaching specific populations without collecting more information. Facebook does provide some information about the users that "like" or otherwise engage with sites, such as age, gender, and geographic location.
- Synthesizing input from social media can be also difficult, but this information can be particularly useful for early identification of emerging issues.

Social media is an excellent means of disseminating information on upcoming events. It can also be used to complement the events themselves. For example, the Hillsborough County Metropolitan Planning Organization has begun holding a "Facebook 'event'" a week prior to each MPO Board meeting. The event allowed the public to comment online and then have their comments shared during the MPO Board Meeting."[89]

Some forms of social media, such as Twitter, can be adapted and customized to suit practitioners needs. In Louisville in 2013, a group of nonprofits and foundations developed a new engagement tool based around Twitter, which young people (the target audience) were already using. Before developing the tool, developers met with a group of social service agency employees who served low-income users and asked them about youth technology usage and access. Based on this feedback, developers decided not to develop a whole new standalone app. Rather, they would take advantage of an already well-known technology.

Other Online Engagement Tools

Over the past decade, many off-the-shelf online tools, such as Loomio, Google Moderator, and MindMixer (now MySidewalk), have emerged with the aim of fostering greater public engagement. "Long known as groupware in the business world, such tools now are either being adapted or purpose-built to facilitate conversation and collaboration between government and citizens with the goal of enabling democracy that is more participatory and inclusive of diverse voice."[90] Many of these tools are proprietary and come with some costs, though some are open source and free for all to use.

Visualization

Visualization techniques—videos, digital simulations, illustrations—have become popular tools for practitioners. These tools are extremely valuable, as they can powerfully illustrate ideas and concepts that might otherwise be difficult to understand. They are also useful in educating and engaging with low English proficiency populations and low literacy populations. Though these techniques are not free, "taking the time to create visuals that assist public understanding of project impacts early on can avoid costly confusion and disputes later. It is much less expensive to change plans at the conceptual phase than to spend millions of dollars to make changes at the final design or construction phase."[91]

Data

One of the great features of digital engagement is the wealth of quantitative data it can produce. As described in the below example, this data can be leveraged to determine the costs of outreach and analyze the effectiveness of outreach techniques in reaching target populations.

Issues and Considerations

Practitioners should ensure that any project or departmental websites function well on mobile phones. Sixty-eight percent of American adults own smartphones, and for some, it is their only reliable means of Internet access. A recent study from the Pew Charitable Trusts found that "7% of Americans own a smartphone but have neither traditional broadband service at home nor easily available alternatives for going online other than their cell phone" (Smith). Smartphone dependency is especially prevalent among Americans with an annual household income of less than $30,000; 13% of this population is dependent upon smartphones for Internet access. In addition, “12% of African Americans and 13% of Latinos are smartphone-dependent, compared with 4% of whites.”[92] Many members of the disadvantaged populations then, will be interacting with online resources almost solely from their smartphones.

Respondents to surveys and other online engagement opportunities may not be representative of the population as a whole. This is due to self-selection, as well as varying levels of technological access and knowledge across the population as a whole. In some situations, this can be mitigated by the use of targeted online ads or SMS surveys. Practitioners could also provide access to these online tools in a more “offline” setting, such as a kiosk at a public event that features touch-screen tablets.

If agencies want to get beyond a one-way dialogue with community members in an online setting, they should be prepared to monitor feedback regularly and in good faith. As mentioned above, good social media usage on the part of public agencies requires that these agencies be responsive to the comments and questions posted by the general public, something that can take up staff resources. Additionally, agencies also have a tendency to undervalue online input. “It's common for agencies to discount public comments when they are received on a social-media platform.”[93] Agencies should begin to see this kind of input as legitimate and, where appropriate or feasible, respond to it with the same seriousness as if it were obtained in-person at a public meeting.

Finally, practitioners should avoid the temptation to use these tools as substitutes for traditional face-to-face citizen and stakeholder interactions, which are still crucial to the engagement process. This is especially true when dealing with older or lower-income populations who have less access to these technologies or lack the skills necessary to use them effectively. A variety of online and offline outreach techniques should be used to ensure that all segments of the population are heard from one way or another.

Contexts Where Appropriate

Digital technology should play a role in every project to some degree, but it can be most extensively deployed during long-term projects. Though there are disparities in the use of and access to digital technologies, the fact remains that this technology is becoming more widespread (and more familiar to the public) by the day. Online technology could be a way to connect with individuals in areas with more dispersed populations. And on a related point, online ads can help practitioners specially target the members of the public they want to hear from the most. For example, in 2009, the Missouri DOT put an ad on MapQuest promoting online and offline town hall meetings concerning the 200-mile-long I-70 corridor. The ad, which cost less than $100, appeared every time someone planned a journey near the corridor; over 700 people took part in the online or offline meetings as a result.[94]

Digital technology, broadly considered, could be used throughout every phase of the IAP2 spectrum. However, it is especially well-suited to the “Inform” and “Consult” phases because of its ability to easily disseminate information—in the form of emails, websites, social media activity—to a wide audience instantaneously. In addition, most forms of online engagement (such as a web survey) are brief and "thin," meaning they are not designed to facilitate long-term, in-depth dialogue. For practitioners looking to develop strong relationships with citizens and stakeholders, digital engagement opportunities should be supplemented with offline events that allow for face-to-face communication.[95]

Example: MnDOT and Minnesota GO

The Minnesota Department of Transportation's revision of its Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan, called the Minnesota GO project, provides an excellent example of a smart and comprehensive use of technology to aid public engagement. In this project, which is ongoing, the department has used technology to complement external engagement and improve the efficiency of its activities in real-time.

Website: The team developed a sophisticated and aesthetically pleasing website capable of hosting surveys and integrated with social media. The website provides project information and allows users to take part in mini-surveys, letting them see the results in real-time. It also contains a very easy to use calendar of events and a portal that allows interested groups to request in-person presentations. For several months, the site employed the online engagement tool MetroQuest to gauge public opinion on different investment scenarios. MnDOT also put on an online open house, providing a digital alternative to the traditional offline open house events which were occurring concurrently around the state. Importantly, the site is both mobile-friendly and ADA-accessible.

The team has closely tracked website activity throughout the project, which has given it insight into how the website is used and how cost effective it is. As of March 2016, it has discovered that 85% of usage came from desktop computers while the other 15% was from mobile phones. It has also determined that it costs $5 to generate a unique visitor and $1.14 to generate a visit.

Social media: MnDOT's social media activity strategy was carried out through Minnesota GO's own Facebook and Twitter profiles, with occasional related posts put out through MnDOT's own social media accounts. Posts were made semi-weekly for the purposes of "driving traffic to the project website for more information and educational materials, promoting surveys and other feedback opportunities and interacting with followers to gain input directly through Twitter."[96]

Complementing its use of social media, the department also ran four rounds of targeted Facebook ads, with the first rounds intended to promote the use of online engagement tools and the final round used to promote open house events. These ads were especially valuable because they were relatively cost effective and could be used to target specific demographics. Each round was analyzed in terms of cost, number of clicks, demographics of participants, effectiveness of images used, etc. The results of previous rounds informed the approach for future rounds. MnDOT received 357 total responses at an estimated cost of $4,946, giving them a "per measured feedback" cost of $13.86. The ads were the second most-cost effective way of obtaining direct, quantifiable input. (State fair interactions were the most cost effective at $1.42 per measured feedback).[97]

Email: Using Constant Contact, the Minnesota GO team is also engaged in an intentional and targeted email campaign designed especially to reach organizations and stakeholders that have been identified as representing disadvantaged populations.

Data: The team has demonstrated an appreciation for the importance of data and how it can be used to make-adjustments in real-time. The team has closely tracked the effectiveness of its engagement methods in reaching community members of all kinds and has been willing to make adjustments in its strategy when it identified a deficiency. For example, realizing that women, people of color, and Minnesotans outside major metropolitan areas were not being properly reached, the team successfully employed targeted Facebook ads to boost their participation. They also held more events across the state and shifted resources to focus specifically on underrepresented communities in the final weeks of the project phase. This data is now also being utilized to examine demographic transportation priorities and inform future engagement.
In addition, the team has used the data to determine the "price per measured feedback" of each online and offline outreach tool for this engagement project, ranking each technique by cost (See Appendices).

Conclusion

There are many compelling benefits associated with public engagement. It can confer legitimacy to a given project, empower communities, and result in policies that are more reflective of community values and attitudes. However, public engagement is, by its nature, difficult, costly, and time-consuming. And when it comes to involving disadvantaged populations in public engagement—a key concern in transportation planning—the difficulties are even more acute.

Disadvantaged populations may be intimidated by the traditional engagement process, something that is no doubt exacerbated by cultural differences and limited English ability. Past experience, in the U.S. and abroad, may have made some disadvantaged individuals suspicious or fearful of government and anything associated with it. Other more practical considerations, such as immigration status, or obligations to work or family, may also discourage participation. This is not even to mention the fact that many members of the public, disadvantaged or not, are generally apathetic when it comes to civic matters and skeptical that their input will make any difference in the process.

All of the above are serious impediments to achieving quality public engagement. These problems are multifaceted and solutions to them must be equally so.

The preceding report has been an attempt to synthesize both academic research and first-person interviews in order to develop a series of recommendations on public engagement for the Illinois Department of Transportation. The recommendations apply to both IDOT's internal processes and external engagement procedures. Once again, the recommendations are: (1) Know Your Audience, (2) Use Existing Community Resources, (3) Perform Informal Outreach and Use Nontraditional Locations, (4) Match Engagement Technique with Goal and Context, (5) Enhance Staff Capabilities through Training (6) Build Institutional Memory through Knowledge Management, (7) Measure and Assess, and (8) Use Technology to Enhance and Complement Outreach.

Individually, the recommendations represent pieces of sound advice, but they have been developed to complement and reinforce one another. They can be summarized as follows: IDOT should develop a strong understanding of the affected community through a combination of first-hand and secondary research. At the same time, practitioners should build strong local connections and leverage these to tap into already existing community organizations, institutions and resources, especially those associated with disadvantaged populations. To supplement traditional involvement opportunities and to reach disadvantaged or less engaged populations, practitioners should perform informal outreach and use nontraditional locations or special events that are frequented by community members. For all engagement opportunities, practitioners should carefully select context-appropriate outreach techniques that are aligned with their goals. As each project will yield its own insights into public engagement, the agency should take care to learn from its own experiences and to systematically catalogue the lessons learned from each project. To further develop in-house expertise, the agency should also invest in training in the areas of public involvement facilitation and cultural competency. In the interest of effectiveness and efficiency, engagement techniques should be evaluated by the extent of impact and their cost. Finally, to enhance all of these efforts, the agency should employ a range of technological tools throughout the engagement process to increase its reach and efficiency.

There are no real shortcuts to quality public engagement, but there are ways to do it better and more effectively. A continued application of these practices will help IDOT develop the in-house expertise needed to achieve public engagement that is worthwhile to practitioners and participants alike.

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End Notes

[1] For the purposes of this report, "public engagement" can be defined as the practice of involving the public in the development and planning of transportation projects. The terms "public participation," "public involvement," and "public outreach" may also be used throughout to refer roughly to the same activity.
[2] The term "practitioner" will be used throughout this report to refer to anyone within a public organization or agency who performs or is tasked with overseeing public engagement.
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