PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT TECHNIQUES FOR TRANSPORTATION DECISION-MAKING

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FOREWORD

For the transportation community, involving the public in planning and project development poses a major challenge. Many people are skeptical about whether they can truly influence the outcome of a transportation project, whether highway or transit. Others feel that transportation plans, whether at the statewide or metropolitan level, are too abstract and long-term to warrant attention. Often the public finds both metropolitan and statewide transportation improvement programs incomprehensible.

How, then, does a transportation agency grab and hold people=s interest in a project or plan, convince them that active involvement is worthwhile, and provide the means for them to have direct and meaningful impact on its decisions? This report gives agencies access to a wide variety of tools to involve the public in developing specific plans, programs, or projects through their public involvement processes.

Designing a Public Involvement Program

Developing an effective public involvement program is a strategic effort that requires assembling a selection of techniques to meet the needs of a given transportation plan, program, or project. Current Federal statutes and regulations derived largely from the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) provide general guidelines for locally developed public involvement processes and procedures. There is, however, great flexibility available to transportation agencies in developing specific public involvement programs. Every given situation is different, and each approach to a specific public involvement challenge will be unique.

Whether designing a public involvement program for statewide or metropolitan planning or for an individual transportation investment, it is wise to pursue a systematic thought process based on fundamental guidelines and following a series of steps. The five guidelines are:

1. **Acting in accord with basic democratic principles** means that public involvement is more than simply following legislation and regulations. In a democratic society, people have opportunities to debate issues, frame alternative solutions, and affect final decisions in ways that respect the roles of decision-makers. Knowledge is the basis of such participation. The public needs to know details about a plan or project to evaluate its importance or anticipated costs and benefits. Agency goals reflect community goals. Through continued interaction with the entire community, agencies build community support and, more importantly, assure that the public has the opportunity to help shape the substance of plans and projects. In summary, public agencies act as public servants.

2. **Continuous contact between agency and non-agency people throughout transportation decision-making,** from the earliest stages, as one or more transportation problems are identified, through defining purpose and need or planning principles, through the development of a range of potential solutions, and up to the decision to implement a particular solution.

3. **Use of a variety of public involvement techniques** that target different groups or individuals in different ways or target the same groups or individuals in different ways. A single, one-size-fits-all approach usually results in missing many people.

4. **Active outreach to the public** means agencies search out the public and work hard to elicit response. It is true that resources are limited, and agencies cannot make anyone participate. However, transportation agencies have repeatedly found that going after the public and changing unsuccessful approaches brings greater results.

5. **Focusing participation on decisions** rather than on conducting participation activities because they are required. Decisions include both the continuous stream of informal decisions made by agency staff and lower-level management and the less frequent formal decisions made by decision-makers. Timely agency response to ideas from the public and integration of ideas from the public into decisions shows the public that participation is worthwhile. A focus on the wide range of possible decisions gets agencies past simply offering the public passive opportunities to comment on proposals just before formal decision-making.

The following five steps form one approach to systematically setting up and implementing a public involvement program for a specific plan, program, or project.

1. **Set goals and objectives for your public involvement program.** The goals and objectives derive from the specific circumstances of a given transportation plan, program, or project. What decisions, formal or informal, are to be made? When? By whom? What public input is needed? Public input can be in the form of a consensus on a plan or a buildable project. Consensus does not mean that everyone agrees enthusiastically but that all influential groups and individuals can live with a proposal. Public input can be in the form of information used by staff or decision makers. Agencies use the objectives to form the public involvement program. The more specific the objectives, the better they will guide the involvement program.

2. **Identify the people to be reached.** The general public and those directly affected, such as abutting property owners, are some of those who should be reached. Review who is affected directly and indirectly, as well as those who have shown past interest. Look for people who do not traditionally participate, such as minorities and low-income groups. What information do they need to participate? What issues or decisions affect which specific groups or individuals?

How can their ideas be incorporated into decisions? New individuals and groups appear throughout a public involvement program; there should be a way to identify and involve them. Conceptualize the public as a collection of discrete groups, individuals, and the general public; each has different interests and different levels of energy for participation.

Usually, there two steps interact and are conducted simultaneously. In addition to brainstorming and analysis by agency staff, ask members of the public for their input on goals, objectives, and names of people who might be interested. This can be done through key person interviews (Chapter 1C of this report) or focus groups or public opinion surveys (Chapter 3B).

3. **Develop a general approach or set of general strategies** that are keyed to the goals and objectives of the involvement program and the characteristics of the target audiences. For example, if an objective is to find out what people think about a given proposal, Chapter 3B offers several techniques for eliciting viewpoints. Strategies fit the target audience in terms of what input is desired and the level of interest or education. Chapter 1B addresses the underserved, minorities, and the disabled. General approaches respect agency resources of time, money, and staff. A general approach can be visualized in terms of a principal technique; for example, a civic advisory committee (Chapter 1A). It could be visualized as a stream of different activities keyed to specific planning or project decisions. Alternatively, a general approach could be viewed as a focus on one or more public groups or interests. Be sure to check with members of the public for ideas on your general approach and whether the public to be reached finds the approach acceptable.

4. **Flesh out the approach with specific techniques.** Consult past experience for what works and does not work. Look at manuals of techniques. The techniques in this report are arranged in thematic groups. For example, Chapter 2 presents a variety of approaches for meeting face-to-face with people. Look at the table of contents and browse the groups that look interesting. Follow the marginal cross-references for related techniques. Review the ATaking Initial Steps@ sections at the end of each chapter for ideas. See ideas from agencies who have had successful experiences with public involvement. Choose techniques that fit your specific purpose and your public. target individual groups with appropriate techniques. Approaches that fit the general public often do not fit specific groups well and result in lack of attendance at meetings. Do not isolate groups; provide a way for them to come together and for the general public to review what groups have contributed. If participation lags or you need special approaches like computer simulations, look at Chapter 4.

5. **Assure that proposed strategies and techniques aid decision-making to close the loop.** Ask agency staff the following questions: Are many people participating with good ideas? Are key groups participating? Is the public getting

enough information as a basis for meaningful input? Chapter 1C has many ways to get information out to people. Are decision-makers getting adequate public information when it is needed? If a consensus is needed for decision-making, consensus-building techniques like negotiation and mediation (Chapter 3B) or collaborative task forces (Chapter 1A) may be useful. Ask participants who is missing from the participation process. How can missing participants be attracted? Do participants think discussion is full and complete? Do they think the agency is responsive? Is participation regarding? If not, why not? Continually evaluate and make mid-course corrections.

HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

This is a reference work that makes a wide variety of public involvement techniques available to transportation agencies. It includes the 14 techniques originally published in *Innovations in Public Involvement for Transportation Planning.* There are four chapters with subsections that group techniques thematically by function. Each chapter ends with a final subsection called ATaking Initial Steps,@ indicated in the margin by an Aaction@ symbol.

To assist practitioners in coordinating a full public involvement program, each technique is cross-referenced in the margin to other related techniques. The organizing principle for each technique is a series of questions, such as AWhy is it useful?@ or AWhat are the drawbacks?@ Each technique is symbolized by a visual Aicon@ that introduces the technique and is repeated in the right-hand page headers. The wide margins allow room for personal notes by users.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Howard/Stein-Hudson Associates and Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade and Douglas wish to thank the advisory panel members who donated their time to this project, providing information and reviewing the text: Philip Chisholm, Public Hearing Officer, Michigan Department of Transportation; Hank Dittmar, Executive Director, Surface Transportation Policy Project; Barbara Dougherty, Communications Program Manager, Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority; Blair Forlaw, Director of Youth and Innovative Affairs, EastBWest Gateway Regional Council; Gloria Gaines, Manager of Planning, Metropolitan Area Regional Transit Authority; Ed Hall, Transportation Specialist, U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs; Anne Haynes, Chairwoman, D.C. Citizens= Advisory Committee; Aileen Hernandes, President, Aileen Hernandes Associates; Robert Johns, Acting Director, Center for Transportation Studies; Deborah Jones, Senior Planner, Regional Transit (Sacramento); Bruce McDowell, Director of Government Policy Research, Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations; Servando M. Parapar, Director of Planning and Programs, Florida Department of Transportation; Marilyn Skolnick, Board Member, Port Authority of Allegheny County; Michael Stern, Attorney, Connecticut Fund for the Environment; Linda Thehlke, Director of Office of Public Affairs, Wisconsin Department of Transportation; William Wilkinson,

Executive Director, Bicycle Federation of America; and Kristina Younger, Senior Transportation Planner, Capital District Transportation Committee (Albany).

The researchers also wish to thank the many State departments of transportation, metropolitan planning organizations, transit agencies, and other organizations who generously provided information about their public involvement practices.

USER'S GUIDE

This volume is organized into four chapters:

Informing people through organization and outreach

Involving people face-to-face through meetings

Getting feedback from participants

Using special techniques to enhance participation

Each chapter is broken down into several subsections containing groups of public involvement techniques. In addition, each chapter has a final subsection called "Taking Initial Steps," indicated in the margin by an "action" symbol:

The basic organizing principle of each of the techniques is a series of questions, such as "Why is it useful?", "How much does it cost?", and "What are the drawbacks?" Each technique is symbolized by a visual "icon" that introduces the technique and is repeated in the right-hand page headers. To assist the practitioner in coordinating a full public involvement program, each technique is cross-referenced to other techniques in the margins in a script type face.