



National Consortium for Remote Sensing in Transportation

Streamlining Environmental and Planning Processes

Alternatives Considered - Public Involvement Synthesis Report

Bethany Stich and Jeremiah Dumas

Traditional Approaches

Hearing formats have been the traditional approach to public participation and planning. The USDOT identifies three types: traditional format, dual-hearings or combined format, and open format.

First, USDOT notes that the “traditional format was developed at a time when hearings usually afforded the sole opportunity for citizen involvement” (USDOT, 1991). The traditional format or “town meeting” is the one used by most local governments (O’Leary, Arnold, Kyte, and Perfater, 1999). This format has two major drawbacks. The question and answer period is of little substantive value, and the hearing format does not offer the public the opportunity to discuss the project on a one-on-one basis with the project team members, nor inspect the graphic display during the hearing (USDOT, 1991). It is a top-down approach designed by USDOT and disseminated as part of a NEPA training policy for the states. Policy implementation strategy is formulated at the top (USDOT) and translated into instructions for those who will implement at the bottom (states and localities).

Second, the dual hearing is made up of both a formal and informal hearing. It has several advantages over the traditional format because:

- It eliminates the pretense of two-way communication in the testimony room.
- It reduces the possibility of having a hearing disintegrate into a prolonged debate between members of the public and agency personnel.
- It allows the public to inspect graphic materials and technical documents and to discuss the project freely without disturbing or interrupting those giving testimony (USDOT, 1991).

Third, the open forum format is the most recent innovation in public hearing techniques dating back to the 1980s. As citizens and administrators increasingly became unhappy with the traditional format, this new open format was created. Georgia was the first state to use this format and needed FHWA approval prior to changing from the traditional to the open format. Now, using the open format is a common and acceptable way to engage the citizenry. USDOT explains the open format as the following:

Members of the public are free to interact informally with agency staff one-on-one and view the exhibits which may include a slide show or video presentation. As appropriate, agency specialists such as cultural resource or wetlands specialists are available at tables in the center of the room. There is no formal agency presentation at a set time and the public may submit written comments, speak to a court reporter or recorder at any time. Consequently, this format has been found to be much more convenient to persons who may not be available in the evening (e.g. shift workers or the elderly) or may not have the time to sit through an agency presentation and numerous public speakers until their turn comes. The format also makes commenting easier for people who are uncomfortable speaking before a group (USDOT, 1991, p. 64).

Streamlining Approaches

The U.S. Department of Transportation’s Federal Highway Administration has compiled a citizen involvement best practices document for state transportation agencies entitled, Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making. The document has four chapters: “Informing People Through Organization and Outreach,” “Involving People Face-to-Face Through Meetings,” “Getting Feedback from Participants,” and “Using Special Techniques to Enhance Participation.” Though each of these chapters is subdivided into several subsections, the document is not designed to be a step-by-step guide. FHWA states that it does not expect any agency to use all of these public involvement techniques, but instead, to use a “careful variety” of the techniques discussed

(<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pittd/adminmes.htm>, 2002). However, because it is a reference tool created by FHWA to specifically assist practitioners in coordinating a full public involvement program, it is an appropriate measuring tool for an involvement program.

Still, there is little discussion about the information gathered from this public involvement and how it should be used in transportation planning. Although, some state DOT's involvement plans are legally compliant and, in fact, encourages public involvement beyond what is legally required. Unfortunately, some plans are not geared for two-way communication and leaves the reader of the plan, and no doubt the citizens involved in the process, to wonder exactly why the agency wants public involvement and what it is exactly that the agency does with the products of the public involvement process. This is a clear example of where the traditional and even the dual hearing formats were formulated at the top and is then translated into instructions for state DOT employees to implement it at the bottom. However, the implementation of this policy is not achieving the desired effect ISTEA and TEA-21 was meant to address, namely citizen *involvement* in transportation planning.

Suggestions

Our research has determined the current public involvement processes used by state DOTs are not achieving the true deliberative democracy that was intended by the discussed legislation. Therefore, we have three suggestions to address the weakness in the current public involvement policies. They are: education of the process to the public; reconciling public involvement and marketing, and the use of collaboration at the MPO level.

Transportation Education

To address the concerns expressed by FHWA, state DOT employees, and citizens that transportation plans are too abstract and long-term or to incomprehensible for the public, the attached flow chart has been created by to simply the process (See Appendix B). It is our hope that by having the charts like these readily available at public meeting or hearings, citizens will better understand the process by which state DOTs builds roadways and when and where their input can be most useful to the agency. Another useful tool is an outline discussing the major elements of the road building process, some of which occur concurrently, would be helpful for citizens to understand the process.

Marketing Strategies

Marketing is a buzzword government agencies often use when working to improve communication effectiveness as it relates to public involvement. Marketing and consumer based strategies, as tools for communication were specifically discussed as a useful approach to public involvement in course interviews in previous research projects.

The marketing paradigm may have advantages in sharing and targeting information, yet it is important to remember that it cannot replace real public participation. Marketing and citizen involvement are two distinct types of communication with different yet complementary goals. Marketing can be characterized as one-way communication or education while citizen involvement can be characterized as two-way communication. This is not to say that agencies cannot benefit from marketing based programs and initiatives as they may serve to reinforce the issue as it relates to trust and competence on behalf of public perception. Marketing structured communication can serve to raise awareness that is key to education and can facilitate enhanced input.

At the most basic level, public participation is based on the notion that hearing and discussing all sides of an issue results in better decision-making. The fact that decision-makers must be willing to share decision-making powers with the public under-girds this notion of improved decisions that serve the needs of both the agency and the public. It is paramount to the success of any public involvement effort to remember the goals of the agency in determining what mix of participation techniques best fits the particular situation and circumstances. The very specific public participation goals for an agency, and specific planning and project initiatives, must serve as the guide for technique selection in order to facilitate shared decision-making with the public. We submit that the process of learning about and then acknowledging the community values and priorities at work in any transportation area under discussion is key to an agency's ability to identify and implement appropriate techniques for the specific situation.

Collaboration

By using a collaborative model, the following will occur: citizen involvement at the local levels will become two-way involvement; MPO's will improve on the use of all citizens' inputs; the work of established citizen advisory committees will be taken seriously by integrating this information into the final plans of state DOTs through MPO advisory board participation; and the MPOs ability to produce non-technical reports for dissemination by citizens to citizens will be possible. By making citizen participation process changes, MPOs are allowing the new process to become what ISTEA originally intended. "Public involvement processes shall be proactive and provide complete information, timely public notice, full public access to key decisions, and opportunities for early and continuing involvement" (ISTEA, Federal Regulation 23).

Advantages of Using Facilitation and Deliberative Engagements in Community Planning

Failure to include diverse perspectives in the comprehensive planning process can present itself as an obstacle to effective decision-making and implementation of comprehensive plans. In complex and dynamic social environments, no single actor, public or private, has all the information needed for a successful planning effort. The basic premise behind facilitation of deliberative engagements in the comprehensive planning process is inclusion of diverse local perspectives and information that can add substance to the planning efforts but which otherwise may be unavailable to government bureaucracies. Furthermore, building community networks as a long-term commitment eases future implementation of comprehensive plans and strengthens the communities' resilience to respond to potential catastrophic events. Therefore, facilitating deliberative processes can contribute to the planning process and to strengthening community resilience by:

- Including diverse local perspectives and information in the planning processes
- Citizen engagement in identification of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats
- Strengthening the quality of decisions in the planning efforts
- Enhancing community awareness of the planning process
- Building community networks and public-private partnerships involved in the planning processes
- Developing community and institutional structures for implementation of plans
- Opening channels of communication between government institutions and communities that can improve the community resilience and can be critical for effective planning
- Adding flexibility in the planning processes to adapt to unanticipated situations

Comprehensive planning is a long-term process. It is of crucial importance for the long-term success of the planning efforts to develop institutional structures, community networks, and partnerships that commit the government institutions to long-term cooperation and communication with local communities. The process of deliberative involvement would focus on engagement of citizens, private businesses, neighborhood associations, churches, not-for-profit organizations and other community associations.

Expected Deliverables

The project will incorporate citizen engagement like techniques to transportation planning and citizen involvement as part of comprehensive planning. These activities will gather and share information amongst community residents, leaders, businesses, planning professionals and government employees, thereby creating networks within the community. The project will deliver data pamphlets that illustrate the planning process. Further, the deliverable will highlight the major elements of building the infrastructure. These deliverables will be available for all participants so they will may have an enhance understanding of the process.

In addition, the project team will promote the engagement meetings through public service announcement in multiple media outlets (i.e., newspapers, radio, and local television). These media outlets will market penetration, which will increase citizen involvement.