Improving public engagement

Why?

State DOT leadership and staff generally understand the importance of robust community engagement. However, that level and quality of engagement happens less frequently in practice because it is expensive and time consuming to conduct for every project. In reality, DOTs generally go to the public seeking approval and buy-in for a concept staff have already developed, rather than to seeking meaningful input that could change their approach.

The recommendations below all aim to change the agency's approach to public engagement, as well as how it is conducted.

Strategies

Recognize the value in public engagement

Current measures of success, particularly the expectation of on time and under-budget project delivery, can directly conflict with a context-sensitive design approach. The steps required—defining the project need carefully, conducting thorough community engagement, and seeking lower-cost solutions instead of automatically designing to standard—can add time and complexity to project development. However, the same steps often prevent delays and cost increases later in the process by producing a scope with greater community support upfront. Balancing this requires setting an expectation for staff that the outcomes of projects are as important as the speed of project delivery.

To work effectively with community organizations and individuals, DOTs must increase capacity and provide training and staffing support for communication and community engagement to their planners and engineers. Real community engagement requires an understanding and acceptance that the project team may have to let go of their preferred solution for something that better reflects community needs but still meets the problem statement or purpose and need. In addition, transportation professionals should consider stakeholders the experts on their community, how it functions, and its priorities and concerns.

Be explicit about what impact the public can have

DOTs should make clear to stakeholders how the outcomes of engagement will be used moving forward. Community residents who tend to be active around these issues can face engagement fatigue from participating in a number of meetings if they do not appear to produce immediate outcomes or change how decisions are made. This can be especially frustrating when residents have taken time off of work or overcome other hurdles to attend workshops and forums, only to feel that their voices have not been heard. Articulating

clearly how feedback from community members will feed directly into future projects or policy decisions and providing concrete next steps can encourage better attendance.

This first step is to be clear internally on how much influence stakeholders will have. For example, will stakeholders be driving the process? Can their input lead to substantial changes in the scope? Or is the project at a point in the process where their feedback could only produce minor changes? Is the purpose of the engagement more about conveying information? Being clear about this internally helps guide how project teams approach the engagement and makes it easier to communicate expectations explicitly with stakeholders, which can reduce their frustrations and build trust.

It is critical to be upfront and clear about the purpose of each engagement and how the outcomes of engagement will be used moving forward. The spectrum of public participation below from the International Association for Public Participation is a valuable resource for defining and setting expectations around engagement.[1]

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

	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 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 look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

At what point(s) in the process are locals, districts, and other stakeholders included?

[1] Spectrum of Public Participation. International Association of Public Participation. 2018. https://www.iap2.org/page/pillars

[2] Office of Community Transportation. Tennessee Department of Transportation. Retrieved December 2018.

DOTs should establish a process to routinely have corridor or project visioning sessions with localities. The purpose would be to prompt a discussion about tradeoffs between the role of the road in serving regional and local trips, community goals, and modal needs that should be prioritized in the project. GICD suggests that this happen as a requirement when projects are added to the 3-Year Plan.

It is important for DOTs to engage local partners early and often when deciding what role the road *should* play within the surrounding community and region to provide a framework for guiding future design decisions during project development. The goal should be to build trust with the community and generate support for projects later in the process. Rather than holding hearings or informing the public once the process is underway and a preferred design has been chosen, efforts should be made to go out into the community to get a better sense of the issues and hear the public's priorities. Later on, if there is opposition from a vocal minority, opponents or others intent on disrupting the process will have to answer to a base of supporters who have bought into the project, not just the DOT or other transportation professionals.

This approach can help to prevent the development of a project that aims to address one priority while residents and stakeholders are seeking to address totally different—and even contradictory—challenges.

Identify the right spokespeople.

Often the most compelling messengers for skeptics are stakeholders whose interest in the project is somewhat unexpected. For example, depending on the project, this could mean business owners, chambers of commerce, and real estate developers who see the benefits of the project for local economic development or their bottom line.

To engage residents that have not traditionally participated in the transportation decision-making process, DOTs should engage trusted community leaders to act as liaisons and spokespeople. Some residents will be more comfortable engaging with a community leader whom they know and trust. Hiring liaisons to support engagement efforts can cultivate longer-term relationships with residents who might otherwise be hesitant to engage. Moving beyond public meetings can also open the process to new stakeholders and groups.

Can we meet people where they already are?

Rather than hosting separate workshops and events, DOTs and localities should attend existing standing neighborhood meetings, school functions, or community events. This provides an opportunity to collect feedback from a broader group of residents that may not attend separate sessions. In addition, holding meetings and events at different times of day can help reach a range of community members with different work schedules and needs. While decision-makers and stakeholders from DOTs and local governments can attend public meetings through their jobs, some community residents would need to take the day off of work to do so. DOTs can collect broader input by providing multiple ways for

residents to provide feedback on a topic, such as online or phone surveys or social media in addition to in-person events.

Don't forget the human element.

The general public and other stakeholders may not be transportation engineers, but they are the experts on their neighborhoods and region. They have a set of values that will not translate perfectly into LOS, delay, or throughput. Transportation agencies should focus on communicating values rather than data and use terms that those outside the transportation industry can understand. Further, it is okay to use humor and be light, especially when using social media to communicate. Knowing there is a real person on the other side of an agency's Twitter account can go a long way.

Examples & Tools

TDOT's Office of Community Transportation

TDOT has improved its community and stakeholder engagement by creating a dedicated public facing Office of Community Transportation (OCT)[2] in each TDOT region charged with better linking TDOT's projects and designs to local needs and aspirations. OCT offices work directly with community and regional planning agencies to integrate land use and transportation decisions and provide access to tools and resources to localities available through TDOT and national best practices. Many communities also already have local organizations focused on advancing quality of life and economic vitality, and through public outreach these groups can readily become planning partners. OCT works through the TDOT Rural Planning Program with their RPO coordinators and MPO partners in the urbanized areas to understand upcoming local development and lessen any negative impacts TDOT projects would have on local and state transportation systems and finances. In addition, TDOT staff proactively make presentations and answer questions about upcoming projects at existing community meetings and events.

Hawaii's Guide for Public Involvement

The Hawaii Department of Transportation has developed an excellent *Guide for Public Involvement* for its Highway Division that could provide a model for guidance. The Guide discusses the values of Hawaii culture, different levels and types of engagement for different purposes, and how to make engagement successful. It also includes a detailed Project Delivery Checklist at the end with steps for identifying the community context and risks and benefits of the project, determining the appropriate engagement strategies, and identifying key messages to share with the public.[3]

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[2] Office of Community Transportation. Tennessee Department of Transportation. Retrieved December 2018. https://www.tn.gov/tdot/long-range-planning-home/longrange-oct.html

[3] Guide for Involvement Public. Hawai'i Department of Transportation, Highways Division. June 2012. http://www.oahumpo.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Final-HDOT-Guide-for-Public-Input-7-27-12.pdf

The guide includes a public involvement continuum, guidance for involvement during corridor studies, and a public involvement workbook. The guiding principles are partualy noteworthy:

- Build public trust: Build public trust in the Highways Division through public involvement that is honest, transparent and that demonstrates a sincere interest in community values.
- Early and continuous information and input: Throughout each phase of project delivery, provide early and continuing opportunities to share information with and/or gather input from a wide range of stakeholders.
- Consistency and coordination: Conduct consistent public involvement for similar efforts throughout the Highways Division and provide an appropriate level of coordination and consideration for each project and its stakeholders that use the Highways Division's resources effectively.
- Public involvement strategies, techniques, and methods: Utilize a wide range of public involvement strategies and techniques to meet the diverse needs and characteristics of the Highways Division's plans, programs, projects, and stakeholders.
- Documentation: Support accountability and coordination by documenting public involvement activities, input, and follow up responses throughout the life of the effort.

Pennsylvania's Smart Transportation Guidebook

The *Smart Transportation Guidebook* developed by PennDOT and NJDOT could also provide a model for guidance on community engagement.[4] In addition to offering stakeholder engagement tools and approaches, it includes a section on the crucial role local agencies must play in creating connected multimodal transportation networks and encouraging supportive land uses.

The Governors' Institute on Community Design worked throughout 2017-2018 helping a small group of state departments of transportation question and assess the underlying assumptions that result in giant highway solutions for every transportation problem. This memo is part of a series about the states that are finding success through what's known as practical solutions, a way for transportation departments to meet changing demands and plan, design, construct, operate, and maintain context-sensitive transportation networks that work for all modes of travel.

The Governors' Institute on Community Design, a program of Smart Growth America, helps state leaders address economic development, housing, transportation, and other pressing issues that relate to how communities grow and develop.

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[4] Context Sensitive Solutions and Design. U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration. August 2018.
http://contextsensitivesolutions.org/content/reading/dots_release_smart_transportation_guidebook/