

Florida Department of Transportation

Tallahassee, Florida

Snapshot of Florida

- 2000 U.S. Census Population: 15,982,378
- Percent change in population 1990 to 2000: 23.5%
- 2000 Census Racial/Ethnic Composition:
 - White: 78%
 - African American: 14.6%
 - Asian: 1.7%
 - Other: 3%

OVERVIEW

In 1994, the Florida Department of Transportation launched the most ambitious statewide public involvement effort in its history to solicit the participation of Florida's citizens, visitors, and businesses in the development of the 2020 Florida Transportation Plan (FTP).

With new ISTEA regulations, FDOT recognized the need to more actively engage the public in transportation decision-making. Outreach associated with the plan consisted of more than 50 separate public events in 33 towns and cities. Locations for the meetings included airport terminals, FDOT offices, shopping centers and turnpike plazas. Over 3,000 residents, travelers and shoppers participated in the process.

During development of the plan, as outreach activities were being launched throughout the state, it became apparent that there was a need for FDOT to provide guidance to both the central office and district staffs on how to conduct effective public outreach activities. While some of the agency's offices were well equipped to initiate targeted outreach initiatives, others exhibited a general lack of direction on how public outreach should be conducted. In 1996, a consultant was hired to assist the agency in identifying needs and developing materials to guide future initiatives. This work was coordinated closely with the Office of Policy and Planning and a statewide Design Team established in 1997 to develop the public involvement plan (PIP). The result: development of a comprehensive public involvement training course and ©Public Involvement Toolkit to provide staff with detailed guidance on how to develop, implement and assess the effectiveness of its public outreach activities.

WHAT HAPPENED

To inform the development of the training materials, the consultant conducted one-on-one telephone interviews with 60 individuals directly involved in public involvement activities associated with the FTP. These interviews confirmed the need for detailed guidance to direct the agency's interaction with the public and served as a needs assessment to inform the development of the training course and Toolkit. Issues raised included lack of public involvement training, uncertainty with respect to how to approach various audiences and a general lack of direction on how public outreach should be conducted.

Recognizing the need for input and buy-in from FDOT's managers to assure an integrated approach to improving the effectiveness of the agency's public involvement activities, FDOT established a Statewide Public Involvement Design Team in 1997. Composed of senior level district and central office staff representing the spectrum of disciplines, the Team was tasked with developing a proactive public involvement plan for the DOT. As part of this effort, the Team developed FDOT's first formal public involvement policy calling for the integration of public involvement in all functional areas of the Department.

To support implementation of the agency's public involvement plan, the Design Team worked closely with the consultant and the Office of Policy and Planning to develop a public involvement training course and accompanying Toolkit materials.

Training Course

The public involvement training provides steps and methods for citizens to access transportation decision making. It also helps transportation professionals know what the public needs to make decisions.

-- C. Leroy Irwin, manager, Environmental Management Office, FDOT

Designed to raise the profile of public involvement and provide a level of consistency in the agency's approach to the public, the training program was first piloted in 1998.

The program was comprised of four training modules. Sessions ranged from a half-day course for employees with an oversight role in public involvement activities to a four-day course for project managers and staff directly involved in working with the public. These sessions were designed to provide participants with a core set of competencies that could be applied to all functional areas. Participants were asked to complete an assessment form prior to the course to assist the trainer in tailoring the sessions to the particular needs of each audience.

At the outset of each session, participants were asked to identify best practices from prior initiatives and discuss why a particular approach had been successful. Participants were also asked to critique a variety of outreach materials including fliers, meeting notices and maps for their comprehensiveness and user-friendliness. Role-playing was also employed to teach participants how to respond to a particular set of issues. These exercises enabled the agency to continuously evaluate its outreach activities while instructing participants on the most effective means of communicating and interacting with the public.

To reinforce the training program, a "train the trainer" manual was initiated to assist public involvement coordinators provide specific advice to project managers. Predicated on three basic questions: What do you want to know? Who do you want to involve? How do you get what you need to know? it provides specific methods to be employed.

Over time, much of the information from the original public involvement training course has been incorporated into other programs including Community Impact Assessment, Access Management and other functional training programs within the Department. The ©Public Involvement Toolkit continues to serve as a resource.

Toolkit

The ©Public Involvement Toolkit offers professionals quick and easy methods for getting things done.

--- Louise Fragala, principal, Powell, Fragala & Associates.

Ms. Fragala has been the prime contributor to the FDOT Central Office Public Outreach Program for the 2020 Transportation Plan for the past several years. She developed the Public Involvement Training Program and the Tool Kit for this program in a collaborative effort with the FDOT.

A ©Public Involvement Toolkit was developed to reinforce the coursework and provide practitioners with comprehensive information on how to design, conduct and evaluate effective outreach activities.

Housed in a black plastic toolbox lined with hanging file folders containing six “how to” manuals, the Toolkit provides detailed information to walk professionals through everything from developing a public involvement plan (PIP) to identifying and reaching the appropriate audience, to processing public comment.

To promote the periodic evaluation of these activities, the modules provide questions to be considered in assessing the effectiveness of specific outreach activities as well as sample forms and guidance on how to process and analyze the input received from the public. In this way, the Toolkit acts as an evaluative measure to ensure that the outreach process remains true by providing a checklist of items to be considered at different stages in a project.

Four areas of focus are identified for evaluation:

Identification of the Appropriate Stakeholders

Identifying the appropriate stakeholders is an important part of any successful outreach effort. Module 2 of the Toolkit (How to Identify and Reach the Right People) includes criteria on how to identify people that will contribute to the decision-making process. This section includes a comprehensive community checklist of target participants representative of all segments of the project community. Also included is a matrix of strategies that can be employed to reach stakeholders. To provide guidance on assessing the effectiveness of a project team in reaching the “Right People” the Toolkit includes the following questions to assess the appropriateness of the target audience:

- Do the participants effectively represent their organization?
- Are affected parties represented?
- Do the participants participate?

Communication with Stakeholders

As might be expected, once a project audience has been identified, it is important to establish an effective means of communication. Module 3 (How to Create Effective Communication Materials) provides useful information on how to plan, schedule, distribute and design communication materials and provides a sample evaluation form for use in determining the effectiveness of the project team in conveying project information.

Ways to Engage the Public and Solicit Meaningful Feedback

Recognizing the need to tailor meetings to fit the purpose of the study and the audience, Module 4, (How to Plan and Implement Effective Public Meetings) provides assistance on meeting formats, elements, planning, checklists and ways to determine whether a meeting was effective. This includes guidance on both the external and internal review of the meeting including meeting survey/evaluation forms to solicit participant feedback and questions to be considered by the project team regarding the successes and shortcomings of a meeting including:

- Did we achieve the meeting's purpose?
- Did the meeting format allow the public ample opportunity to participate?
- Were the methods used to advertise the meeting effective?
- How can we do better the next time?

The Processing of Public Comment

After soliciting the public's input the next logical question is how is the information collected from stakeholders incorporated into project decision-making? The processing of public comment became a particularly important issue for the agency during the development of the 2020 Florida Transportation Plan in 1994 when hundreds of comments were received. Module 5 of the Toolkit ("How to Handle Public Comment") responds to the agency's desire to develop an integrated approach to respond to the information received by directing the information received to the appropriate departments for follow through.

At FDOT, tracking numbers are assigned to ensure that comments do not get lost during project development and subsequent commitment/compliance phases (some comments may require distribution to multiple departments to ensure a complete answer to all issues and use of tracking numbers facilitates the tracking process).

Comments are then analyzed to determine the appropriate response. Ideally, it is recommended that comments be divided into four categories: general, procedural, substantive and other. Substantive comments must then be categorized by project phase (e.g., current previous, future). It is the project manager's responsibility to track the comment from the time of receipt through resolution to ensure that an adequate response is provided.

FDOT also advocates that a synopsis of the comments received on a project and their resolution be compiled. The benefit of this exercise is that it encourages project managers to record, track and analyze comments received on a study, thereby providing them an excellent overview of the project. With careful review, the quality of an initiative can generally be determined. If the comments received on an initiative are overwhelmingly general in nature and do not reflect the subject at hand, chances are that the effort has not been successful in conveying the information necessary to enable participants to be involved in the decision-making process in a meaningful way.

To guide both the compilation and tracking of public comment, sample comment and tracking forms (to track public comments that have been forwarded to other departments for resolution) are included in the Toolkit.

More than 600 individuals, including consultants, FDOT employees and representatives from Florida's Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) participated in the original public involvement training course. One hundred individuals are currently participating in the CIA training program. Hundreds of Toolkits have been distributed.

By compiling the Toolkit and reinforcing its precepts in its training courses, FDOT has taken the guesswork out of how to approach, communicate with and solicit feedback from the public. The task at hand remains to continually assess and refine these initiatives to fit the changing needs of the public.

Lesson 1: Ask Staff What Works and What Doesn't

From the outset, FDOT queried employees on what worked and what didn't. After conducting telephone interviews with individuals directly involved in the public involvement activities associated with the FTP and determining that there was a real need for public involvement training, the agency hired a consultant to design a training program and the accompanying materials. This work was closely coordinated with both the Office of Policy and Planning and the statewide Design Team tasked with developing the PIP. To guide development of the course and accompanying materials, Design Team Members were surveyed and asked to respond to the following questions:

1. What public involvement activities or practices are required now?
2. What public involvement activities are planned for next year?
3. What public involvement or information materials are currently being distributed? (Design Team Members were asked to provide samples for discussion)
4. Who conducts public involvement activities and outreach efforts?
5. What public involvement manuals or guidelines are currently followed?
6. What public involvement techniques are currently in use?
7. Who is in charge of public involvement activities?
8. Describe the best examples of successful public involvement activities, techniques used, type of project or plan and who designed and implemented them. Include the reason this activity was judged successful and by whom.

Assessment of staff needs and public involvement activities continued as participants in the training program were asked to identify their needs to assist the trainer in tailoring the course to a particular audience. Participants were also asked to provide examples of current public involvement or public information materials for critique by class members. With an eye toward showcasing the best, participants were also asked to identify and discuss best practices specific to FDOT initiatives.

By continually soliciting input on what works and what doesn't the agency has been able to provide guidance to FDOT staff on how to be more responsive to the needs of the public through the provision of training and resource materials.

Lesson 2: Design Resource Materials to Promote Periodic Evaluation

Today we have a citizenry that is better informed due to the vast amount of information available via global communications, and they want to be included in the decision making about how their tax dollars are being spent. This proactive approach demands that we have effective means of engaging the public.

-- Sally Patrenos, director of external affairs, Florida Transportation Commission

Too often in large agencies, public involvement activities are conducted on an ad hoc basis with little consistency in approach. This makes any sort of qualitative and/or quantitative evaluation difficult.

By developing the ©Public Involvement Toolkit, FDOT has established a standard and provided practical guidance to staff on how to initiate and sustain effective partnerships with the public. By highlighting the importance of periodic evaluation and the processing of the information received, the agency has challenged its employees to continually assess and refine their relationships with the public. This promotes more effective interaction and provides the agency valuable information on how best to identify, reach, communicate and interact with its stakeholders. This in turn enables FDOT to target its resources to most effectively solicit the participation of the public in the transportation decision-making process.

Challenges Ahead

Through the provision of public involvement training and the development of the ©Public Involvement Toolkit, the agency has laid the groundwork to establish a standard for its approach to the public.

Future challenges will include the need to develop the “next generation” of public involvement training and resource materials as well as criteria to measure the effectiveness of public involvement activities.

As referenced earlier, the concepts advanced in the original public involvement training course are now being incorporated into other programs such as Community Impact Assessment.

In FDOT’s 1997 *Report of the Working Group on Community Impact Assessment, Public Involvement and Environmental Justice*, the need for training courses in the fields of public involvement, community impact assessment, communication and related subject areas were identified. Recommendations included making these courses available to all in-house personnel and Department consultants involved in inter-governmental coordination, public involvement, community impact assessment and related subject areas.

CIA Training is currently underway. Providing opportunities for staff to attend training and embrace this approach will be important as FDOT strives to create transportation projects responsive to community needs.

The next step will be to develop performance measures for CIA activities, including public involvement. To this end, the agency has just developed a research proposal to conduct a nationwide search of performance measures.

Once documented, it is anticipated that these findings will be reviewed by the task team established to implement the findings of the report by working with all involved offices to institutionalize the recommendations through policy, procedure and training. Upon review, the team will work to develop measures applicable to FDOT's program and call for the evaluation of these activities.

A similar approach is anticipated for other functional training programs within the Department as they work to enhance their interactions with the public.

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