**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 guide 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), the Transportation Equity Act for the 21$^{st}$ Century (TEA-21), 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, these 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 guide) 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 1A 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 1B). 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. Related techniques are cross-referenced at the end of each technique's discussion. Review the

"Taking 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 1B) 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 GUIDE

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 "Taking Initial Steps."

To assist practitioners in coordinating a full public involvement program, each technique is cross-referenced to other related techniques. The organizing principle for each technique is a series of questions, such as "Why is it useful?" or "What are the drawbacks?"

## NOTICE

## Chapter 1. INFORMING PEOPLE THROUGH ORGANIZATION AND OUTREACH

What distinguishes an amorphous, overly-general public involvement effort from one that is purposeful, grounded, specific, and productive is good organization and well-planned outreach. In initiating public involvement in transportation, agencies must begin with clearly-defined, project-related goals that focus on the specific issues to be addressed, the specific kinds of input needed, and the specific "public" that needs to be involved. The more specific a public involvement plan, the greater its chances of producing input an agency can actually use in decision-making.

### Why is organization crucial?

Participation doesn't just happen. Once the "what" of an overall strategy is in place, an agency has to determine the "how." Staff needs to carefully orchestrate ways to contact people, give them the needed information, hear their views, respond to their comments, and incorporate their concerns into plans and decisions. Organization establishes a systematic, planned approach to working with people, so that an agency gets the kinds of information it needs when it needs them. At the same time, good organization allows room for flexibility and openness as needed.

### Why is outreach essential?

Outreach to all potential participants reaps broad and varied representation. Often, an initial list of "given" participants unintentionally omits important segments of the population. These include people who are not usually well-represented in the process of planning or project development, such as minorities, ethnic groups, individuals with low incomes, the poorly educated, and people with disabilities. In the past, freight interests did not often participate in planning and project development. Extra effort may be needed to elicit involvement by people unaccustomed to participating, because they often have different needs and perspectives than the majority.

### What are appropriate kinds of organization and outreach?

Organization and outreach are project-specific. An agency chooses judiciously from a varied menu of methods to reach people and bring them together on the issues. This chapter provides a guide to several ways to structure an approach:

**A. Including people who are underserved by transportation;**
**B. Bringing a core participation group together;**
**C. Providing substantive information and establishing methods of communication; and**
**D. Taking initial action step**

## Chapter 1. INFORMING PEOPLE THROUGH OUTREACH AND ORGANIZATION

### A. INCLUDING PEOPLE WHO ARE UNDERSERVED[1] BY TRANSPORTATION

Public involvement needs to encompass the full range of community interests, yet people underserved by transportation often do not participate. They not only have greater difficulty getting to jobs, schools, recreation, and shopping than the population at large, but often they are also unaware of transportation proposals that could dramatically change their lives. Many lack experience with public involvement, even though they have important, unspoken issues that should be heard.

These groups are a rich source of ideas that can improve transportation not only for themselves but also for the entire community. Agencies must assume responsibility for reaching out and including them in the decision-making process – which requires strategic thinking and tailoring public involvement efforts to these communities and their needs. Techniques are grouped here under two headings:

- Ethnic, minority, and low-income groups; and
- People with disabilities.

[1] Underserved is a term found in 23 CFR Section 450 and includes low-income households and minority households.

## ETHNIC, MINORITY, AND LOW-INCOME GROUPS

### What does this mean?

**Individuals from minority and ethnic groups and low-income households often find participation difficult and are also traditionally underserved by transportation.** While these groups form a growing portion of the population, particularly in urban areas, historically they have experienced barriers to participation in the public decision-making process and are therefore underrepresented. These barriers arise both from the historical nature of the public involvement process and from cultural, linguistic, and economic differences. Recent efforts to include many different cultural or disadvantaged groups in this process have been designed to assure basic, equitable access rather than to favor one group over another.

**Although America prides itself on being a melting pot of many peoples, deep differences in culture or income often impede participation.** Language differences are only the most immediate hurdle to overcome in order to work effectively with various cultural groups. Economic barriers such as the costs of child care or transportation to meetings also hinder participation. More importantly, understanding and accommodating the various ways people interact with one another to make decisions, or their belief in their own power to do so, is the major challenge of getting people to work together successfully toward common goals. A starting point in effective interaction is addressing groups by the names they want to be called at the time. For example, at the time of this publication, American Indians prefer to be called that rather than Native Americans, a term that includes non-Indian Native Americans. Preferences change over time.

**Today, agencies work to empower people to help define the *kinds of processes* they need to participate effectively.** Thoughtful consultation with minority, ethnic, and low-income people enables agencies to identify specific barriers and find effective ways to overcome them. In Orange County, California, attendance at a series of introductory open houses for a major investment study was high for all sectors of the affected population except Mexican-Americans. In subsequent meetings with leaders from this community, county planners learned that these constituents were uncomfortable with the open-house format and intimidated by one-to-one interaction. Supplementary, informal, small-group meetings in Latino neighborhoods eventually brought increased participation.

**Governments at various levels have played a significant role in protecting the rights of underserved populations.** Presidential Executive Order 12898 of 1994 requires Federal agencies to identify programs, policies, and regulations with a disproportionately high and adverse effect on minority and low-income populations. The order directs Federal agencies to conduct their programs, policies, and activities so as to ensure that they do not have the effect of excluding persons from participation in or benefits of the programs. This can usually be done by modifying existing participatory programs.

**Federal transportation law requires transportation plans to avoid a disproportionate impact of transportation policies or investments on traditionally-underserved communities**. The Final Rule on Metropolitan and Statewide Planning requires MPOs and states to "seek out and consider" the needs of the transportation-disadvantaged.

**Outreach to minorities and ethnic groups has several objectives in addition to the basic aims of public involvement:**

- Convey issues in ways that are meaningful to various cultural groups;
- Bridge cultural and economic differences that affect participation;
- Use communication techniques that enable people to interact with other participants;
- Develop partnerships on a one-to-one or small group basis to assure representation; and
- Increase participation by underrepresented groups so they have an impact on decisions.

**Why is it useful?**

**Outreach to traditionally-underserved groups helps assure** that all constituents have opportunities to affect the decision-making process. These efforts are particularly useful because they:

- Provide fresh perspectives;
- Give first-hand information about community-specific issues and concerns of which an agency may not have been aware;
- Flag potential controversies;
- Provide feedback on how to get these communities involved; and
- Provide solutions to problems that best meet their needs.

**These efforts widen the basis of consensus** on an implementable plan or project. The greater the consensus among all community members, the more likely a plan or project will succeed.

**Agencies can address issues specific to minority, ethnic, or other underserved groups.** At the inception of its long-range plan, the Georgia Department of Transportation (DOT) had special forums for minorities so the planning process could address their concerns from the outset.

**Local leadership may become more active.** For the past fifteen years, the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County in Houston, Texas has had a good working relationship with all segments of the community, especially underserved populations. As a result, their leaders have been very active in the decision-making process.

**Participation establishes trust and openness in the decision-making process.** The St. Louis, Missouri, MPO works in close collaboration with minority, ethnic, and low-income groups from the beginning of planning and throughout the process, fostering a sense of ownership of the outcome.

**How do underrepresented groups participate?**

**Community organizations and their leaders are invaluable in building communication between agencies and underrepresented groups.** Canvassing key community leaders individually may help determine the best ways to conduct outreach within their communities. Often low-income people, for instance, are so busy working many hours in several jobs that they do not have time for grass roots participation; they rely on their community leaders to represent them in the process. The Albany, New York, MPO uses the Albany Service Corps (a job-training program for disadvantaged youth that is part of the national Americorps group) to distribute information to low-income communities. In many cases, agency staff can easily identify and reach out to community leaders as a first point of contact. The Virginia DOT distributes materials through the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to reach minorities. Working with leaders also increases the credibility of the participatory planning process. Respecting ethnic tradition, the Alaska DOT has found it helpful to meet first with Alaskan native elders to establish a rapport prior to presenting projects to whole communities.

**Community groups provide access to individuals and can serve as forums for participation.** Agencies sometimes focus initial attention on active community groups to prepare for later approaches to the general public. Community groups, like Civic Advisory Committees, can provide an underserved community with a meaningful way to participate, as well as a sense of empowerment. MPOs in Portland, Oregon, and in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, work through established neighborhood organizations. Often, community organizations reflect community-wide concerns and can advise an agency on useful strategies for interaction. In Arizona, Tucson's MPO involved several Mexican-American neighborhood associations in updating its long-range transportation plan. In Chicago, Illinois, the Center for Neighborhood Technology brought minority groups into the existing regional citizen coalitions. Cooperation with community groups follows the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" principle. If working through an established organization serves the purpose, an agency wastes effort by creating a new forum that probably will not work as well. Agencies need to be cautious, however, about presuming that any one group represents an entire community.

**Religious organizations in particular are an effective way to reach minority and ethnic groups.** Most of them have civic as well as religious activities and interests, along with a strong geographic base. They have broad constituencies and often have a strong ethnic or cultural focus. They are particularly good avenues for reaching people who are not active in the community in other ways. The Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) has established communication links with African-American, Latino, and Asian religious institutions in order to increase participation of underrepresented groups. The Little Rock, Arkansas, MPO, works to establish good relations with, among others, the African-American Ministerial Alliance in its region.

**Agencies need to consider the times at which members of minority, low-income, and underserved communities are available to participate in the transportation decision-making process.** Agencies often do not take into account the varying working hours of individuals who are not in typical occupations. In addition, issues of child and elder care can impact an individual's schedule. In winter months, many elderly people can be reluctant to drive when it is dark outside. It is important, therefore, to consider expanding hours of operation for public meetings and other functions that might be typically held in the evening. Expanding hours of operation can consist simply of manning a desk with informational materials, perhaps even showing a short informational video or slide presentation on the project, and offering an opportunity for individuals to ask questions and provide oral and/or written statements. In addition, individuals can be offered an opportunity to put their names on a mailing list for additional information, or to be included in the formal review process for a particular project. A more formal public meeting can be held in addition to these open hours, however all input taken during the open hours would be considered.

**Agencies need to make special efforts to communicate with people who use languages other than English.** For example, of the approximately 2.5 million households in Los Angeles County, 40 percent speak a language other than English as their first language, and 13 percent speak no English. Thus, translations and bilingual speakers are often necessary. The Alaska DOT has produced radio spots in indigenous languages. In addition, translations to other languages, logos, and project terminology need to be carefully reviewed from a cultural perspective. A leading car manufacturer found that although a particular model sold well among the general population, it did not sell well among Latinos, because "no va" in Spanish means "doesn't go."

**Understanding a culture is often critical.** The Dallas, Texas, transit agency (DART) finds it helpful to research an ethnic group's customs and language. Changing demographics in East Dallas led DART to accommodate the language needs of Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Arab, Iranian, Ethiopian, and Nigerian communities. This outreach identified a need to provide training in several English-as-a-second-language programs on how to use the transit system. The custom of bus travel was unfamiliar to some participants and practiced very differently by others.

**Agencies also need to recognize varied styles of communication derived from ethnic or minority cultures.** In some cultures, for example, it is considered improper to disagree with authority. As a result, agency staff people attempting to assess community response to different alternatives have found it difficult to move beyond polite agreement with all alternatives. In other cultures, discussion with the entire community precedes decisions by its leaders, and elders may have a particular role in decision-making. In some groups, speaking up is interpreted as "making trouble." Agency staff members can learn about traditions and behavioral patterns by careful observation or by tactfully and privately asking group members what is going on. Group members familiar with mainstream culture are particularly good sources of such information. The Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department reports getting a cool reception to its initial attempts at outreach through local churches. Research discovered that this was because its spokesperson addressed local congregations from the main pulpit – a place of honor reserved for the ministry. In subsequent visits, the representative moved to the regular platform, the audience relaxed, and constructive dialogue took place. In communities where there is reluctance to disagree or criticize, opinions may only be expressed after prolonged consideration or in very indirect ways.

**American Indian tribal governments are considered domestic sovereign nations**; i.e., they have a direct and special relationship with the Federal government as a result of treaties and are independent of individual States. For example, tribes deal directly with the Federal government in securing funding for Indian reservation roads if they are tribes on a reservation, even within an MPO. Agencies need to identify issues regarding American Indians and transportation needs, plans, projects, and outreach early in the process. Expert guidance (for example, from members of the Governor's Interstate Indian Council) should be sought in developing relationships with tribes, reservations, and individuals. Since tribes are eligible to apply for and be awarded separate funding, transportation practitioners need to consult with both Federal transportation agencies and local tribes to coordinate plans and projects.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Understanding the full range of a community's needs enables an agency to create more responsive and even innovative plans.** Interacting with community members yields insight into the reasons why they support or disagree with proposed plans or projects. The perspective of traditionally-underrepresented groups can cast a whole new light on the goals and outcomes of planning and project development. Ethnic and minority group members suggest fresh approaches to transportation issues that otherwise would not be raised. However, input from underserved groups is not "separate" from other input or given more weight; rather, to be most useful, it is integrated with and balanced by the needs and concerns of all interests.

**Agencies may discern new or improved transportation options.** Input from predominantly Mexican-American communities led to a hybrid option for transit in the Los Angeles Metro Red Line Eastside Corridor. In a mid-range of cost, the new option has the highest potential ridership and offers significant service advantages. The region's leadership and project planners agree that the new alternative is the best solution and readily admit it would not have been identified without the help of ethnic constituents.

**Agencies also use community input to assure equity in the distribution of services and impacts.** In order to do this, they must use a variety of techniques to solicit public input from the traditionally under-represented population – particularly minority and low-income groups as identified in the Executive Order on Environmental Justice. Typical meeting announcements in newspapers and on radio, for example, may not reach these populations. Agencies need to understand how these populations get information. This could be, for example, in church bulletins, on grocery store or laundromat bulletin boards, and in community meeting places. (See **Public Information Materials**; **Media Strategies**.)

### Who leads outreach to these groups?

**Existing staff may lead, provided they have the appropriate skills or training.** To be successful, they need to have an open-minded attitude, process skills, and sensitivity to cultural differences. They also must be committed to encouraging minority and ethnic group participation, not only because it takes persistence and creative thinking to foster inclusion of people who have historically been outsiders, but also because lack of such commitment is easily perceived and undermines trust and credibility.

**To enhance the effectiveness of interaction, staff should come from a variety of backgrounds.** As the Oregon-based Sensible Transportation Options for People (STOP) suggests, "Don't use all white men in suits" to interact with traditionally-underserved communities.

**Special outreach coordinators can provide particularly strong leadership and demonstrate an agency's sincere commitment to responding to ethnic and minority concerns.** A number of agencies hire staff specifically charged with outreach to the traditionally underserved. MPOs in Madison, Wisconsin, Seattle, Washington, and Twin Cities, Minnesota all have a minority affairs coordinator. The

Cape Cod, Massachusetts, Commission has two positions for minorities and one for American Indians. To enhance communication, Pennsylvania DOT uses an intermediary when addressing Amish communities, because this is their traditional way of dealing with outsiders. Only elders are allowed to speak with an intermediary. By communicating with an intermediary, DOT staff better understands the community's culture, dress code, language, and beliefs, as well as their specific transportation needs and concerns.

**Consultants with special expertise or skills can also enhance the process.** For a major investment study in transit, South Sacramento, California, utilized consultants with experience working in the affected ethnic neighborhoods. The St. Louis, Missouri, MPO regularly contracts with the Urban League for focus groups and information dissemination.

**Translators or interpreters are essential to reach non-English-speaking groups.** Many agencies now provide interpreters when needed, as well as translations of some or all of their information materials. Florida DOT has a bilingual affairs staff and a bilingual newsletter. The Los Angeles, California, MPO has "foreign language teams" for its region. The transit agency in Houston, Texas, prints information in up to five languages. For large meetings, the University of Massachusetts has tear-off pads saying "I need an interpreter" and provides translators in six different languages. In California, Orange County transit agency staff members wear blue dots on their name tags at open houses if they are bilingual. Alaska DOT has local residents volunteer to interpret for Eskimo communities.

**Translations must take into account the fact that often minority people who do not speak English well also do not speak literary or standard forms of their native languages.** Agencies need to make sure that translations are clear, easily understandable, and in an idiom native to the group to be reached. A Portuguese translation, for instance, must recognize that people from Portugal have difficulty understanding Brazilian Portuguese speakers, and vice versa.

**What are the costs?**

**Costs are linked to the complexity of an issue.** A large minority or ethnic community can be reached in traditional ways, through news media, literature, and informal meetings. However, when an issue is highly controversial, the need for participation intensifies, and agencies may need to use more varied and innovative techniques – resulting in higher costs in staff time and funding. Eliciting participation may involve translations and interpreters, advertising, and other special efforts.

**Costs climb when a large number of underrepresented people need to be reached.** Encouraging disadvantaged groups to participate is time- and energy-consuming for agency staff. Some groups are typically more difficult to draw into transportation planning processes than mainstream participants. For the Miami East-West Corridor Major Investment Study, Florida DOT held an average of 30 meetings per month over a two-year period to reach the varied populations within the 22-mile study area. Communities, particularly the ethnic communities, continuously requested meetings and invited project staff to attend numerous meetings sponsored by neighborhood organizations. The agency estimates that staff participated in approximately 1,000 meetings on the project, ranging from one-on-one discussions to larger meetings.

**Costs may be minimized by using electronic media and by locating meeting spaces that are convenient and free of charge to the public.** For example, for a local meeting on a transportation project in Washington DC, an auditorium at the National Zoo was used for an informational public meeting. Not only was the space accessible by public transportation, but it was also a well-known location for individuals in the project area. Access to electronic media should be considered before employing it as a cost-minimizer. Schools, community centers, and libraries may be able to help provide services to people who do not have electronic access at home or at work.

**How is such outreach organized?**

**A basic task is to identify which minority and ethnic groups require special attention for a transportation plan or project because of its impact on them.** Careful research about the communities potentially affected by a plan or project may be necessary to determine a diverse group of community leaders. This can be done by contacting local governments to determine the "players" in the community, through word of mouth, conducting key-person interviews, and by being alert to advertisements/fliers for community activities. It is important for practitioners to maintain up-to-date contact lists for community-based organizations and key individuals in the community who can be tapped for discussions. Human service coalitions, like the United Way, colleges and universities, and national organizations often maintain contact lists.

**Agencies draw from the full array of formal techniques to involve minority and ethnic groups, along with others.** Formal techniques are inclusion on committees, task forces, and other official advisory and/or decision bodies; participation in meetings and conferences; focus groups; surveys; and working through recognized neighborhood groups. In San Francisco, California, the MPO created a special Minority Citizen Advisory Committee as a result of a lawsuit in the mid-70s. It includes African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans. The Wisconsin DOT created focus groups for American Indians, African-Americans, and Latinos. As part of its long-range planning effort, the Nevada DOT sponsored meetings in which surveys were used to make initial contacts. These contacts were used to identify representatives of American Indian nations and to administer a more comprehensive survey of transportation needs and concerns in the reservations. The questions covered the condition of roads and access to public transportation, as well as services for the elderly and handicapped. Representatives from each of the 24 Indian nations in Nevada responded, as did the executive director of the Nevada Association of Nations.

**Informal techniques are especially useful.** They include developing relationships with underrepresented groups and networking within communities. During a corridor study in East Los Angeles, the transit agency's Spanish-speaking staff walked through the neighborhood, personally inviting people to attend – which resulted in high turnout. Creating partnerships between DOT staff and community members helps increase access and familiarity on both sides. Working together, they can develop strategies for outreach, anticipate the issues and concerns people are likely to raise, identify appropriate locations for meetings, and jointly sponsor ways for the community to get transportation information.

**Many minority, ethnic, and low-income groups prefer small meetings.** They are less intimidating and more conducive to interaction. Agencies that have turned to small groups for involving ethnic populations include DOTs and FHWA Division Offices in Alaska, Idaho, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin. For example, the FHWA Division Office in Oklahoma found that Native American Tribes in the state were poorly informed as to what the highway trust fund meant and what services were available. The Division Office worked with the Oklahoma Tribal Transportation Council and state partners to establish a platform to bring consistent information to the 37 recognized Oklahoma Tribes. The end result was three workshops conducted to explain the highway trust fund and to gain cooperation, coordination, and communication between the tribes; state, county, and city officials; and the federal agencies (FHWA/Bureau of Indian Affairs). (See **Small Group Techniques**.)

**Agencies can hold meetings where ethnic or minority groups cluster in the community.** New Jersey Transit holds meetings in many unconventional places, including shopping malls, housing developments, senior centers, and work places. The Boise, Idaho, MPO reaches the underserved through group homes and head start centers. (See **Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events**; **Media Strategies**.)

**Announcements in minority or ethnic news media can heighten interest in a process.** In Seattle, Washington, the transit authority advertises in different languages in minority newspapers to obtain increased participation and greater trust in the agency's good will. The Twin Cities MPO in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota, interests the owners of minority media in an upcoming transportation process or project and, through them, the broader community. The MPO not only places advertisements but also receives much free public interest coverage from such personal contacts. The St. Louis MPO aggressively promotes public service announcements in minority media. Because radio is often preferred over newspapers, many agencies spend more funds and energy on this medium. The Sacramento, California, transit agency featured an interview and call-in show on a Spanish radio station. (See **Improving Meeting Attendance**; **Focus Groups**.)

**Financial and other incentives may be used to improve attendance.** The St. Louis MPO paid unemployed people to participate in focus groups. The Albany, New York, MPO provides scholarships for low-income people to participate in its conferences. The Alaska DOT paid airfare for some Alaska natives to attend meetings. In Montana, Blackfeet Community College offers American Indians college credits for attending community meetings. Agencies sometimes provide day care and/or transportation to help low-income people participate. The Portland, Oregon, MPO provides child care at large meetings, as does New Jersey Transit.

**Outside financial assistance may be available.** In connection with the New Mexico DOT's long- range planning, the Alliance for Transportation Research obtained a grant for a two-day conference for people not traditionally involved in transportation.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**Outreach to underrepresented groups is integral to an effective, overall public involvement program.** The initial contact with minority, ethnic, or low-income communities not only helps reach a wider audience but also sets the tone for the subsequent process or project activities. Outreach promotes a spirit of inclusion for those communities that have been outside of the decision-making process.

**Traditional public involvement techniques, i.e., formal meetings, may not be effective with underserved populations.** A variety of public involvement techniques may be needed when working with underserved populations. In order to get participation, it is valuable to hold meetings and conduct outreach in the community itself. Practitioners can research activity centers as meeting locations and venues for informal outreach. When disseminating information to the public, agencies must recognize the need to communicate with others who speak other languages. Announcements in minority or ethnic news media can heighten interest in a process.

**Minority, ethnic, and low-income groups are empowered to help make transportation decisions.** Concept mapping is a technique that involves mapping the ideas of residents and using those results in strategic plans. It includes a brainstorming activity and is very inclusive in the sense that no idea or input is excluded or "edited" in the final result. Minority, ethnic, and low-income groups can be invited to participate in civic advisory committees, task forces, and other policy bodies. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**; **Community Members on Decision and Policy Bodies**.) Such inclusion empowers these groups and provides access to the whole participatory effort. Many agencies have one or more seats for minority or ethnic members, including the Green Bay, Wisconsin, MPO; Portland, Oregon, Metro; and the Cleveland, Ohio, MPO.

### What are the drawbacks?

**Staff time and resources may be significant.** One-to-one contact requires substantial staff time and energy. Administering an outreach program involves monitoring inquiries and responses, as well as documenting and answering numerous requests for meetings or briefings. Many ethnic groups lack a tradition of participation in government and require extra urging. For example, Miami's Cuban-Americans were reluctant to participate in planning for a new rail system in the mid-70s because public participation was not part of their cultural heritage. Planners turned to the Catholic Church and the Latin chamber of commerce to obtain the perspectives of the public. Now assimilated, two decades later, this ethnic group participates vigorously. In fostering grass roots involvement, agencies need to assess carefully the cultures of each specific community, for there may be significant differences, even within an ethnic group.

**Special efforts can encounter institutional resistance.** Many innovative, creative techniques are different from past practices and may be initially uncomfortable for some agency staff. In some cases, this generates backlash. Local laws prohibiting expenditure of public funds to prepare material in languages other than English are one example. Planners who face misgivings about "special treatment" might note that techniques tailored to individual segments of the public such as business communities have long been common to effective public involvement programs.

**Reaching out to one community may exclude others.** For example, while canvassing leaders of community groups may allow agencies to reach certain populations, these leaders may not represent the entire community. Using a CAC to target participation toward specific groups could run the risk of excluding others whose voice would be equally as important. In addition, CACs are more effective when working on a project scale, and depending on circumstances, may not be as beneficial for a large scale planning process.

### Is such outreach flexible?

**Outreach to minority, ethnic, and low-income groups needs to be inherently flexible.** Agencies must constantly monitor and adjust their approaches to discover and capitalize on what works. During the project development phase of a new light rail transit system, the Denver, Colorado, transit agency disseminated information widely. One low-income neighborhood requested more information on the project. As a result, the agency established a neighborhood drop-in center both to provide more information to the community and to gather input about its concerns. (See **Drop-in Centers**.)

**To be most effective, techniques may need to be altered or augmented, because styles of communication and behavioral patterns differ from culture to culture.** Early, informal consultation with members of target groups about what barriers to participation exist and how to surmount them is essential. Often a more personal, direct dialogue is needed between agency staff members and individuals from ethnic or minority groups. When dealing with such groups, the Twin Cities MPO finds it useful to modify its meeting format to draw out the participants. It addresses the issues one-to-one by directly asking each participant his or her opinion. The Montana Native American Technology Transfer Technology Center phones individual members of the American Indian community to remind them that their attendance at an upcoming meeting is vital to assure a sound and responsive plan or program. For its project planning process, an Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department representative attends as many as four different church services on Sunday mornings to invite people to participate. In rural areas, he goes to people working in the fields, before or after their shifts.

### How is a technique for working with one low-income/minority group vs. another low-income minority group chosen?

**Ideally transportation practitioners would work with all groups affected by a program or project**, but if time and staff resources are limited, they would probably want to focus their energies on a group that would reach a broader group of people. If there are particular social or cultural implications of a program or project, groups to address them would need to be included.

**The transportation agency must determine what is an effective communication technique in reaching the community.** A variety of techniques may need to be employed to reach more than one low-income/minority group. Agencies may need to research the groups with which they would be dealing, both in general (e.g., Vietnamese people), and more specifically about the cultural/minority group in a specific location (e.g., how many are recent immigrants). Agencies should also talk with community leaders to find out the best techniques for working with the particular low-income or minority group (e.g., which approaches to use, where to hold events, how to recruit people, what to avoid doing).

**When is it used most effectively?**

**Outreach efforts to the underrepresented start early** and extend throughout the process and are integrated with other public involvement efforts insofar as possible. Informing communities of events and providing status reports help to establish a good working relationship. This approach is also very effective in diffusing potentially controversial issues by addressing concerns early.

**The advantages for early outreach** in both project development and long-range planning include:

- Diffusing potentially controversial issues;
- Allowing more people to understand a process or project;
- Broadening the range of project alternatives;
- Enhancing opportunities for creative solutions for transportation needs;
- Reducing the potential need to re-do an environmental analysis;
- Establishing good relationships with underserved groups;
- Getting people to help in the planning;
- Breaking down historical barriers; and
- Increasing chances for obtaining consensus.

**Public and staff education can begin even before a process or project planning effort is initiated.** The Denver Transit Agency sends out meeting notices to schools for children to take to their parents. It also provides bilingual, educational coloring books as an incentive to attract children who, in turn, involve their parents. A key pre-initiation activity for agency staff is self-education about the culture of the affected communities. Reflecting his people's fear of vulnerability through public involvement, a participant at the National Congress of American Indians revealed, "Once I allow you to capture my concern that way, you can trade it off against other concerns, and I will lose." Clearly, transportation planners and project managers need to be aware of such issues as they attempt to establish good-faith communication and trust.

**For further information:**

- Alaska Department of Transportation, Statewide Planning Chief, (907) 465-2171
- Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department, Environmental Division, (501) 569-2281
- Florida Department Of Transportation, West Project Field Office, (305) 262-7033
- Houston, Texas, Transit, Capital and Long-range Planning, (713) 739-4000
- Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Public Affairs Manager, (213) 244-6891
- Nevada Department of Transportation, Carson City, Nevada, (702) 687-3463
- New Jersey Transit, Executive Director of External Affairs, (201) 491-7130
- Sacramento, California, Regional Transit District, Project Manager, (916) 261-4785
- St. Louis, Missouri, MPO, Director of Policy and Programming, (314) 4241-4220
- South Carolina DOT, 803-737-1395
- South Carolina Route 72 Case Study, http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/ejustice/case/case10.htm
- Federal Highway Administration, Oklahoma Division (Proactive Outreach Process with Oklahoma's Native American population). Lubin Quinones, (405) 605-6170
- Center for Neighborhood Technology, http://www.cnt.org/
- TRB Committee on Public Involvement in Transportation, http://www.ch2m.com/TRB_PI/default.asp
- Concept Mapping, www.conceptsystems.com

## PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

### Who are people with disabilities?

**The disability community encompasses many people.** The Census 2000 Supplementary Survey estimates that approximately 17% of the American household population aged five and over has a disability. This can include functional limitations (blindness, deafness, severe vision or hearing impairments, physical mobility limitations), developmental limitations, self-care limitations, and work limitations. In addition, many other Americans are temporarily disabled during part of their lives – whether aged, infirm, or recuperating. In identifying and consulting with the disability community, agencies find a wide range of strikingly different needs. Ideas and input from people with disabilities provide insight about their needs in using the programs or facilities being developed. Additionally, people with disabilities participate as interested members of the community.

### What guidelines apply to the accessibility of public involvement activities for people with disabilities?

**The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) stipulates involving the community, particularly those with disabilities, in the development and improvement of services.** For example, in rail transit planning, participation by the disability community is essential for a key station plan. People with disabilities – in particular those who have vision impairments – rely on pedestrian and transit modes for independent mobility. Accessible sidewalks, street crossings, and accessible vehicles are effective ways of reducing community use of costly paratransit options.

**Self-evaluation and transition plans** required under the ADA (1990) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 also require consultation with people who have disabilities. Many transportation agencies rely on the advice of committees of disabled users. Also, sites of public involvement activities as well as the information presented must be accessible to persons with disabilities.

**The ADA requires specific participation activities – particularly for paratransit plans.** These include:

- Outreach (developing contacts, mailing lists, and other means of notification to participate);
- Consultation with individuals with disabilities;
- Opportunity for public comment;
- Information in accessible formats;
- Public hearings in accessible facilities;
- Summaries of significant issues raised during the public comment period; and
- Ongoing efforts to involve the disability community in planning.

**Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended in 1998, requires that Federal agencies make electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities.** Inaccessible technology can interview with an individual's ability to obtain and use information quickly and easily. Section 508 was enacted to eliminate barriers in information technology, to make available new opportunities for people with disabilities, and to encourage the development of technologies that will achieve these goals. The law applies to all Federal agencies when they develop, procure, maintain, or use electronic information technology. Its standards provide criteria specific to various types of technologies, including:

- Software applications and operating systems;
- Web-based information or applications;
- Telecommunication products;

- Video and multimedia products;
- Self contained, closed products (e.g., information kiosks, fax machines); and
- Desktop and portable computers.

**Under Section 508, Federal agencies must give disabled employees and members of the public access** to information that is comparable to the access available to others.

**Section 508 applies to the Federal government, but there may be implications at the state level.** Many states have also passed legislation requiring electronic and information technology accessibility.

**Who participates? And how?**

**People who have disabilities in sight, hearing, or mobility participate.** People with disabilities may be pedestrians, transit riders, or drivers. They share many characteristics with other users of transportation facilities – children, older Americans, and traveling with packages, suitcase, strollers, and carts. A broadened view of user characteristics in the design of transportation facilities will build support from all facets of the community. The Spokane, Washington, Transit Authority solicited disability community involvement through a “Rider Alert” program. Orange County, California, Transportation Authority scheduled one-on-one meetings with representatives of individual groups to obtain input to its planning effort. In Juneau, Alaska, public workshops were held to discuss compliance with ADA’s transportation requirements.

**Does involving people with disabilities have special requirements?**

**Both facilities and information must be accessible.** All events held for programs or projects with Federal aid and open to the general public must be made accessible to everyone, including the disability community. Meeting notices should state that the meeting is accessible and that services are provided for interpretation (based on national and state civil rights laws for public meetings). Special efforts are needed to comply with the statutory requirements of the Federal transportation legislation, and ADA, and the Section 508 of Rehabilitation Act.

**Sign language interpreters may be required**. They must be hired early, since they are in scarce supply. Two interpreters are necessary for meetings longer than one hour, to provide breaks for each other. Public notices for a meeting should state that sign language interpreters will be made available upon request, as was done by the Sacramento and San Mateo County, California, Regional Transit Districts and the Johnson City, Tennessee, Transit System. An individual who is both blind and deaf can be accommodated by a deaf/blind interpreter, who uses sign language in direct contact with that person’s hands.

**Listening assistance may be required, depending on the meeting place.** For example, small devices are available to amplify speakers’ voices via an FM, infrared, or inductive loop system. It is possible to rent or borrow them from a State commission for the deaf. In Massachusetts, the Guild for the Hard of Hearing offers them on loan. Many meeting rooms in newer buildings have embedded in the floor an inductive loop to be used for transmission. A State commission for the deaf may have Computer-Aided Real Time (CART) reporting in which the reporter transcribes proceedings onto a screen during the meeting. Cable television stations covering meetings should provide interpretation or captioning in rebroadcasting.

**A text telephone (TTY) is essential for communicating with people who are deaf or have communications impairment over the telephone.** Under the ADA, all public agencies should have this inexpensive, modem-like device for a telephone with a keyboard into which messages are typed rather than spoken. A small light-emitting diode (LED) screen on each machine shows the message. In some machines the message may also be recorded on paper tape. Many telephone systems can now be connected to utilize the computer screen and keyboard as a TTY.

**People with disabilities require materials in accessible format.** Prior to meetings, the Williamsport, Pennsylvania, Bureau of Transportation advertises the availability of its plan in large print, tape, Braille, and computer diskette formats. The Delaware Administration for Specialized Transportation certifies that plans are available in accessible formats, either in large print or on cassette tape. For people with sight impairments, documents are prepared in large (22 point) print in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Meeting announcements are prepared in large print in Wheeling, West Virginia. The Phoenix, Arizona, Regional Public Transportation Authority used large, bold, sans serif typefaces in its questionnaire on a plan update. Whichever formats are chosen, the person making the request must be able to use them. Many consumers with vision impairments now rely on electronic files, especially for larger texts.

**Many states, local agencies, and organizations have developed checklists** for planning accessible events. Below is a sample created by the Office of Equity Programs and the Fairfax Disability Service Board for Fairfax County, VA.

| **Element** | Accommodation Area | **Yes** | **No** |
|---|---|---|---|
| General | • **Do you know your agency's responsibility to provide accessibility to persons' with disabilities?** | | |
| Transportation | • **Is the facility/meeting location accessible by public transportation?**<br>• If yes, is public transportation available at the time of your meeting/training? | | |
| Evacuation | • **Do you know the emergency evacuation plans for the meeting/training location?** | | |
| Parking | • **Does the building have accessible (handicap) parking spaces?**<br>• **If yes, are they at least 8' wide and have 5'aisles next to them?** | | |
| Sidewalk | • **Are there <u>unobstructed</u> curb ramps leading to the sidewalk (walkway)?** | | |
| Walkway | • **Is there a walkway from the parking lot to the building, at least 36" wide?**<br>• Does the walkway have a stable and firm surface?<br>• If the accessible route is different from the primary route to and through the building, can you post signs with the wheelchair symbol that show the route?<br>• Is the walkway level and free of steps?<br>• If no, is there a ramp at least 36" wide?<br>• If there is a ramp, does it have a gentle slope (1" rise to 12" length)? | | |
| Entrance/Doors | • **Is the door at least 32" wide (wide enough for a wheelchair)?**<br>• Can the hardware be operated with one hand (level, push plate, etc.) with a minimum of twisting or grasping)?<br>• Are the handles low enough to reach? (maximum 48" high)<br>• Can the door be pushed open easily?<br>• Is the threshold no more than ½" high and beveled?<br>• When a vestibule, is there a minimum of 48" between the sets of doors? | | |
| Floors | • **Are the floors hard and not slippery?**<br>• Is there a floor mat to dry feet and crutch tips to prevent slipping? | | |
| Corridors | • **Is there a 36" corridor, from the entrance to where the meeting/training is held?**<br>• Is the path free of objects projecting 4" maximum into the corridor? | | |
| Elevators | • **Is there an elevator in the facility where the meeting/training is located?**<br>• If yes, is it a working one that is large enough for a wheelchair? | | |

| **Element** | Accommodation Area | **Yes** | **No** |
|---|---|---|---|
| | • Are the controls within reach? (maximum 48")<br>• Do the controls have Braille?<br>• Is there an audible signal ringing at each floor?<br>• Is there an audible two-way emergency communication system in the elevator? | | |
| Meeting/Training Rooms | • **Is there enough clearance around the table for a wheelchair to move?**<br>• Can the wheelchair pull under the edge of the table to sit close? | | |
| Restrooms | • **Is there a wide, accessible path to the restroom?**<br>• Is there a toilet stall wide enough that a wheelchair can enter and close the door behind? Interior space to turn around?<br>• Is the water closet (toilet) 17-19 inches high to the rim?<br>• Can the wheelchair roll under the sink (29 inches to the bottom)?<br>• Can the faucets be reached and turned on easily?<br>• Are the dispensers (soap, towel, etc) reachable? (maximum 48" high)<br>• Is there a mirror at an accessible height (bottom of the mirror 44" above the floor) | | |
| Interpreters | • **Do you know how to arrange for sign language interpreters?**<br>• (You must ask the participant the type of interpretation needed) | | |
| Telephone | • **Is there a Teletype unit (TTY) in your facility/agency?**<br>• If yes, is the number published on the announcements alongside the phone number?<br>• Is the staff in your agency trained to use the TTY?<br>• Can the TTY be used by those attending your meeting/training?<br>• Does the staff know how to use the Virginia Relay Center? | | |
| Assistive Listening System (ALS) | • **Does your facility have permanent assistive listening system?**<br>• If yes, do you know how to use it?<br>• Do you know how to arrange for an ALS (permanent, portable, and rental)?<br>• (You must ask the participant the type of system and listening accessory needed) | | |
| Captioning | • **Do you know how to arrange for captioning or computer assisted note-taking services?** | | |
| Videotapes | • **Do the videotapes or other broadcast programming materials that you may be using during your meeting/ training carry captioning?** | | |
| Fire Alarm | • **Are there flash fire alarm signals in the building? In the meeting/training room?** | | |
| Directions | • **Can you provide clear, detailed directions to the facility and/or the meeting room?**<br>• Is there a receptionist to offer assistance? (If not, can someone be available to help?) | | |
| Handouts | • **Can you provide the meeting/training materials in alternative formats if requested?**<br>• (You must ask the participant what format is needed) | | |
| Signage | • **Is there Braille text in the signage at the facility?** | | |
| Lighting | • **Is there adequate lighting in the elevators, hallways, stairwells, etc?** | | |

Source: Fairfax County Virginia, Office of Equity Programs, http://www.co.fairfax.va.us/service/dsb/Meetacc.htm

**Additional examples of checklists for planning accessible events can be found at:**

- ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, Planning Accessible Conferences and Meetings: An ERIC/OSEP Information Brief for Conference Planners, http://www.eric.org/digests/e735.html
- Loudoun County, Virginia, Meeting Accessibility Checklist, www.co.loudoun.va.us/services/dsb/checklist.htm
- City and County of San Francisco, Accessible Meetings or Event Policy – Checklist, www.ci.sf.ca.us/sfmod/html/accessible_meeting_or_event_poli.htm
- State of Connecticut Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities, Checklist for Ensuring Accessible Events, www.state.ct.us/opapd/publicatio/site_access.htm

### How do agencies use the output?

**Agencies' efforts are not fully inclusive of everyone's ideas until they include people with disabilities.** This requires an expansive approach to accommodate the population that is disabled.

### Who leads the process?

**Every State and MPO must make events accessible to people with disabilities.** Information on accessibility needs is offered by State commissions dealing with disabilities, deafness, rehabilitation, or blindness, as well as by local agencies or advocacy groups. Many of these groups assist in doing outreach for transportation processes.

**State agencies should be a central focus for information for individuals with disabilities.** In Massachusetts, for example, the Commission on the Blind, the Association for the Blind, and the Vision Foundation record information about dates or events and provide it to telephone callers.

### What does it cost?

**Costs may include** investigating meeting facilities for accessibility, creating/providing accessible formats of outreach materials, websites, and other information tools, and arranging for interpreters, assisted listening systems, and captioning.

### How does it relate to other techniques?

**All meetings or hearings must be accessible to comply with ADA, if they are open to the general public.** (See **Public Meetings/Hearings**; **Open Houses/Open Forum Hearings**.) This includes most public meetings or hearings, as well as charrettes, brainstorming sessions, and visioning meetings. (See **Brainstorming**; **Charettes**; **Visioning**.) Civic advisory committees can serve the interests of persons with disabilities with appropriate representation of them. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.)

### When is it most effective?

**All events may attract people with disabilities.** Special efforts and events are useful to attract people with disabilities and to encourage their participation in the process. When the expertise of the disability community is used to make an event accessible, it is likely to be more effective. (See **Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events**.)

**For further information:**

- Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers (DBTACs) – provide information, materials, technical assistance and training on the ADA, (800)-949-4232, www.adata.org
- Resources for Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act: www.access-board.gov; www.section508.gov
- Kailes, June Issacson and Daniel Jones, *A Guide to Planning Accessible Meetings*, Houston: ILRU Program. (Available from ILRU program for $25 plus P+H, 713-520-0232, TDD 713-520-5785, FAX 713-520-5785)
- Capitol Transit, Juneau, Alaska, (907) 789-6901
- Massachusetts Assistive Technology Partnership Center, Voice (617) 735-7820, TDD (617) 735-7301
- Project ACTION, *ADA Public Participation Handbook,* (202) 347-3066, (800) 659-NIAT (Voice/TTY)
- RESNA Technical Assistance Project, *Technical Assistance Personnel Directory,* (202) 857-1140

## Chapter 1. INFORMING PEOPLE THROUGH OUTREACH AND ORGANIZATION

### B. BRINGING A CORE PARTICIPATING GROUP TOGETHER

People want to have a voice in transportation decision-making for their communities, and agencies must have public involvement to create a successful planning or project development process. But where does an agency begin? One approach is to start with a core group of participants—people the agency knows are likely to have a strong interest—and then broaden the public involvement program based on work with the core group. This section presents three different approaches to establishing a core group of participants:

- Community-based organizations;
- Civic advisory committees;
- Citizens on decision and policy bodies; and
- Collaborative task forces.

Agencies form core groups for either a limited or an extended period of time, depending on the issues at hand. Core groups usually meet regularly and are sometimes assigned the tasks of reaching out and informing others who may want to participate. Membership of a core group should reflect the range of affected interests. To encourage people to participate, it is sometimes essential to provide support to offset out-of-pocket expenses or training to improve people's communication and problem-solving skills and enhance their knowledge of planning methods and terms.

A core group helps agencies establish a working relationship with the community and take its pulse as a plan or project moves forward. Agencies often use core groups as key participants in decision-making; for example, in selecting evaluation criteria or narrowing a set of possible alternatives.

## COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

### What is a community-based organization?

**A community-based organization is a group of individuals organized by and for a particular community of people based on shared interests and/or attributes.** The community could be defined geographically (e.g. a neighborhood), could contain members from diverse backgrounds, and/or could be defined on the basis of something like religious beliefs or a shared condition. Members may include various stakeholders, such as the public, elected officials, advocacy groups, and business leaders.

**A community-based organization focuses on issues and concerns at the local level** (e.g. neighborhood, layperson, city, county), not on a national scale. They are often organized around a particular purpose or cause and tend to be grass roots in nature, working from the ground level upward to address issues. Community-based organizations may also participate in regional coalitions with similar groups in support of an issue such as affordable housing, water quality, or connection of open space.

**Community-based organizations use a number of names to describe themselves**, including association, alliance, and commission. Many community-based organizations will hold regular meetings for a specific period of time where they discuss the issues of common concern. Participation on community-based organizations is generally voluntary and open to any individuals with interest in the particular issue.

**One example of a community-based organization, Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs),** function as an integral part of major decisions made in the District of Columbia. ANCs are composed of elected neighborhood residents who advise the Washington, DC government of particular issues affecting their areas including such topics as planning, transportation, safety, sanitation, and social services. There are 37 ANCs in Washington, DC's eight Wards.

**Another type of community-based organization found nationwide is a Transportation Management Association (TMA**). For example, Transportation Solutions in Denver, CO is a public-private partnership deigned to manage transportation demand by providing and promoting programs to improve accessibility and mobility in the service area. Transportation Solutions has two full-time staff members and 20 individuals who serve on the Board of Directors. Membership consists of employers, property owners, municipalities, and neighborhood representatives who are committed to better managing transportation demand.

### Why are community-based organizations useful?

**Working with these community-based groups allows transportation professionals to tap into key community players and an organizational structure that has already been created.** Regularly scheduled meetings of community-based organizations can be used as a forum for disseminating information and gathering input on transportation plans, programs, and projects at a grass-roots level.

**Community-based organizations work directly with the public and are aware of their basic goals, needs, issues, and concerns.** If the public has an issue that needs to be addressed, more people would tend to go to the local level for assistance than a regional, state, or national level. In addition, the public may trust representatives from a community-based organization more than someone from a transportation agency. Community-based organizations provide a common visible entity with which community members can identify and rally around community issues as a unit. They also give "outsiders" or "supporters" a venue with which to participate in community issues in an organized fashion. Because community-based groups are created by the public; they can exhibit power in numbers and have strong credibility and standing and well-developed connections within the community.

**Working with community-based organizations can assist agencies in hearing issues that are important to the community and in presenting and resolving complex issues.** Being involved with community-based organizations allows practitioners and agencies to develop an information network that can extend beyond transportation issues. If the community-based organization is geographically focused, it also can provide an opportunity to address a broad range of issues.

### Does a community-based organization have special uses?

**Not only do communities-based organizations represent the public at the local level,** they can also be the voice for a particular community or neighborhood regarding regional, statewide, or national issues.

**Community-based organizations can encourage participation and involve members of the community who may not otherwise participate.** For example, at the Magnolia Tree Earth Center in the Bedford Stuyvesant community in Brooklyn, NY, children in the community were able to create involvement from the community as they surveyed neighborhood residents door-to-door and participated in segments of community meetings. More parents and guardians became involved than might ordinarily have in the past because of the children's involvement.

**Community-based organizations can also be used to gain consensus about an issue or a project.** They can be used to identify and investigate particular issues in more depth (i.e., strategies for reaching the vision of a plan, development of environmental mitigation strategies, the minimization of environmental impacts). They can also be used to gain community-level information (e.g., assessing sidewalk conditions, local land use or lighting at bus stops). Community-based organizations can be of particular use when engaging in a community impact assessment.

**Community-based organizations may be particularly useful in situations when transportation agencies encountering apathy or a lack of interest about a particular issue (e.g., long range planning).** They might also be useful in situations where there are environmental justice concerns. Low-income or minority persons may be more accessible as members of community-based organizations than in other ways.

### Who participates? And how?

**Community-based organizations are typically organized at a grassroots level,** so participation tends to be broad-based. Virtually anyone can be active in such a group, so they provide an effective mechanism for working with the general public, as opposed to specific publics. Some examples of community-based organization members include: individual members of the public, representatives of community and advocacy groups, church leaders, representatives of the business community, and elected officials. Depending on the organization, members may volunteer or may be nominated, appointed, or elected.

**Many community-based organizations do not have professional staff** and some do not have formal office space or equipment. This can limit their ability with professional transportation staff during typical business hours.

**The demands of participation may influence who can participate.** These might include how often the group interacts and the timing of interaction (mid-day, evening, weekend). Participation can take a range of forms, including face-to-face gatherings and e-mail exchanges.

**How do agencies get involved with community-based organizations?**

**To get involved with community-based organizations, practitioners should research what groups are in existence in the area they are serving.** This can be done by contacting local governments to determine the "players" in the community, through word of mouth, and by being alert to advertisements/fliers for specific community-based organization activities. It is important for practitioners to maintain up-to-date contact lists for community-based organizations and key individuals in the community who can be tapped for discussions. Human service coalitions, like the United Way, colleges and universities, and national organizations often maintain contact lists.

**Practitioners could then begin attending meetings and interacting with leaders** to learn more about the organizations and their members, contact the organizations directly to discuss a particular issue, and develop presentations and materials for use with community-based groups. The practitioner may ask organization representatives what public involvement techniques would work best in getting the community engaged in the decision-making process. In addition, before interacting with community-based organizations it is important for the practitioner to clearly define what needs to be communicated to the organizations and what is hoped to be gained from establishing a relationship with them.

**How do agencies use the output?**

**Agencies can use the output from community-based organizations in several ways.** These include:

- Gauging the reaction of the larger population that the community-based organization was established to represent.
- Identifying the concerns or issues of members of the community.
- Incorporating the output into in community visioning exercises, visual preference surveys, goal setting, and policy development.
- Establishing a pattern of continuing communications with the community until the culmination of a process (e.g., when the plan is developed, when the decision is made).
- Developing plans, programs, projects, goals, policies, strategies, and alternatives and to resolve conflicts.

**What are the costs?**

**Costs of working with community-based organizations are variable.** Monetary costs for the agency may be very little, unless the organization requires technical assistance (e.g., resources, funding). Possible monetary costs include outreach materials, food and beverages at meetings, and facility charges.

**The majority of costs to the agency would be staff time to attend community meetings, work with group leaders, prepare agendas and meeting minutes, and schedule meetings and facilities.** This may differ based on location or setting. A great deal of time and effort may be needed initially to work with community-based organizations in areas where people are not participating in many existing community groups, especially if there are trust or apathy issues.

**The major cost to individuals in community-based organizations is time** to contact community members about, and participate in, meetings and events.

**Neighborhood or geography-based organizations often have multiple commitments;** housing or crime, rather than transportation, may be a priority. However, an agency can help build more capacity, for example, by training community leaders. In this situation awareness is needed with regard to local politics and the willingness of community representatives to share their knowledge of "how to get things accomplished" with others.

**How are community-based organizations used with other techniques?**

**Community based organizations can be used with other public involvement techniques easily,** including **charrettes**, **open houses**, **video**, and **public information materials**. Community-based organizations can be used with **brainstorming** to develop ideas about how to proceed with a particular project. **Visioning** can be used to determine where a community wants to go in the future. Community-based organizations can be included on **mailing lists** for surveys, meeting notices, and special activities, so that information can be disseminated through them to the individuals in the community. Often, TMAs are linked into the planning process and designated to disseminate information to all interested parties. Community based group representatives could also be selected for or elect to participate in a **civic advisory committee**.

**What are the drawbacks?**

**Community-based organizations may not be representative of the overall community.** If members are nominated, the overall community may not agree with the composition of the group and may not feel these members have their best interest in mind.

**Working with community-based organizations for public involvement can sometimes attract "professional community participants,"** i.e., those members of the community who have strong interest in an issue or high availability and can always be counted upon to attend group activities. Suggestions for broadening community participating in these instances include:

- Asking the community to identify their leaders. This may render different leaders than those that are frequently tapped. The community may not identify leaders that are frequently-tapped as representing their interest.
- Thinking about demographics (e.g., number of single parents, number of elderly who may not want to drive to a meeting in the evening) and the history of agency-public relationships in the area. Local planning and economic develop agencies, colleges and universities often maintain current demographic information.
- Seeking out and identifying the affected and targeted group first. Finding out what a group's ideas, views, likes, and dislikes are and targeting more advertisements in the affected area to make sure the right people are getting the message.
- Going directly to the group to broaden the participation. It might be best to start out by doing this at a project level, as the project may be something more concrete that the public can relate to (as opposed to the more abstract and nebulous planning process).
- Using the "buddy system;" ask each person who attends a meeting to return next time with one other person. For the ones who don't attend, try to find out why, then try to see if there's a way to utilize their talents in a different way. For example, if the community participation is voluntary and individuals have to work during the hours of the meeting, they may be able to perform background research or some other task through which the information obtained could then be funneled to the group as a whole or incorporated into the greater project at hand.

**The agency can sometimes influence the decisions of the community-based organization.** In addition, sometimes community-based organizations are not taken seriously and are considered to be trouble and a lot of unwanted "noise".

**Working with such groups can be very time consuming.** Community-based groups tend to be small and focused on a particular geographic area or issue. If a broader level of input and participation is desired, transportation professionals may have to interact with several organizations. It would time to build credible relationships and to adequately educate each group on the transportation process, particularly if there is a history of mistrust. Substantial initial time and effort may be required in forming a new community-based group if one goes beyond the most interested/most available people.

**Generally, the benefits of working with these groups outweigh the drawbacks** because community-based groups are an effective way to get directly to those impacted by transportation decisions.

**For further information:**

- South Carolina DOT, (803) 737-1395
- Washington, DC (Neighborhood Action), http://neighborhoodaction.dc.gov/main.htm
- Transportation Solutions, Denver, CO, http://www.transolutions.org/
- TRB Committee on Public Involvement in Transportation, http://www.ch2m.com/TRB_PI/default.asp
- Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations, MPO's Best Practices, http://www.ampo.org/programs/best_practices/

## CIVIC ADVISORY COMMITTEES

### What is a civic advisory committee?

**A civic advisory committee is a representative group** of stakeholders that meets regularly to discuss issues of common concern. While these groups are often called *citizens'* advisory committees, the term *civic* is used here, since citizenship is not a requirement for participation. Civic advisory committees (CACs) have been used for many years and are not in themselves innovative, yet they can be used very creatively. For example, a CAC was used in Louisiana to find consensus on environmental issues for input to public agencies. In Florida a CAC advised on designs for deployment of a traffic information system.

**Representation of agencies on a CAC is highly desirable** as a means of interaction between local residents and their government. For example, in Portland, Maine, a 35-member CAC developed a long-range transportation plan with agency help. Because it can be used either alone or in conjunction with other techniques, a CAC is widely used to achieve a basic level of local input to transportation planning and development.

**A CAC has these basic features:**

- Interest groups from throughout a State or region are represented;
- Meetings are held regularly;
- Comments and points of view of participants are recorded;
- Consensus on issues is sought but not required; and
- A CAC is assigned an important role in the process.

### Why is it useful?

**A CAC is a forum for hearing peoples' ideas.** It is a place where agencies present goals and proposed programs. It provides a continuing forum for bringing peoples' ideas directly into the process and a known opportunity for people to participate. In the San Francisco Bay area, special efforts have been made to include representatives of disabled residents and minorities, including people who speak languages other than English.

**A CAC molds participants into a working group.** It is democratic and representative of opposing points of view, with equal status for each participant in presenting and deliberating views and in being heard. It is a place for finding out stances of participants on issues. It is a place where people become educated on technical issues, over several meetings if necessary. It gives a better understanding of the effort and milestones of public agency progress. Its members feel freer to ask agencies for assistance, clarification of points, and follow-up on questions.

### Does a CAC have special uses?

**A CAC demonstrates commitment to participation.** Its existence demonstrates progress toward involving people in projects and programs. It helps find common ground for consensus about a solution. If consensus cannot be reached, a CAC provides a forum for identifying positions, exploring them in depth and reporting the divergences of opinion to the agencies.

**A CAC is flexible.** It can be part of regional or State planning or of a single project, with community participants' assistance in anticipating construction and identifying measures to reduce potential disruption. It can be subdivided. In the St. Louis area, three CACs were formed to develop the regional long-range plan.

**Who participates? And how?**

**Representatives of community groups or stakeholders** are selected in one of two ways: 1) an agency carefully identifies all stakeholders, including the general public; and 2) the public self-selects CAC memberships; i.e., those who are interested attend. If membership is not fully representative, an agency should encourage groups not represented to attend or seek their input in some other way. San Francisco County Transit Authority appoints 11 CAC members, drawing upon a pool of self-selected candidates who submit resumes. People who attend meetings are asked if they would like to be considered for CAC membership. In appointing members, the Authority proactively seeks diversity and balance of representation by race, gender, neighborhood activists, business interests, the disability community, bicycle proponents, et al. The CAC is used as a sounding board by the Authority on a wide variety of transportation issues.

**Diversity in viewpoints is a plus, to ensure full discussion.** Though no special training is required, attendees typically have a broad, long-term view in discussing issues within a geographic area—not a specific, single project. In many areas, such as the San Francisco Bay area, agencies make targeted efforts to involve freight interests.

**People participate by examining and discussing issues with others.** Mailings prior to a meeting help participants understand issues and form questions. Major points of discussion are typically recorded; in some instances substantial detail on issues is desirable.

**How do agencies use the output?**

**A CAC helps monitor community reactions** to agency policy, proposals, and progress. Observing interactions at the periodic sessions of a CAC, agencies become aware of opinions and stances at an early point in the process—often before they become solidified or difficult to modify. Working with a CAC, an agency crafts compromise positions through give-and-take and over a relatively short period of time. For example, in Pennsylvania a CAC helped determine the extent to which a highway project would affect a rapidly developing area in the Pocono Mountains.

**Who leads a CAC?**

**A CAC elects its own leader.** Dynamic and firm community leadership is effective in enlivening a CAC. In Chatham County–Savannah, Georgia, a charismatic leader strengthened the CAC's role in planning. Typically, CAC members select a leader who can deal with agencies in an open and friendly manner and who is sensitive to group dynamics and able to effectively lead the discussion and draw opinions and positions from participants.

**What does a CAC cost?**

**A CAC requires support staff within an agency,** and the work can be substantial. Meeting minutes must be taken. Background information, minutes, and agendas must be sent out before meetings. A site for the meeting must be selected. Agency representatives must attend to provide resources for CAC questions and response preparation. A CAC may want to sponsor a special meeting on transportation's role in the community, as was done in Pittsburgh. Additional assistance may be required in some instances. For example, in Washington State a CAC led by a facilitator helped plan a highway bypass on the Olympic peninsula.

**Material needs are minimal,** but a quiet meeting room is essential. Written materials may be needed at hand to supplement or give depth to the notes mailed prior to the meeting. In many cases, an agency needs to carefully explain its position or analysis, requiring staff and materials at hand.

### How is a CAC organized?

**Ideally, a CAC has limits on its size** to encourage discussion. However, flexibility is needed. Rigid limits exclude people who could provide valuable input; they also discourage future participation. If an overall size limit is undesirable, a large CAC can be divided into subgroups. However, this curtails interaction among interests. Recognizing this, a CAC and the sponsoring agency should investigate overcoming these limitations through other means. For example, conferences can be used to expose CAC members to interaction with interests not represented on the CAC.

**A CAC usually has officers,** with a chairperson or director, an assistant director to chair meetings in the absence of the chairperson, and a secretary to record minutes (this person is sometimes on an agency staff). Elected officers may serve for a year or more.

**CAC meetings are managed by the elected officers** with assistance from agency staff. Formal parliamentary procedures, if oriented toward voting, are less useful than informal rules and consensus-building techniques. Meetings are usually held on a regular basis.

**Pre-meetings help plan the regular sessions** and draft policy goals. CAC officers and agency staff work together to bring substantive issues before the larger group. Subcommittees are established to explore details of issues, with meetings held between the regular sessions of the CAC.

**A typical CAC agenda covers the following items:**

- Introductions, if attendees vary each time;
- Welcome to newcomers;
- Discussion of agenda, seeking potential changes;
- Discussion of items on agenda in order unless change is requested;
- Presentations of information as necessary for clarification; and
- Determination of whether a consensus on each issue exists.

### How is a CAC used with other techniques?

**An established CAC is a forum for many public involvement techniques.** A CAC leader can use brainstorming to establish consensus on a project. (See **Brainstorming**.) Facilitation by an outside specialist is used within a CAC to establish or resolve a particular or pressing problem. (See **Facilitation**.) A CAC uses the visioning technique to establish long-range policy goals. (See **Visioning**.) A CAC should be able to consider the special issues of people with disabilities. (See **People with Disabilities**.) Video techniques can illustrate specific points. (See **Video Techniques**.)

### What are the drawbacks?

**A CAC can seem to be manipulated by an agency** unless information from governmental sources is fully shared. The CAC may feel it is outclassed or overwhelmed by technical information if care is not taken by agencies to explain essential facts or features. In such cases, a CAC may become inactive.

**A CAC is most useful on a project or regional scale.** A statewide CAC or one for a very large region can be unwieldy when a large number of people are involved and travel is required of both staff and participants. A CAC's effectiveness depends on being able to hear and decide on the issues in an efficient and fair manner. Thus, effective leadership is essential.

**A CAC does not encompass all points of view.** By virtue of being representative, it is never all-inclusive. A CAC's voice may be skewed if it does not represent all stakeholders and the general public. It may be difficult to represent minority interests.

**Opponents may refuse to consider each other's ideas.** People who feel they are being controlled or patronized may withdraw from full participation. Agency staff members who feel that the process is leading nowhere may not respond appropriately to questions from participants.

**For further information:**

- Chatham County–Savannah, Georgia, (912) 236-9523
- E–W Gateway Coordinating Council, St. Louis, Missouri, (314) 421-4220
- Metropolitan Transportation Commission, San Francisco Bay area, (510) 464-7700
- Phoenix, Arizona, Regional Transportation Authority, (602) 262-7242
- Portland, Maine, Area Comprehensive Transportation Committee, (207) 724-9891
- San Francisco County Transit Authority, (415) 557-6850
- Southwest Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission, Pittsburgh, (412) 391-5590

## CITIZENS ON DECISION AND POLICY BODIES

### Who are citizens on decision and policy boards?

**Community people serve on policy and decision-making committees and boards.** They represent groups organized around civic, environmental, business, or community interests, or specific geographic areas, or they serve as individual experts in a field. They need not be elected officials or agency staff. The Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) appointed a community committee to develop and recommend alternatives for reconstruction of a large I–95 bridge.

**Some boards make decisions; others help formulate policy.** Regional residents sit on the decision-making Great Falls City/County Planning Board in Montana, and on Washington's Puget Sound Regional Council. The head of Georgia's Chatham County–Savannah Metropolitan Planning Committee sits on the Metropolitan Planning Organization's Project Committee. Citizens on such boards are distinct from purely advisory groups, such as civic advisory committees, that are often part of planning and project development. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.)

**These boards are established by statute, regulation, or political decision.** Ad hoc committees are set up by legislative acts or executive decision to investigate specific subjects. They may be temporary or permanent. In Portland, Oregon, a committee of community members works with the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) staff to develop scopes of service for projects and to review and select consultants. For the U.S. 301 corridor study, Maryland's Governor created a 76-member task force to address regional transportation issues, develop and evaluate possible transportation and land-use solutions, and recommend public policies. The majority of members were private citizens.

**The composition of a board varies, depending on its assigned task.** A board may include citizens and elected or appointed officials or be composed entirely of citizens. It may be assisted in its task by staff members assigned from elected officials or agency representatives. The Airport Policy Committee of the San Diego, California, MPO has a mixed representation of citizens and professionals. The Metro Council, MPO for Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota, has both citizens and elected officials on its 30-member Transportation Board, including 10 municipal elected officials, 7 elected county officials, 9 private citizens (including the chair), and 4 representatives of State or regional agencies.

**People are appointed to boards in a variety of ways.** They are nominated or appointed to these positions by public officials, or they volunteer or are elected by their peers. The ways they come to serve depend on the rules and nature of the policy body.

**The board's role establishes the amount of influence these citizens wield.** The 76-member task force overseeing the U.S. 301 Corridor Planning Study in Maryland has virtually total decision-making power. Composed entirely of citizens appointed by the Governor, Arizona DOT's Transportation Board has final say on the State's five-year plan, the transportation improvement program, and State transportation planning projects.

### Why are they useful?

**Community people bring new points of view, new ideas, and a community perspective directly into the decision-making process.** Little Rock, Arkansas, MPO found that people were able to integrate political and technical engineering issues in solving problems. They focused on whether an idea made sense to them, their neighbors, and the people most affected by the decision.

**Ad hoc committees help local people participate in decision-making.** For the Albuquerque, New Mexico, MPO's Urban Area Truck Route Task Group, membership was solicited through more than 300 letters to neighborhood, advocacy, and business groups. Volunteers worked with technical staff from the city and a neighboring county to develop a commercial vehicle network plan processed as though it were an agency-prepared plan.

**Decisions have greater legitimacy if residents are involved.** Including local people in decision-making demonstrates an agency's commitment to participatory planning. At the contaminated U.S. Department of Energy site in Rocky Flats, Colorado, a community committee directed the planning of an off-site hazardous waste sampling program. In essence, such empowerment validates the principle that people want—and should be able—to decide what is best for their community.

### Do they have special uses?

**Citizen committees oversee specific aspects of complicated programs.** For the Hudson River Waterfront Alternatives Analysis/Draft Environmental Impact Statement in New Jersey, local residents directed agency staff in implementing air quality monitoring.

**Community representatives work directly with project design consultants.** For proposed construction of I–70 through Glenwood Canyon in Colorado, the Governor appointed area residents to work with the State's highway planners and the principal design consultants to address public concerns from the beginning of preliminary engineering and highway design. Along with frequent public hearings, local representation served to satisfy public demand for a greater voice in the project.

**Local people facilitate communication between decision-making bodies.** The Airport Policy Committee of the San Diego, California, MPO worked with officials to forge consensus on several controversial issues. These people provided a free flow of ideas, unconstrained by concerns for existing policies, and were able to help overcome political deadlock.

**Community representatives serve as informed spokespersons for an agency's programs.** Individuals from the Boise, Idaho, MPO citizen committee host public meetings, speak to other organizations, and attend neighborhood events. They use non-technical language to make citizens more comfortable and willing to participate in discussion.

**Residents help achieve an agency's goals.** For the Dade County, Florida, rail system, a decision-making committee was appointed, composed of elected officials and neighborhood representatives. These citizens subsequently provided leadership on two referenda supporting funding for the new rail system.

**Civic outreach committees assist with public involvement programs** and provide advice based on what they hear in their own discussions with the public. Seattle's Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) appointed a group of people to assist in developing a ballot proposal for regional transit.

### Who participates on these boards?

**People who serve on policy boards are drawn from many sources.** They include community and business leaders, leaders from special interest groups, and interested individuals. Length of tenure varies, depending on tasks, but is generally one to five years.

**It is important to recognize special interests.** The Hartford, Connecticut, MPO agency-wide technical committee includes representatives of four private groups: the American Lung Association, the Chamber of Commerce, a construction industry association, and a ridesharing corporation. The board of the Port Authority of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, has long included representatives from the Sierra Club and the League of Women Voters.

**What are the costs?**

**Monetary costs are usually nominal.** Local people appointed to policy boards are seldom paid. Costs to support their participation include agency staff time, postage, transportation, and occasional meals. Many agencies economize by sending the same information packages to both elected officials and boards that include citizens. Costs of including community people on existing boards are likely to be lower than those of forming an entirely new board or committee such as a collaborative task force.

**Staffing requirements may be very small.** A 1995 nationwide survey of transit agency policy committees showed that staff support to the committees averaged 12.4 hours per month. Full-time staff members with assignments including support to these committees averaged 1.2 people. However, even modest requirements of staff time may pose a challenge to small MPOs.

**How is this organized?**

**The first step is to determine the need for local representation.** Agencies may be aware of the need because of comment or criticism from local people. The media sometimes call for local representation when an agency undertakes a specific task. An agency also becomes aware through discussions with peers in other areas.

**Another step is to research legal requirements.** State laws may specify whether individuals may sit on MPO boards. Participation may be limited by an organization's by-laws.

**An agency devises a strategy for local representation,** designing community positions to suit the board's functions and objectives. The Albany, New York, Capital District Transportation Committee (CDTC)—all elected officials—puts local people on many task forces, along with local agency representatives and institutional and business leaders.

**An agency solicits local interest in a variety of ways.** The media help by opening the issue to public discussion. A letter soliciting interest in participation on boards or committees might be sent in a general mailing. For a long-range planning effort, the Albany CDTC took a sample survey of local people to determine potential interests in participating on planning and policy committees.

**An agency seeks a balance of various viewpoints.** The nature of a task may draw volunteers who represent only one side of an issue, yet a board should encompass many stances.

**A formal appointment process is established.** A simple letter or a more formal event lends legitimacy to the process and gives satisfaction and encouragement to an appointee. A written document formalizes the time frame, responsibilities, and the expected products. It is also important to point out the extent of the powers that accompany the appointment and how the results of the task will affect further agency actions.

**Agencies involve elected officials and keep them informed.** Officials are often able to provide helpful insight. They may also want to be apprised of the board's progress.

**Agencies determine the nature of their involvement on boards.** It may take the form of representation, usually in an ad hoc and non-voting capacity. It may involve board support, in the form of staff services, meeting space, and use of equipment for presentations and recording of proceedings. In some instances, agencies supply meals, especially if participants travel long distances or a meeting is held during a conventional meal hour.

**A method of selecting a committee chair is determined.** Often a board selects its own chair, or the chair is appointed. If elections are to take place, introductions of board member candidates are appropriate, so that an informed selection is made. Introductions can be informal or take a more formal approach, such as written position papers that define an individual's expectations and goals for the processes and products.

**Meeting frequency is derived from the size of the task and its deadlines.** In order to accomplish an assignment, a board may need to meet frequently. Many citizen committees meet monthly, but specific projects or responsibilities may dictate different schedules. Board members should play a major role in determining meeting frequency.

**Communication is maintained between meetings.** Minutes of each meeting are kept for the record and distributed to remind participants of past events and decisions. Issue papers are distributed prior to meetings to help people prepare and to aid discussions. Many agencies keep local representatives informed with periodic status reports.

**Decision-making bodies need time to adjust to the dynamics of public involvement.** In some cases, important informal communication occurs during breaks or outside formal meeting hours. For effective communication among policy board members, the sponsoring agency may take time to foster a positive atmosphere or use familiar procedures. For guidance, many MPOs, such as those in Portland, San Diego, and Phoenix, employ the commonly-understood meeting procedures outlined in *Robert's Rules of Order.*

**Ethical issues must be considered.** Public agencies frequently have established rules of professional ethics, and these rules extend to community participants. For example, potential conflicts of interest need to be identified and addressed immediately.

### How is this used with other techniques?

**Community representatives are important components of a public involvement program** and complement almost any other technique. However, local representation cannot be the sole method an agency uses to involve the public in the planning process. Community representatives are most effective if they relate continuously with their constituent groups and participate in an agency's other public involvement outreach techniques.

**Local representatives are ideal speakers.** They are generally well-informed and usually have extensive experience and exposure to issues. They are good candidates for a speakers' bureau, but agencies must remain considerate of demands placed on their time. (See **Speakers' Bureaus and Public Involvement Volunteers**.)

### What are the drawbacks?

**The selection and appointment process may be criticized,** especially if the appointee's qualifications are questioned or if the process is seen as closed or unfair. To counter such charges, an agency can develop a strategy for the process that is comprehensive and well-understood.

**Board members may not be fully representative.** Selected representatives may not share the prevailing opinions of the communities they represent. An agency sometimes needs to expand the number of representatives to bring in underrepresented interests.

**Balanced representation of interest groups is crucial** in avoiding controversy. Disputes over representation require skillful diplomacy to maintain the legitimacy of the process.

**Agency culture sometimes presents barriers.** Agencies that perceive themselves as empowered with sole decision-making responsibility are reluctant to share authority with non-elected citizens. An agency's traditional organization or decision-making style may block efforts to increase the influence of private citizens on decision or policy bodies.

**For further information:**

- Alaska Department of Transportation, Juneau, Alaska, (907) 465-2171
- Capital District Transportation Committee, Albany, New York, (518) 458-2161
- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1357
- Connecticut Department of Transportation, Newington, Connecticut, (860) 594-2939
- Little Rock Metropolitan Planning Organization—Metroplan, Little Rock, Arkansas, (501) 372-3300
- Maryland State Highway Administration, Baltimore, Maryland, (410) 333-6431
- Portland, Maine, Area Comprehensive Transportation Study, (207) 774-9891
- San Diego Association of Governments, San Diego, California, (619) 595-5300

## COLLABORATIVE TASK FORCES

### What is a collaborative task force?

**A collaborative task force is a group assigned a specific task,** with a time limit for reaching a conclusion and resolving a difficult issue, subject to ratification by official decision-makers. Its membership usually includes local people or representatives from interest groups, appointed by elected officials or agency executives. Agency staff people are frequently assigned to provide technical support. Collaborative task forces have been used on a project level and for resolving issues within a project.

**A collaborative task force differs from a civic advisory committee and citizens on decision and policy bodies.** While they focus on similar issues, each plays a different role in the decision-making process. A civic advisory committee acts primarily in an advisory role, studying issues and presenting a mosaic of opinion to the agency; consensus is not required. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.) Citizens on decision and policy bodies are local community people appointed, along with other representatives, to boards or agencies that make decisions or propose recommendations to elected officials. (See **Citizens on Decision and Policy Bodies**.) By contrast, a collaborative task force usually helps solve a specific problem, working strenuously toward consensus and presenting a strong and unified voice.

**A collaborative task force has these basic features:**

- A sponsoring agency committed to the process;
- A broad range of representative interests;
- Emphasis on resolving an assigned issue through consensus;
- Detailed presentations of material and technical assistance for complete understanding of context and subject matter; and
- Serial meetings to understand and deliberate the issues.

### Why is it useful?

**A collaborative task force can extend community input for decision-making and enhance self-governance.** Task force discussions help agencies understand participants' qualitative values and reactions to proposals. They can aid in development of policies, programs, and services and in allocation of resources. A collaborative task force was used to explore alternatives for the Charles River crossing of Boston's proposed depressed Central Artery and to recommend a preference to the Massachusetts Highway Department.

**A collaborative task force helps resolve impasses** through a participatory process. Following a difficult process or unsettled controversy, it involves people in solving a problem. In Fort Worth, Texas, the issue of a controversial widening of a downtown interstate freeway was assigned to a collaborative task force.

**Decisions can be expected to have broad (although not universal) community support.** Task force members represent a broad cross-section of interests. This helps legitimate the process and decisions. The views expressed are typically exhaustive. Often the group begins by making small and specific decisions early in the process; later group decisions become somewhat easier.

### Does it have special uses?

**A collaborative task force deals with high-profile issues** that have generated significant public or media attention and community polarization. It can be used productively at any time in a complex project or planning study, but because of time and cost commitments it is often used to resolve an impasse. If some participants or the agency itself take intractable positions, consensus is very difficult or impossible to achieve. (See **Facilitation; Negotiation and Mediation**.)

**It can bring together a wide range of opinions** to assist in exploring issues. The breadth of representation is accompanied by depth of probing. In a collaborative task force, a great depth of discussion is expected and can be accommodated. For example, in Maine a group of 58 community people and agencies worked together to explore Turnpike widening and alternative modes of transit in implementing an initiative approved by the voters.

### Who participates? And how?

**Participant groups are invited by the sponsor,** with the groups selecting their representatives. Representatives are selected from affected interests, but the collaborative task force may add new representatives to round out its membership.

**A broad cross-section of interests is desirable** and may include local governments, transportation or environmental groups, civic or business groups, and consumer organizations. Other people are involved through outreach and participation programs, including open house presentations or newsletters. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

**People participate by engaging in the discussion.** Members of the group react to each other's opinions and bring up alternative ideas. The facilitator guides discussion to cover all agenda items that the group determines it wants to cover. Coaching and training of participants in the process and in conflict resolution is sometimes necessary.

### How do agencies use the output?

**A collaborative task force helps resolve a difficult issue** or problem. Such a group is used primarily when an agency can seriously commit to incorporating the group's decision into ongoing work. Because of the important role of a collaborative task force, the sponsor may agree to ratify its findings, if not too costly or unimplementable. For example, the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) formed a collaborative task force to deal with the difficult issues of rebuilding an interstate highway bridge and its approaches in downtown New Haven and agreed to accept the task force's consensus recommendations among alternatives if technically feasible and within the budget.

**The sponsor sets broad limits on issues to be explored.** A mission statement for the task force is clearly identified before it begins its work. The schedule reflects the complexity of the issue and the time required to come to a resolution within the task force.

**Many sponsors observe groups in a non-participatory role** without assuming any leadership function. Representatives of the sponsor respond to questions from the group and provide technical assistance while retaining a neutral position. Expressions of support for the process from high-level agency leaders also help sustain commitment and progress, especially when a task force is wrestling with difficult issues.

### Who leads a collaborative task force?

**A collaborative task force needs a facilitator** to maintain the agenda and schedule and assure that all participants are heard. The facilitator assists participants in verbalizing or crafting positions and in developing a constructive process for group decision-making, problem-solving, and conflict resolution.

**The facilitator plays a special role in the task force.** Feedback and encouragement to the group are required to maintain progress in the development of issues and steps toward resolution. Facilitators need to tell the group when the process is doing well and warn them if a dead end or irresolvable conflict is approaching. They may need to coach and instruct task force members in methods of conflict resolution.

**The facilitator must be viewed as neutral to the process** but supportive of the goals and outcomes determined by the group. The chosen person may be from inside an agency but is typically an outsider provided by the sponsor. The group can dismiss the facilitator if it perceives that the person is not serving their interests.

### What does a collaborative task force cost?

**Significant resources are required.** A facilitator experienced in group processes and conflict resolution is mandatory, and staff technical support required. Graphics—and in some cases, presentations by technical experts in language geared to lay people—are necessary to understand technical issues. Modeling of anticipated impacts, structural and engineering issues, and traffic simulations need to be explained. Each meeting can consume several hours.

**Specialized consultants may be needed** to provide a neutral facilitator or technical support for complex projects. Schedules are tailored to fit the needs of participants and the sponsor. Meetings may be held in the evening to allow participants to attend without interfering with daytime jobs. The time required for preparation is substantial, because each meeting must be tailored to the agenda determined by the group.

**Policy support within an agency is required.** Staff follow the course of discussions and respond to the need for information. A neutral meeting site not associated with the agency or any stakeholder must be selected. Staff work is essential for preparation of meeting minutes, notices of upcoming meetings, correspondence, newsletters, press releases, or advertisements about outreach events.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**A collaborative task force uses other techniques as needed.** Brainstorming or a charrette can be integral to a task force's work as it seeks solutions to difficult problems. (See **Brainstorming; Charrettes**.) Visioning may establish a desirable goal to work towards. (See **Visioning**.) Facilitation is essential early in the process, when goal-setting helps establish a means to measure progress. (See **Facilitation**.)

**A task force can sponsor its own events** to apprise the community of issues and potential solutions. These events are useful ways to elicit and review community comments and to find responses as appropriate.

### How is it organized?

**The sponsor determines the interests to be represented** on the task force and selects a facilitator. Typically, a cross-section of organizations is invited to participate, and each selects its representative to the group. The task force then identifies additional participants essential for broad representation. On two rapid transit lines in Boston, task forces were assembled for design of each individual station. The Federal Transit Administration has a current project to develop collaborative decision-making processes.

**A collaborative task force has a target date** determined by the sponsor to provide a framework for and guide scheduling. For example, in Canada a task force of 24 interest groups met over an extended period to plan a light-rail transit facility for Calgary, Alberta. A task force's mission may be defined by the sponsor in broad terms, but the group usually determines its own approach to problem-solving. It is self-governing, and its work is usually based on a consensus process rather than voting.

**The sponsor sets an overall schedule,** leaving detailed scheduling to the task force itself. The sponsor provides technical support, either from within the agency or from consultants familiar with the topic. To retain neutrality, the technical staff should not be co-workers of the facilitator.

**The task force determines the need for a chairperson.** The group develops its own norms or rules to guide the process over time. These may be explicit or implicit; in some instances they are prepared in written form to remind participants of their expressed intent.

**The task force monitors its own progress.** Where appropriate, the facilitator reminds the group of the agenda and schedule and makes suggestions to keep the work moving toward resolution.

**What are the drawbacks?**

**The process is long and expensive.** To achieve a full understanding of all issues, an extensive number of meetings and presentations is required. This long process demands patience, good will, and a commitment of continued funding. Participants must make an extensive commitment to the process. Staying with the program over a long period of time may be difficult for many individuals. Similarly, agency commitment is critical; the process can be long and wrenching.

**A high degree of facilitation skill is required** to keep the task force on course. Technical support is needed to respond to questions and prepare responses to unforeseen work that may be requested.

**For further information:**

- Calgary, Alberta (Canada) (Light-rail study), (403) 268-1612
- Connecticut Department of Transportation, Environmental Planning Division (Q Bridge Study), (860) 594-2939
- Federal Transit Administration Collaborative Decision-Making, (202) 366-4060
- Massachusetts Highway Department (Charles River Crossing Design Review Committee), (617) 973-7000
- Texas Department of Transportation (Ft. Worth study), (871) 370-6542

## Chapter 1. INFORMING PEOPLE THROUGH OUTREACH AND ORGANIZATION

### C. PROVIDING SUBSTANTIVE INFORMATION AND ESTABLISHING METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

Public involvement is a two-way street. In order to participate effectively in transportation project development and planning, people need ways to both get information from an agency and give information back to it.

On the one hand, then, agencies need to provide attractive, eye-catching materials that convey the appropriate "message." Desktop publishing and ever-changing communication technologies offer agencies new, faster, and more varied ways to capture the public's interest and give them the information they need to understand what is being proposed. This variety allows agencies to tailor public information pieces to specific purposes, media, audiences, projects, or plans and to update them quickly and easily.

On the other hand, agencies need to offer people effective, easy ways to communicate so that the ideas and concerns of the community are heard and attended to.

The following section describes some techniques that help agencies provide information and establish communication with the public:

- Mailing lists;
- Public information materials;
- Key person interviews;
- Briefings;
- Video techniques;
- Telephone techniques;
- Media strategies; and
- Speakers' bureaus and public involvement volunteers.

## MAILING LISTS

### What are mailing lists?

**Computer technology has revolutionized the process of compiling and updating mailing lists**—a staple of most public involvement programs. Simplicity, ease, flexibility, and speed now characterize the once-cumbersome process of maintaining and using collections of names of those affected by or interested in a project or plan—including organizations, residents, media, elected officials, abutters, agency personnel, interest groups, and others. Agencies use mailing lists throughout planning and project development to keep a thumb on the pulse of the community and other key people. Lists include addresses but may also include telephone and FAX numbers or other information to aid in contacting people in a variety of ways. Using mailing lists, a transportation agency reaches an audience with announcements of upcoming events, meeting invitations, newsletters, summary reports, and other information about its activities.

**List size is affected by a number of factors,** including stakeholder population and the scope of the project, study, or plan for which names are being collected. The Atlanta Regional Commission's Family of Partners has 1,200 names. Some organizations maintain larger lists; Portland, Oregon, Metro's list comprises 60,000 names. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) retains an outside list-management firm to handle its large master list, while smaller, more frequently used lists are maintained in-house.

### Why are they useful?

**Mailing lists help an agency organize its public communications,** particularly when lists are kept up-to-date on computer. New Jersey Transit, with approximately 1,000 names on its Monmouth–Ocean–Middlesex Counties mailing list, identifies names and addresses, group affiliation, municipality, county, facsimile number, and committee membership. It can assemble a mailing to specific groups or committees by using computerized search and sort capabilities. The master mailing list of the Portland, Oregon, Metro includes names gathered by several of its divisions. These lists are combined and sorted by computer to avoid duplicates when the agency wishes to contact the entire group.

**Mailing lists demonstrate an agency's outreach efforts.** A large mailing list shows that an agency has tried to reach many people. A list demonstrates that an agency has worked diligently to justify funding for a project or to involve or interest the public in its work.

**Mailing lists allow agencies to provide updated information quickly.** As agencies become more active in reaching out to communities, people expect to receive continual updates on meetings.

**Mailing lists can focus on a targeted group of people.** Those most affected by a proposal want to receive information on an agency's intentions and on the progress of the work. Special efforts should be made to include names of those who should be interested in what the agency is doing.

**Computerization maximizes the flexibility and usefulness of mailing lists.** From a database list, computers can generate mailing labels or customize the greeting in form letters. This "merging" of names with form letters allows personalization of each letter, rather than addressing a generic "Resident" or "To Whom it May Concern." Computers generate lists and sort according to specific criteria, such as zip codes. They also facilitate updates of information.

**Computerized mailing lists form records of persons an agency has contacted.** They can contain information gleaned from sign-in sheets, phone-call logs, and correspondence. New Jersey Transit uses its list as a record of meetings and events attended by individuals, as well as of their individual issues and concerns.

**Agencies analyze mailing list information to evaluate programs.** Agencies examine the effectiveness of a public involvement program by comparing the names on its mailing list with the names of people who have responded or participated. Areas where the population has not responded can be targeted for special attention.

**Do they have special uses?**

**Mailing lists provide an off-the-shelf pool of potential committee and task force members,** particularly if they comprise names of people who have signed in at meetings, called in to a hotline, or expressed interest in an issue—in other words, people who may want to serve in an advisory capacity. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**; **Collaborative Task Forces**; **Citizens on Decision and Policy Bodies**; **Hotlines**.) In Georgia, the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC)—a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)—developed a Transportation Resource Bank of over 1,200 names of people who signed in at its planning meetings. For a subsequent major investment study, ARC contacted people on the list to develop a set of committee representatives with a variety of perspectives.

**Agencies can reach all property owners who are affected** by a project or program. New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) uses tax maps to identify holders of property within a certain distance of a project. The DOT then sends them mailings about the project and associated hearings.

**Mailing lists are used as a basis for surveys.** Larger lists are better in this respect, since they take a larger sample of a population. Lists comprising registered voters provide a random sample, while lists of people who are interested in a project define a self-selected group. A survey to this type of group is still useful, since the respondents are more likely to be well-informed. However, such a survey should not be regarded as statistically valid (i.e., it does not represent the opinion of a representative sample of the population). (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

**How are mailing lists compiled?**

**Agency staff develops a list of people who want to receive information.** A small, active list of people begins the process and then grows over time as more people become involved. Additions to a list are often keyed into agency actions or specific milestones in a project or planning effort.

**People get on a list by signing in at a meeting.** People also participate when they phone in comments or suggestions to an agency, if the agency makes a record of the caller's name and address. Agencies offer mail-in coupons in newsletters or local newspapers to encourage people to get information by joining the mailing list.

**Mailing lists can and should be shared** among offices within an agency and perhaps with other agencies and organizations. Outreach is enhanced as the number of names increases, and sharing information helps keep the costs of list maintenance reasonable. The Capital District Transportation Committee (CDTC)—the Albany, New York, MPO—has assembled lists from other groups, including New York State DOT, New York State Thruway Authority, freight industry organizations, the Women's Transportation Seminar (WTS), the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE), the American Planning Association (APA), and Delta Nu Alpha (a fraternal organization of transportation professionals). For 10 projects along San Francisco's waterfront, the City established a shared mailing list of more than 3,000 participants with interests of individuals coded by project.

**How are they organized and maintained?**

**The most basic task is to assess needs and expectations for the list.** What information does an agency want to distribute? What methods will be used to package the information? How frequently will the list be used? How much effort can be put into its maintenance? What resources are available?

**A second step is to structure the information to be maintained.** On computer, each individual's information constitutes a separate record, which is organized in categories called fields. A basic set of fields might include:

- Name
- Street number
- Street name
- Post office
- State
- Zip code
- Municipality (often different from Post Office)
- County
- Phone number
- Facsimile number

Optional information could include:

- E-mail address
- Occupation
- Household size
- Adults in household
- Affiliation (government official, interest group, etc.)
- Meetings attended
- Mailings sent
- Statements or other responses made
- Membership on committees
- Source of information if names are an assemblage of other mailing lists

**Some fields may remain blank for some individuals.** Most records include only names and addresses. A new field may be added at any time when a mailing list is used for a specific purpose, such as keeping track of attendance at a particular meeting.

**A third step is to gather names and addresses.** A variety of information-gathering methods allows an agency to reach a large portion of the population. Organizations use hotlines to build their mailing lists by having callers leave names, addresses, phone numbers, and other useful pieces of information. (See **Hotlines**.) Agencies might work with an organization that reaches most or all of the population via services such as motor vehicle registration, voter registration, tax returns, or utility billing. The Minnesota DOT cooperates with utilities to send mailings out via utility bills. Albany's CDTC used the local phone book to identify stakeholders and interest groups for a survey of the freight community. The Portland, Oregon, Metro linked tax assessor's information and addresses for all property owners in the region to its geographic information system (GIS). Metro uses this program to inform people within a specific geographic area, municipality, street, or census tract.

**A fourth step is to enter the data onto the list.** This is a continuous process as new people attend meetings or use hotlines, addresses change, or an agency takes steps to broaden its constituency. Again, computerization greatly facilitates this process. Albany's CDTC and the San Diego Association of Governments send out return-mail postcards to people on its list. Recipients are asked to return the cards, updating the information if they wish to remain on the list. Those who do not return the card are dropped from the list, thus making it more cost-effective.

**A fifth step is to use the list for mailings.** A list can be printed out directly on envelopes or on labels for newsletters, announcements, and flyers. It can be merged with a form letter for personalized contact. Specialized lists may be developed from a master list by sorting the records according to a parameter within a single field. To conserve expenditures in agency staff time and energy, private services such as mailing houses can handle large mailings.

**These steps constitute an ongoing process.** As the list expands and changes, it can be reassessed for its value to the agency. New names and information are added to keep a list up-to-date. The Alaska DOT has kept a mailing list for 30 years. It includes members of the public but changes over time to reflect new elected officials and representatives from neighborhood and Alaskan native groups.

### How are they used by agencies?

**Agencies send out information in a variety of ways.** General information, such as newsletters, meeting announcements, or invitations, can go out to an entire list. (See **Public Information Materials**.) When sending specialized reports and other documents, the Central Puget Sound RTA, the Southwest Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission, the Atlanta Regional Commission, and Albany's CDTC all sort their lists to target specific stakeholders. For a transportation improvement program, an agency may send a summary to an entire mailing list, along with a notice that the complete report is available, while sending the full document to a selected group.

**Agencies disseminate information and keep a record of interested parties.** Agencies can keep records of comments received as well as personal profiles. Records of comments give agencies access to the opinions of a segment of their constituents. The San Diego, California, Association of Governments uses its mailing lists to keep track of the memberships of over 40 committees.

**Agencies maintain a master list, with subsets to contact on specific issues.** Agencies add names collected during all outreach activities and sort the list for people interested in a particular issue for a targeted mailing. In Washington State, the Central Puget Sound RTA maintains a master list of all names and a priority list of people with a greater level of responsibility. If an agency is about to make a presentation to the governing body of a town, people from that town can be selected to receive notices or invitations.

### Who leads?

**Agency staff leads in setting up a mailing list.** The effort of building and maintaining mailing lists is often significant and requires the support and commitment of an agency's senior management.

**Mailing lists need an organizer and caretaker** to determine the fields to be included and to keep the list up-to-date. A skilled and creative clerical person with good computer skills and attention to detail can easily execute the work. Organizers of meetings and other public events can be enlisted to collect names and addresses of participants.

### What are the costs?

**Building and maintaining a large mailing list is a labor-intensive process** that can be fairly expensive. Albany's CDTC allocates about 5 hours per week to maintenance of its database (approximately 900 names). Additional time is needed during peak periods when a large number of names is received or if a large mailing is underway. The San Diego Association of Governments dedicates approximately 10–15 staff hours per week to administration of its list (approximately 11,000 names). A Portland Metro staff person dedicates virtually all of her time to maintaining its 60,000-name mailing list.

**Mailing lists are labor-saving devices, particularly if computerized.** They allow an agency to contact many people at one time with individualized letters or other materials. They save staff time on phone calls. A well-organized, computerized list simplifies clerical tasks related to correspondence, which can lead to a reduced clerical workload and an associated cost reduction.

**Equipment requirements are fairly modest.** Most data management software packages can run on a desktop computer and are available for under $300. Data storage is an issue if a list becomes especially large, but a large list can be stored on a computer's hard drive or cartridge and backed up on floppy disks. Mailing labels or envelopes can be printed out on most standard printers.

**Large lists incur significant mailing and printing costs,** but there are economies of scale. A typical newsletter is cheaper to print after the first 1,000 copies. Bulk mail costs vary, depending on the number of pieces sent to each zip code. If an agency wants to blanket a community, newspaper inserts are a good alternative to bulk mailings. New Jersey Transit recently used newspaper inserts to distribute 50,000 newsletters to key communities in the Burlington–Gloucester major investment study area and 25,000 newsletters to its Monmouth–Ocean–Middlesex major investment study corridor. For smaller mailing lists, other options may be more attractive. Bulletins from San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) reach a list of about 500–600 businesses via facsimile machines.

**How are mailing lists used with other techniques?**

**A mailing list is a basic building block of a good public involvement program.** It allows an agency to stay in direct touch with people who have an interest in its planning and projects. Used periodically throughout a process to distribute information, mailing lists require and contribute to a record of people interested in transportation.

**Mailing lists are used to structure information** from other techniques for gathering names. These include hotlines, other telephone logs, and communications logs. (See **Hotlines**.)

**Mailing lists are used to send out newsletters or other publications.** Newsletters, pamphlets, or other printed matter update people on the progress and major milestones of a project or planning process. Announcements of public meetings, open houses, and other events are facilitated by a well-maintained mailing list. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

**Mailing lists are a basis for on-line contacts with participants.** Kansas City, Missouri's MPO, the Mid-America Regional Council, is developing its mailing list into a civic advisory network to reach people on the Internet as well as through postal services. (See **On-line Services**.)

**Mailing lists help set up civic advisory committees or other groups.** The New Jersey DOT, the Atlanta Regional Commission, and the Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission in Pittsburgh use mailing lists to look for potential members of Community Advisory Committees, focus groups, or ad hoc task forces. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**; **Collaborative Task Forces**; **Focus Groups**; **Citizens on Decision and Policy Bodies**.)

**Mailing lists help in administering community surveys.** Washington State DOT has used its mailing lists to distribute surveys. The Portland, Oregon, Metro mailed a survey to 400,000 people (60 percent of households in the metro area) and received 20,000 returns, a 5-percent response rate. As part of its Transportation Policy Plan Study, Pennsylvania DOT sent out a survey attached to its newsletter and received approximately 400 responses. It should be noted that mailing lists are usually not a statistically valid method of surveying. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

**Mailing lists help in setting up speakers' bureaus.** The Atlanta Regional Commission has used its mailing list to develop a speakers' bureau that consists of a number of volunteers who meet with interested groups to discuss transportation issues. This "Family of Partners" (a concept also being explored by Georgia DOT) was developed using ARC's list of meeting sign-ins. (See **Speakers' Bureaus and Public Involvement Volunteers**.)

**What are the drawbacks?**

**The principal drawback is the amount of time needed to set up a list.** This time commitment entails a significant labor cost. Postage and printing costs for large lists also put great strain on a budget.

**To be cost-effective, mailing lists must be kept current.** Albany's CDTC and the San Diego Association of Governments send return postcards to help weed out names of people who are not interested in being kept on the lists.

**Mailing lists can exclude a segment of the population.** Traditionally-underserved populations, such as immigrants or poor people, are particularly vulnerable to being excluded. These people frequently do not come into contact with an agency until a direct impact becomes an issue. Special efforts can broaden the reach of an agency's mailing list. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**; **People with Disabilities**.)

**Trading names and addresses with other agencies is an issue.** Some people are concerned about their privacy when agencies trade their addresses. Agencies need to inform people that lists will not be used for commercial purposes but for keeping people abreast of recent developments.

**Mailing lists are not a statistically-valid basis for surveys.** Agencies should be cautious when using data received from surveys, particularly those from small lists. A list built from sign-in sheets and committee memberships represents a self-selected group, not a methodically-selected random sample of the population. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

**Sometimes agencies rely excessively on mailing lists to maintain contact with the public.** Often, the public treats bulk mailings as junk mail and ignores them. Agencies need to remember that mailings cannot replace direct contact through meetings, focus groups, drop-in centers, etc.

**Are mailing lists flexible?**

**Mailing lists are applied to a multitude of tasks,** including the building of committees, focus groups, and task forces, distribution of surveys, and of course the distribution of notices, newsletters, and reports. They can be tailored to contain virtually any informational category. Lists can be sorted to make sub-lists of people based on location, occupation, issues, interests, or other criteria.

**When are they used most effectively?**

**Mailing lists are used throughout a process and for many purposes,** but they should be linked to other public involvement activities. A mailing list is meaningless unless an agency has newsletters, announcements, invitations, or other printed materials to send to the public. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

**For further information:**

- Alaska Department of Transportation, Juneau, Alaska, (907) 465-6971
- Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2575
- City of San Francisco Chief Administrative Office, (415) 554-5782
- Mid-America Regional Council, Kansas City, Missouri, (816) 474-4240
- New Jersey Transit, Newark, New Jersey, (201) 491-8077
- San Diego Association of Governments, San Diego, California, (619) 595-5300
- Washington State Department of Transportation, Olympia, Washington, (206) 705-7958

## PUBLIC INFORMATION MATERIALS

### What are public information materials?

**Public information materials are materials that provide information** about a transportation investment that is underway or in the planning stage. They are usually printed but sometimes are video or tactile. Public information materials are an essential form of communication in any public involvement process. The substance of the materials can be factual, present a point of view, or in some instances be legally required and thus need special drafting.

**Public information materials communicate quickly.** They are often visually appealing, and many need not include a great deal of detail. Some materials are quite small and contain a single item of information, like a logo for a metropolitan planning effort or a telephone number for more information. Some are geared to individual recipients, while others such as billboards reach out to a mass audience. Public information materials can summarize large amounts of information simply and in straightforward fashion. A sample range of public information materials includes:

- Advertisements—display and legal notices
- Badges and buttons
- Billboards
- Brochures
- Display boards
- Electronic media
- Fact sheets
- Fast-food placemats
- Fliers
- Grocery bags
- Magnets
- Models
- News articles
- Newsletters
- Newspaper inserts and articles
- Notices
- On-line home page
- Posters
- Press releases
- Progress bulletins
- Public service announcements (paper, video, radio)
- Slides and overheads
- Summaries of reports
- Utility bill stuffers
- Videotapes

### Why are they useful?

**Public information materials provide basic information** about a process, project, or document in a fast, concise, and clear way. They often summarize or capsulize the overall thrust of a process. They provide information on what to do to respond, comment, get more involved, or get on a mailing list for a project or study. (See **Mailing Lists**.)

**Public information materials are an easy way to update information periodically** for people who aren't actively involved in an issue but who are curious or interested about its status. Often this is a very large group with fewer information needs than those who are intensely involved and need information frequently and in more depth.

**Public information materials make it easy for people to find information.** They are widely distributed to many people for maximum effect. Public information materials increase the chances that people actually get the information, because distribution can be extensive and less reliance is placed on press releases, word of mouth, or memory.

**Information can be presented in graphic, non-technical, and non-verbal ways.** Renderings, simplified diagrams, models, and cartoons communicate information different ways. An Idaho Department of Transportation (DOT) poster featured a cartoon map of a construction project. San Francisco's Municipal Transit System (MUNI) used models to show how key stations would be adapted to accommodate disabled people.

**Public information materials target a broad public** beyond those who attend meetings. They expand the number and geographic distribution of those who can become informed and participate. (See **Media Strategies**; **Improving Meeting Attendance**.) The city of Worcester, Massachusetts, distributed pin-on buttons saying "Route 146 and a Piker, too!" to promote a new turnpike interchange and highway expansion project; the pins were distributed throughout the region. As part of its "Open Market Plan," the Rochester, New York, Telephone Company inserted information and a survey with a billing to all of its 340,000 residential customers.

**Public information materials can be tailored to a specific aspect of a project or plan.** They can focus on a geographic area, a particular mode of transportation, or one element of a plan, such as evaluation criteria. The Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Council of Governments produced brochures on specific transportation modes, including one on bicycle access.

**Public information materials can be fun, interesting, and attention-getting.** They engage people casually. Under its "One Percent for the Arts" program, the Regional Transit Project in Seattle, Washington, used a host of amusing, non-technical materials during its planning process, including posters, badges, public service announcements based on interesting conversations, transit music, and video art performances. TV and newspaper ads highlighted the transit planning activities underway by using a character called "avoidance man," an everyday citizen who attempted to ignore messages about the worsening state of transportation in the Puget Sound Region.

### Do they have special uses?

**Public information materials help people decide to participate.** Attractive, well-illustrated, easy-to-understand materials make it easy for people to comprehend a process or a proposal. If they highlight ways for people to participate, community members may decide to get involved.

**Public information materials get children involved.** Games, placemats, and posters have been used to attract children to transportation projects. The Denver, Colorado, Regional Transit District created coloring books to teach children about light rail and safety. Amtrak and the Chicago Rapid Transit Authority prepared paper engineer's hats for children. Amtrak distributed placemats with drawings that challenged children to find an engineer and other rail personnel hidden in a crowd. The Federal Aviation Administration prepared a connect-the-dots game and an activities book highlighting the life of the first black airplane captain, August Martin. For Portland, Maine, Comprehensive Transportation Study, materials were sent home with elementary and junior high school children.

**Public information materials can be multilingual.** Extensive or even moderate use of multilingual materials can create goodwill and demonstrate that an agency is trying to reach out to all groups. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.) In Denver, Colorado, billboards in English and Spanish were used to inform people about an upcoming light rail project.

**Public information materials encourage people to seek more information.** The design of a piece can attract attention and encourage questioning. It can become a symbol of a process or project.

### Who participates?

**Nearly everyone can use public information materials.** An emphasis on visual presentations makes it possible to reach people who are busy and have only a few moments to catch the message; they appreciate concise informative messages. The visual element makes it possible to reach people who may have difficulties in reading, such as the elderly and children. Visual information should be supplemented by materials designed to reach those with sight impairments. (See **People with Disabilities**.)

**Even technical and planning staff can benefit** from the brevity of public information materials. In the New England Transportation Initiative (NETI) regional study, a newsletter describing alternative investment scenarios was often used and cited by the Policy Committee. Although the full document of the scenarios was relatively short, the two-page description had icons for visual cues, making it easier to read and comprehend.

**And how?**

**People read or view public information materials in a variety of locations.** They read it in print, see it on television, or hear it on radio. They review brochures or other printed material at home. They view displays in public buildings or at meetings. Libraries, state DOT offices, transit stations, or city halls are good locations to lend videotapes, provide summaries of reports, and distribute other public information materials. In San Francisco, information on transit service and joint development activities was placed in prominent locations on turnstiles.

**People request information materials.** In instances where wide distribution is impractical, agencies can make materials available on request. This is particularly true of reports, report summaries, slide shows, or videos. Pennsylvania DOT produced several videotapes to lend to residents on request. (See **Video Techniques**.)

**Community residents can participate in preparing public information materials.** Members of the Citizen Planning Committee of the San Francisco, California, Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) wrote articles for a newsletter for a joint development planning study newsletter.

**Public information materials reach people at restaurants and stores.** Restaurant or fast-food placemats with information about a project are seen by people who may not read news articles about transportation projects or listen to public service announcements. The Portland, Oregon, Tri-Met combined grocery shopping with information about transit. Working with a grocery vendor, Tri-Met printed messages on grocery bags, printed its logo on grocery advertisements, stuffed a flier in each grocery bag, and handed out magnets printed with a logo at the cash register.

**Public information materials show that an agency understands and values communication** with people other than technicians and bureaucrats. For the Central Artery North Area project in Boston's Charlestown neighborhood, the Massachusetts Highway Department produced a two-sided color poster, "Charlestown in 1999." The poster described community development goals, illustrated by an artist's view of neighborhood development after the highway was depressed. This poster touched lightly upon the engineering feats needed to depress the highway, reflecting the interests and concerns of the community about the future.

**Who leads production of public information materials?**

**Experienced staff with communication, public involvement, desktop publishing, graphics, and writing skills** lead the production process. Staff members need knowledge of community issues. The leader must be able to translate technical information into terms that lay people can easily understand. Denver, Colorado's transit district uses non-engineering personnel to direct the public information process to be certain that technical issues are stated in simple, easy-to-understand language.

**Other agency staff get involved,** including the public relations staff. Policy staff members review material for consistency with an agency's mission and other activities. People skilled in graphic design and production are key to well-prepared information materials. To save money, people skilled in desktop publishing can make changes and updates quickly and efficiently. A desktop-published product usually is more effective than a simple, word-processed piece, because it incorporates graphics, columns, and illustrations in an attractive and easy-to-comprehend way.

**Private companies and institutions can assist in the production process.** This may involve donating billboard or exhibit space, paying for printing, producing public service announcements (PSAs), or helping get editorials printed or aired. During the Atlanta, Georgia, Regional Commission's Vision 2020, local business and civic leaders wrote seven guest editorials for the area's biggest newspaper.

**How do agencies use public information materials?**

**Public information materials can test concepts or policies for agencies.** A fact sheet on a proposed policy position generates comments and objections. Agencies use public information materials to explain a policy position or invite public comments. By presenting information in an uncluttered way, without a great deal of detail and technical information about options and alternatives, an agency's message becomes clearer. The NETI Policy Committee issued a newsletter asking people to comment on potential policy shifts in transportation infrastructure investment, airport planning, and growth management planning, among other issues, before it voted to adopt any new policies.

**Public information materials can focus on issues that affect a given area** or subarea, highlighting concerns about alignment, noise, travel time, etc. For Boston's Central Artery/Tunnel project, a project-wide newsletter included neighborhood-specific news bulletins to keep people up-to-date with local happenings.

**Public information materials improve awareness of a planning process.** They provide information on how to get involved. The Texas State Department of Highways and Public Transportation updates people on the North Central Expressway reconstruction project through a quarterly newsletter.

**Public information materials offer opportunities for private-sector involvement.** Public-private partnerships are forged through donations of billboard spaces, newspaper inserts, or utility bill stuffers to help reach more people with information about a process.

**Agencies form useful links with the media.** Newspapers, especially those in local communities, are not as constrained for space as radio and television and are thus more likely to print articles, graphics, newspaper inserts, and calendar listings. Progress bulletins and press releases give reporters ideas and factual information for articles about a project. (See **Media Strategies**.) In Boston, a neighborhood newspaper periodically printed articles and graphics submitted by the Massachusetts Highway Department to prepare people for upcoming meetings.

**What do they cost?**

**The cost of public information materials varies widely,** depending on complexity and volume. Small ones, such as brochures, fliers, or newsletters, are relatively inexpensive to produce, even on a large scale. Materials are expensive to produce if they require four-color printing, large display panels, models, or billboards. Costs are less per unit in volume printings: not counting staff time, printing 1,500 copies of a newsletter might cost 35 cents each, while 5,000 copies might cost less than 20 cents each.

**Desktop publishing produces public information materials relatively inexpensively.** Brochures, one-page progress bulletins, and fact sheets with simple graphics can be produced on a personal computer. Use of color grabs attention and enhances the attractiveness of a public information piece but also increases the costs to produce it. The Maryland DOT produced a five-page booklet describing the State's approach to a program of transportation enhancements. In a simple, straightforward way, the booklet provides details on a relatively new and unknown program, along with telephone numbers for more information. The Iowa DOT's "Need Answers?" pamphlet has staff names and telephone numbers accompanied by a map of districts.

**Private-sector donations cut costs, as do cooperative efforts with other agencies.** Private organizations may distribute printed information materials in grocery bags or utility bill inserts. Media organizations may run meeting notices and PSAs free. Transit agencies may display free advertisements in transit vehicles. Literature might be distributed at toll booths. Billing agencies might include information materials with their mailings.

**Costs are incurred for staff time spent in production.** Written information, such as PSAs and news articles, takes time to produce. Designing and developing graphics can be expensive, and the process from concept to development to camera-ready can be lengthy. Outside consultants are sometimes needed for major items such as displays or models.

**Costs are closely related to the visual quality of public information materials,** but quality is crucial. A piece that is visually bland, cluttered, dull to read, or otherwise unattractive obscures the message. As in advertising, attracting people and getting them to read or look at materials requires eye-catching, good-looking designs. The Arizona DOT's Mt. Lemmon highway reconstruction project in Tucson used the slogan "Lemmon Aid" in bright yellow on black in its eye-catching brochures and posters.

**Costs are incurred in distribution.** Bulk rates are available to help reduce mailing costs. An alternative is door-to-door distribution by volunteers. (See **Speakers' Bureaus and Public Involvement Volunteers**; **Drop-in Centers**.) The Houston, Texas, transit agency reaches apartment dwellers by hanging materials on their doorknobs.

**How is production organized?**

**Public information materials are conceived at the beginning of a plan or project.** They can be oriented to support key goals and milestones of the participation and technical planning processes. A time line for production and distribution is prepared. Materials are planned to coincide with major events and give periodic updates throughout the program. It is often a good idea to schedule periodic communication throughout the process for general updating or "keeping in touch" with people in the community. Scheduled dissemination helps remind agencies of activities that should be communicated to the public.

**The target audience is identified.** In most cases, the general public will be the recipient. However, an agency may need to target and customize materials to different groups. A local community heavily affected by a proposed project may need special publications or explanations to address its concerns. Soliciting funding for specific purposes requires materials targeted to business or industrial interests.

**General information about a process or project is made available.** Information that will remain constant throughout a process or project is made available for repeated use. Pennsylvania DOT videotapes illustrating the planning process are shown at meetings to newcomers who need to know the overall background before they know the details.

**Public information materials highlight an event or milestone,** such as the start-up of process, a major meeting, the release of a report, the start of a new phase, or the conclusion of a project. The Wisconsin DOT's first newsletter at the start of long-range planning introduced the in-depth study process and the people involved. The Puget Sound Regional Council in Seattle, Washington, mails a newsletter several times a year to review events and announce upcoming dates of meetings.

**Public information materials can survey a wide audience.** Typically used in printed materials, survey materials describe facts and include a tear-off sheet to be sent to an agency. They also may list a toll-free or local telephone number to call with comments or a FAX number to encourage immediate response. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**; **Media Strategies**.) The Little Rock, Arkansas, Metroplan MPO issued its report summary as a newspaper insert and included a tear-off form for reactions and comments through phone, mail, or FAX. Dallas, Texas, Area Rapid Transit mails comment cards to people in the community to solicit input on how DART is doing in a number of areas.

**Updates and progress bulletins can be disseminated periodically.** The Little Rock, Arkansas, Metroplan used progress bulletins to keep people informed of current issues. San Francisco's BART periodically sent FAXes to 500 to 600 businesses to keep them abreast of happenings in its joint development planning process. The Orange County, California, transit district sent "Fast FAXes" to 100 companies for immediate information. New Mexico's Middle Rio Grande Council of Governments updates information in an annual report it distributes to the public.

**Press releases serve as input to future media coverage.** Reporters who are following the process may use each new detail of a proposal as the basis of a story. Basic facts are provided to help reporters assemble articles and avoid mistakes or misleading information that could cause difficulty or awkwardness for an agency. (See **Media Strategies**.)

### How are they used with other techniques?

**Public information materials are used with almost any other technique** of public involvement. They give basic information for open houses and open hearings, media strategies, on-line services, drop-in centers, and briefings. (See **Open Houses/Open Forum Hearings**; **Media Strategies**; **On-line Services**; **Drop-in Centers**; **Briefings**.) They are used to announce meetings, charrettes, conferences, workshops, and retreats. (See **Charrettes**; **Public Meetings/Hearings**; **Conferences, Workshops, and Retreats**.) They contribute names for mailing lists by soliciting interest from community residents. The Seattle area's Puget Sound Regional Council produced a videotape that was made into a public service announcement and shown repeatedly. (See **Video Techniques**.)

**Transportation fairs are excellent places to distribute public information materials,** particularly fun items such as buttons, magnets, posters, and literature. (See **Transportation Fairs**.) A Washington, D.C., ridesharing organization supplied many giveaways at its transportation fair.

**Games and contests mesh with public information in creative ways.** The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) held an art contest for children on the theme of "Flying Saves Lives." The FAA also published a bilingual book, "A Visit to the Airport—Un Viaje al Aeropuerto," that included several games, some also in two languages. (See **Games and Contests**.)

**Public information materials reach out to minority, ethnic, and low-income groups.** Reaching out with basic information and facts presented with visuals brings people into the process who might otherwise feel uncomfortable participating. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.) The Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission prepared illustrated glossaries of transportation terms to help people understand the planning process. Boston's Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority prepared a transit design kit that showed drawings of different transit vehicles, answered basic questions about the study, and was printed in Spanish and English.

### What are the drawbacks?

**Public information materials require wide distribution to reach a maximum number of people.** They are an essential part of any public involvement program. Failure to provide periodic basic information can severely hurt a public involvement program and could cripple a project.

**Finding ways to get information out takes creativity.** Demand on staff time and resources can be intensive. Staff members must know ways people can obtain information about a variety of topics. They should be skilled in examining needs and producing appropriate materials to meet them.

**Published or written materials are not usually interactive.** Public information materials cannot substitute for other forms of public involvement, because they are one-way communication, unless a mail-back coupon is included. People who see them must take further, individualized steps to get more information or to participate. An agency should make the steps simple to take, and respond promptly when community people call. (See **On-line Services**; **Computer Presentations and Simulations**; **Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks**.)

**Events can overtake public information materials.** Needs can be determined by default, even with prior planning. An agency might have to prepare public information materials to respond to editorial criticism, counter negative publicity, compensate for difficult-to-read technical reports, or respond to issues that have arisen naturally during the project. In Denver, Colorado, the transit agency broke its long-standing rule of not allowing advertising on shuttle buses in order to promote businesses affected by the transit line construction and inform people about the project.

**Production time is significant if materials are to be done well.** Production costs can be high, depending on levels of detail and numbers of illustrations to be included. Increased volume of printed matter also raises costs, but unit costs diminish as volume increases. Producing a small number of customized materials is expensive and labor-intensive.

**Public information materials may be perceived as public relations and not public involvement.** Materials that are too general and add no new substantial information are often regarded negatively or ignored. Public suspicions may also result from high-end advertising agency slickness. Many people feel it is inappropriate for public agencies to spend a lot of money on fancy public information material when other efforts or programs are being cut back. To gain optimal response, materials should be straight-forward in design and content, especially if input from participants is desired and if it needs to be made clear that plans or projects are not yet finished.

**Public information materials may fall flat if the information is too technical and difficult** for lay people to grasp. Where possible, agencies should avoid intimidating or technical language and formats. If materials are not comprehensible to an average person, good will is lost, and potential participants may become suspicions about an agency's motives. An outside person can be asked to review the piece to make sure it is understandable to the average person and not too technical or obscure.

**Information is prepared in a form that will reach the target audience.** Press releases might not reach the intended audience, because they have been placed in an inappropriate section of a newspaper or relegated to a "lame duck" spot on a newscast. Pamphlets containing technical material may not be read by local residents. Brochures or flyers that are discarded as litter could have a negative effect on the community's perception of an agency. To counter these problems, an agency designs materials for specific uses and audiences and chooses the appropriate distribution technique.

**Are they flexible?**

**Public information materials can be sent through the mail** to a project mailing list or an acquired list, or be inserted in another group's mailing. They can be included in bills sent out by public or private organizations. (See **Mailing Lists**.)

**Public information materials can be sent electronically.** They can be put on a home page to be available on-line. (See **On-line Services**.) Public service announcements provide information via radio or television. They can include announcements of meetings, due dates for comments, recent activities, upcoming events, and more. (See **Media Strategies**.) The Atlanta, Georgia, Regional Commission's Vision 2020 process used PSAs to inform people of the opportunity to voice their opinions through questionnaires inserted in Sunday newspapers.

**Public information materials can be used in displays.** They can be positioned to be seen from a sidewalk, highway, or rail line—for example, on a billboard. They can be illustrations on window cards. They can be posted in interiors of transit vehicles on car cards. The Houston, Texas, Transit Authority uses cards in its buses to announce upcoming events.

**Public information materials can be distributed at meetings.** They help get a meeting started or as a basis for a presentation or discussion. They can be exhibits, videos, fact sheets, slides and overheads, models, or progress bulletins. (See **Video Techniques**; **Computer Presentations and Simulations**.)

**Timing is flexible for most public information materials,** except meeting notices, newspaper deadlines, and materials relevant to public hearings and official comment periods, where exact timing is crucial. Staff commitments for producing public information materials is flexible except for deadlines for production, printing, mailing, or presentation.

**The format for producing public information is flexible.** Options relate to individual budgets, information dissemination needs, topics, and audiences. A variety of types of public information materials can be selected. Many public involvement programs mix and match materials.

**When are they used most effectively?**

**An overall strategy for public information materials is developed early in a process,** before beginning to involve community residents. At that point, an agency can strategize about what audiences need to be targeted, what types of materials are needed, and when they will be most effective. General materials on, for instance, the nature of the project serve as background information that remains relevant throughout the process. Materials can highlight important events or decisions. Timing must be carefully considered, and materials scheduled so they are available in advance of an event, meeting, close of comment period, or articles in the media. (See **Media Strategies**.)

**For further information:**

- Arizona Department of Transportation, Phoenix, Arizona, (602) 255-8143
- Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, Georgia (404) 364-2575
- Boston Central Artery/Tunnel project, Boston, Massachusetts (617) 973-7000
- Denver Transit Authority, Denver, Colorado, (303) 299-2401
- Iowa Department of Transportation, Ames, Iowa, (515) 239-1137
- Maryland Department of Transportation, Baltimore, Maryland, (410) 859-7367
- Puget Sound Regional Council, Seattle, Washington, (206) 464-7090
- Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, (412) 391-5591

## KEY PERSON INTERVIEWS

### What is a key person interview?

**A key person interview is a one-on-one talk about a specific topic or issue** with an individual recognized or designated as a community leader. A key person might be an opinion leader, a spokesperson for the community, an elected official, the head of an organization, or a representative of local media.

**The main purpose is to obtain information.** While basic information is provided to set the stage for discussion, interviews are designed primarily to elicit the interviewee's reactions and suggestions. The goal is to learn about the person's views and constituency, and his/her perceptions of the agency, the planning or development process, and the political setting in which work is being done. Key individuals are likely to have knowledge, wisdom, and insight that can help an agency. In Texas, during the South Oak Cliff study by Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART), key person interviews led to a delineation of significant issues within the community. A bond issue that had major support was being implemented slowly. Though not directly related to DART's work on the transit proposal, it was clearly identifiable as an issue.

**Interviews start early in the process** to learn about the area and the issues and concerns to be addressed. An agency may ask for names of other individuals who should be contacted for interviews or be involved in the participation process. It may want guidance on organizing a public involvement process that includes essential, interested people, and that reaches out and includes people traditionally underrepresented.

**Key person interviews also are held just prior to decision-making.** The Maryland Transit Administration found that positions evolved from beginning to end of a study and thus began to hold interviews near the end of a process but before decisions were made.

**Customarily, interviews are face-to-face events.** Frequently, a key person feels more comfortable if an interview takes place on "home turf" such as his/her office or neighborhood. Although usually conducted in person, key person interviews are also done on the telephone. (See **Telephone Techniques**.)

### Why are such interviews useful?

**Information is transmitted informally** outside of a larger meeting that may be inhibiting. Key people often provide more detail on political or emotional aspects of an issue that are difficult to discuss in a public meeting. Liaison staff for a master plan study in Boston's South End interviewed community and business leaders to learn about potential developments that would not have been revealed in a large public setting. Interviews also elicited input about ongoing concerns to help create a vision of the character of redevelopment for the area.

**Interviews help identify issues, concerns, and desired agendas.** They are helpful in rapidly getting details on the community and in understanding residents' priorities. They also help establish points that must be covered in meetings.

**Key person interviews help target potential participants** in the process. They identify stakeholders who may be involved and interested in a project or proposal.

**Interviews elicit ideas for structuring a public involvement program.** They help set a framework for discussion by identifying potential members for an advisory committee or meeting places perceived as neutral. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.) The Atlanta, Georgia, Regional Commission received advice on structuring its public involvement program from its key person interviews. For a Newark subway rehabilitation project, interviews led New Jersey Transit to set up several station task forces rather than a single advisory committee, as originally proposed. The Newark interviews also identified safety as the overwhelming issue of community concern, which led to changes in the work undertaken by consultants.

**Key person interviews enhance an agency's credibility.** They show interest in the community and in understanding the concerns of a leader's constituents. Conducting interviews sets a positive tone for subsequent public involvement activities.

### Do they have special uses?

**Key person interviews are useful when a project affects a small group in a unique way**—for example, a block of businesses, a neighborhood, or a specific institution. The group may be concerned about impacts of a proposal and welcome early contact. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.)

**Interviews are a good way to introduce agency personnel to the community** before beginning a public participation process.

**One-on-one interviews can defuse a potentially confrontational situation.** Parties to disagreements want to be heard. Listening to key individuals' views is rewarding to both parties, as well as to the larger community. This is particularly important if the key person has been antagonistic in the past, since it enhances an agency's understanding of opposing viewpoints and gets them stated more clearly for the record.

### Who participates? And how?

**Key people are individuals who work with or represent other people.** They are crucial in understanding a constituency. Key people include community group presidents, officers, former officers, and representatives. They can be elected officials, respected people involved in community activities, and officers or active members of clubs, agencies, organizations, and interest groups. Key people can be active business people and practicing professionals, or representatives of professional societies, such as chapters of the American Institute of Architects and the American Public Transportation Association. The Metropolitan Council in Minnesota interviewed the Minority Media Coalition by telephone to find out key issues in the minority community prior to a larger meeting to discuss overall media strategy. It is important to note, however, that in some areas such as minority communities, American Indian areas, small towns, and rural settings, opinion leaders are likely *not* to be office-holders. In these areas, an agency should pay special attention to finding out who the real leaders are. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.)

**A key person meets with an interviewer** via telephone or face-to-face.

**Usually, the key person chooses the interview site.** This may be a home or office, or the location may be neutral to both parties. Informal interviews can be held over coffee or lunch. The choice of setting should reflect potential issues of security and confidentiality.

**An on-site interview helps people point out specific issues.** In the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's (MBTA) Replacement/Transit Improvement Study, agency staff talked with key community people on-site in Dudley Square, a busy transit node and the focal point of the study. Community leaders pointed out specific locations of concern about traffic, pedestrian crossings, and land development. (See **Site Visits**.)

**How do agencies use these interviews?**

**Interviews demonstrate that an agency wants to learn about the issues.** This is particularly true if an agency seeks out key people early in a process. Credibility is also enhanced if an agency seeks advice on design of a public involvement program. For the State Route 15 Vision Study in San Diego, California, the City Heights Community Development Corporation conducted interviews with agency officials, opinion leaders, residents, and others to help plan the highway's future. The interviews were useful not only for finding out about the issues but also for broadening the list of potential contacts.

**Key person interviews are a quick, personal way to learn a neighborhood's concerns.** They help identify players such as elected officials, other agencies, opinion leaders, and other groups, as well as revealing issues and interests in a project or plan.

**Interviews help identify the "real" actors in a process.** Often, they are the fastest way to find out who in the community is perceived as credible, who is difficult to communicate with, and who is a potential ally.

**Through interviews, an agency finds out what key people think of its policies.** The Little Rock, Arkansas, Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) used interviews to discover the degree to which past policies were out of favor. As a result, its Vision 2020 plan reflected the need to replace past policies with proposed new strategies.

**Key people help develop a list of contacts who can distribute information.** Interviews help build a network of critical people to contact. (See **Mailing Lists**.) They even assist in locating the best bulletin boards for advertising meetings and opportunities for participation.

**Interviews with key people establish lines of communication** between community members and agencies. Local people contact their leaders to obtain information or to register opinions, concerns, and complaints. This may fit with traditional methods of quick and easy communication. (See **Improving Meeting Attendance**.)

**Making one-to-one contact helps break down barriers** that might prevent sharing information and opinions. The Dane County Regional Planning Agency in Madison, Wisconsin, learned about the concerns of many groups through individual key person interviews.

**Who conducts key person interviews?**

**Staff members usually conduct key person interviews.** The staff person conducting a meeting should be comfortable with one-on-one contact, personable, open, a good listener, good at probing for details, and able to respond to key questions.

**Sometimes senior staff are more appropriate.** On certain occasions, senior agency personnel need to meet with key people. For example, it might be more appropriate and effective for a senior official rather than a junior-level staffer to meet with the vice president of a major corporation. The head of the Atlanta, Georgia, Regional Commission talks with key business leaders on a regular basis. The director of the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, MPO holds regular visits with key people in the media.

**Sometimes a well-briefed outsider is the appropriate person** to contact ethnic or minority members or polarized groups. The interviewer must be well-briefed on issues important to the community and to the person being interviewed. (See **Ethnic, Minority, & Low-income Groups**; **Negotiation & Mediation.)**

**What do they cost?**

**Costs vary, but interviews can be relatively cheap** if the work is local. Staff time is intensive and the most expensive item. It is particularly significant if a large number of key people from various locations are involved and travel is extensive. Also, long-distance telephone calls add quickly to the costs.

**Costs are closely tied to the number of interviews conducted.** A sampling of 10–20 leaders is effective for certain purposes, while a more broad-based outreach may necessitate 100 or more interviews.

**How are they organized?**

**An initial step is identifying the key people in a community.** It is important to undertake a wide range of efforts to learn who the real leaders are, particularly in minority and ethnic communities. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.) One approach is to use indirect methods; for example,

- Review old and current mailing lists;
- Review newspaper clippings;
- Review meeting notes from related projects or earlier planning processes;
- Review impact reports, environmental documents, and project-related testimony;
- Get copies of sign-in sheets from meetings held by others;
- Observe neighborhood meetings for other issues/projects;
- Talk to people knowledgeable about local leadership; and
- Ask around at professional association meetings.

**A more direct means to build a list of names is linked-chain research or personal contact and networking.** In this approach, people are asked to name leaders, and the process continues until nominations repeat earlier names and the agency is reasonably confident most key participants have been found. Some initial ways to do this by telephone include:

- Contacting local officials;
- Asking action groups and churches who the respected leaders are;
- Asking neighborhood groups and agencies who the respected community leaders are;
- Contacting friends who live in the area or consultants who have done work in the area; and
- Sending out a “community audit” survey that includes a question on community leadership.

**Interviews are arranged in several ways.** To set up an interview, an agency staffer can establish initial contact by telephone. Ideally, an interview is face-to-face and at a time convenient to the person. This may be after work hours, since many people find it difficult to meet during the normal work day. In Dallas, DART always conducts key person interviews as informally as possible so that the person feels comfortable. A letter of invitation may be sent if someone is particularly difficult to reach or if a formal tone is desired. Often, a follow-up confirmation call is useful and courteous.

**It is often important to meet key people in their own community.** Frequently, key people view their neighborhoods as neutral, comfortable, and non-threatening places. (See **Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events**.) The Portland, Maine, Area Comprehensive Transportation Study (PACTS) conducted interviews in key people’s offices on the impacts of a proposed connector on a school and county jail along the alignment.

**Many interviews are conducted by telephone.** Phone interviews are very informal and immediate, but less personal. They sometimes are done while the key person is at work and can be very focused. (See **Telephone Techniques**.) Although phone interviews lack the personal contact of face-to-face talk, they are easier to do impromptu. They are often revealing, because the call seems more casual, immediate, and unrehearsed. A face-to-face meeting encourages better preparation, perhaps by consulting with others. During project development on the I–93/Route 1 interchange in Charlestown, Massachusetts, agency staff regularly called key people in the community to report project events, then to converse about their activities and reactions to the highway project's current status.

**The purpose and topic of the interview is communicated in advance.** The general topic is introduced immediately. The interviewer stresses the importance and goal of the interview and states that several key people are being interviewed. This lets the interviewee know that his/her ideas will be considered along with others. It is useful to explain that the agency wants to listen and learn rather than lecture on the proposed project or process. A short description of the planning effort with maps, drawings, or photos is useful, along with brief written materials.

**An interview begins with stating a specific proposal or issue.** Details should be available in case the interviewee requests them. A series of questions prepared by the agency might be the next step. An interview may be informal and free-form, with a brief statement of a proposal, followed by questions and answers that guide the interview. The interviewer makes it clear that the opinions expressed are primarily for the agency's internal use in planning and project development.

**An interviewer should be able to piece together connections and links** that make up the mosaic of relationships within the community. An agency should avoid alienating potential participants or people who have views that might not be fully understood.

**The interviewer documents the interview in writing.** Documentation frequently maintains the anonymity of the interviewee. At times, it is important to be able to cite the interview as authoritative, but permission should be obtained before quoting people who have been interviewed. To maintain anonymity, individual interviews can be summarized with other interviews. In summaries, the key people's names may be listed, but most comments are not attributed to specific individuals. Interviews for the Portland, Maine, I–295 Connector were summarized according to several themes: comments on transportation issues in general and pros and cons about the proposed connector. Only when it was essential to identify the person who made a statement—such as a concern about the alignment's effect on a specific property—were ideas attributed to individuals.

**Telephone numbers are exchanged.** The key person should be made aware of the desirability of frequent contact and an agency's willingness to respond to calls. To enhance contact, an agency can compile a list of interviewees' work and home phone numbers and FAX numbers, if available and if people are willing to take calls at home. The goal is to demonstrate accessibility and the need for key people to call when they want to deliver opinions and comments.

**Follow-up is essential.** Depending on the intensity of the planning process and schedule, weekly, monthly, or bi-monthly follow-up contacts, either by telephone or face-to-face, are critical. Follow-up keeps key people and agency staff up-to-date on what is happening. Follow-up can be based on initial interviews early in the process to create and maintain a channel of communication. In Dallas, the DART community affairs staff regularly contacts key people—by visiting, telephoning, or sending information—to keep them up-to-date and knowledgeable about the agency's work.

### How are they used with other techniques?

**Key person interviews help identify participants.** Interviews with leaders help identify potential members of a neighborhood planning council. They help increase and improve outreach to traditionally underserved groups, ethnic groups, minorities, elderly, and children. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.) A civic advisory committee or task force can grow from suggestions made in leader interviews. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**; **Collaborative Task Forces**.) In a transit study in Burlington, Vermont, representatives of a new civic advisory committee were identified through interviews.

**Interviews can help set goals and objectives for a task.** A civic planning committee working with San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) on a joint development project conducted interviews with the heads of newly-formed groups to help determine the extent and goals of the organization and its constituency.

### What are the drawbacks?

**Key people may not represent the total range of community values.** Interviews must be used with other techniques that help validate the information gleaned from the interviews. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

**A variety of methods to reach people are essential to obtain a full range of opinions.** Heavy reliance on meeting notes and sign-in sheets from public meetings tell an agency who the visible public leaders are, but key people who work behind the scenes are easily missed.

**Key person interviews do not replace direct talks** with interested or affected groups. Such interviews do not substitute for direct public involvement.

**Community members may be alienated if their key people are not interviewed.** If some people are misidentified as key people, community residents may accuse the agency of ignorance or malice. In Portland, Maine, a school principal identified as a key person turned out not to be as knowledgeable and helpful as had been anticipated. In Dallas, certain community groups felt that the transit agency gave equal credence to comments from individuals and from their organizations. DART then encouraged the individuals who were outspoken to join others in forming a new organization or to join an existing group.

**Interviews should include a full range of people, including opponents.** The Sioux City, Iowa, MPO used its district directors to help identify people to interview. It was careful to include people who in the past had been critical of some of its activities or policies.

**Many agencies interview only public officials** such as the town manager, aldermen, or planners. Although these interviews represent one segment of key people to contact, they must be done in combination with interviews and talks with representatives of interest groups, opinion leaders, neighborhood associations, individual residents, users, and more.

### Are key person interviews flexible?

**Timing and structure of key person interviews are flexible.** They can take place at any time, cover a variety of topics, and be structured or open-ended. However, it is best to do interviews before negative news gets out. Staffing is flexible, but interviewers must be good listeners, open rather than defensive, and knowledgeable about whom to probe and how.

### When are they used most effectively?

**Key person interviews are useful both at the start of a process and just prior to decision-making.** Of course, it may be necessary and desirable to continue the contacts throughout the process. Follow-up interviews are done in the same manner as initial interviews. To save time and staff resources, follow-up may be done by phone. If an agency does not follow up the interviews or maintain contact with key people, credibility suffers.

**Interviews help evaluate projects or proposals** or the process itself. In many cases, key people are well aware of a former process that went awry. Their willingness to discuss it saves an agency many steps. In addition, they have a sense of how a project or proposal will be received within their community. This information aids an agency in modifying plans to be more responsive to community concerns and to present to the public.

**For further information:**

- Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2575
- City Heights Community Development Corporation, (619) 584-1535
- Dallas Area Rapid Transit Authority, Dallas, Texas, (214) 749-2581
- Little Rock Metroplan, Little Rock, Arkansas, (501) 372-3300
- Portland Area Comprehensive Transportation Study, Portland, Maine, (207) 774-9891
- Sioux City Planning Department, Sioux City, Iowa, (712) 279-6344

## BRIEFINGS

### What are briefings?

**Briefings are information meetings with a community group or leader.** Elected officials, business leaders, the media, regional groups, or special interest groups can participate. Briefings usually involve issue-focused communication between agency administrators, project managers, board members, or other staff and a specific group or part of the community. They are organized in several ways:

- **Some briefings are one-on-one meetings with key individuals**—for instance, between an agency representative and a specific community representative or leader.

- **Others are held for key groups** to help establish rapport between agencies and the community and lead to a free discussion to clarify issues. The Burlington, Vermont, Tri-Center Transit Study held a briefing for local business leaders to discuss their concerns about alternatives for transportation improvements, including high-occupancy vehicle lanes, transportation system management, and a new light rail system.

- **Briefings are held at critical times** in a program application or project schedule—either at the beginning of a project or planning effort or at regular intervals to keep leaders or the media informed.

- **They are used for either one-way or two-way communication.** Often, agencies use them solely to convey information, but the format can include a question-and-answer session or two-way discussion as well. If an agency chooses two-way communication, it should organize the briefing accordingly. Notices should make clear what format will be followed. For its Regional Blueprint for Growth and Development, Minnesota's Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) met with government associations to brief them and generate feedback.

- **Either an agency or the public initiates briefings.** When communities or individuals want information, they may request that an agency hold a briefing.

### Why are they useful?

**Briefings provide immediate opportunities for focused communication.** They can be scheduled quickly to allow project leaders to communicate with key community groups or leaders. Portland, Oregon, Metro tailors its presentations to the interest of the group at hand, whether students, a chamber of commerce, or a homeowners' association.

**The community gets advance notice of an important event.** By providing an opportunity for questions, briefings help allay doubts or fears. An agency can "test the waters" with a subset of the community concerning a specific issue. Within the narrow focus of a briefing, community residents give an agency the feedback and direction it needs to be fair and equitable. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection held a series of briefings for companies to inform them how to comply with new employee trip reduction regulations. The three-hour meetings provided a range of information about requirements such as surveying employees and implementing ridesharing programs.

**Briefings are a good way to establish communication links with affected groups.** They help clarify issues and demonstrate an agency's sensitivity to local concerns. Because any project affects different segments of the public, an agency should discuss the impacts and services with the people most affected. The Portland, Oregon, Metro holds periodic briefings for geographic areas and neighborhoods that are affected by a specific alternative.

**Briefings help get candid feedback from the community.** Community people can comment off the record. Since they are not recorded, these comments are relatively unrestrained—and therefore may provide a truer picture of people's opinions.

### Do they have special uses?

**Briefings break through temporary barriers to full public participation.** In circumstances where the communication process is difficult or complicated, they help an agency reach specific groups. In Wisconsin, the Dane County Regional Planning Commission held a series of briefings with representatives of each town to discuss the preparation of its 2020 Plan.

**Briefings give critics a better understanding of a project.** They also give critics a chance to respond in detail, away from larger meetings that dilute their participation.

**Briefings repair damage.** A misunderstood or misrepresented agency uses briefings to get back on track. Briefings on critical portions of a proposal are useful to open discussions. An agency may signal its need for advice from community groups on ways to build greater understanding or future cooperation. Poor communication is improved if agency staff talks briefly and then listens attentively to the responses.

**They demonstrate agency initiative.** Opening a process with a series of briefings shows that the agency is organized and eager to get the word out. When an agency targets specific groups, it shows that it both recognizes their existence and values their participation. To get more people involved, the Twin Cities Metropolitan Council in Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota, recruited other agencies to serve as co-hosts during its series of briefings.

**Briefings help establish trust and credibility** between an agency and community groups. In Newark, New Jersey, elected officials attended the Newark Transit Agency briefings on rehabilitation of the light rail system to demonstrate their support.

### Who participates? And how?

**Briefings can involve any interested group**—elected officials, organization heads, appointed officials, community groups or associations, business leaders, or professional associations. When an agency initiates a briefing, it asks for participation by specific individuals. When a community group requests a briefing, an agency should ascertain the group's interests and send appropriate, knowledgeable staff. Community groups may want a personalized presentation of a proposal in relation to their neighborhood.

**A briefing is usually a simple gathering** held around a small table, in an office, or in a conference room. Alternatively, it is a conference call between appropriate people to discuss a particular issue. Agency representatives should be well-informed about the issues to be addressed, particularly as they affect the participants.

**Participants ask questions.** The format should address their communications needs. Often, a briefing includes a presentation on a plan's status, followed by a discussion. Its design should facilitate communication between an agency and participants.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Briefings reveal whether an agency is effectively communicating with stakeholders.** Agencies get feedback on the effectiveness of their public involvement program. Before formal announcement of an event, input from briefings helps agencies assess its potential effectiveness and adjust plans accordingly to better meet the needs of the community.

**Briefings help prevent misunderstandings** by the public by supplying accurate information and helping to get a message out. They also help prevent agencies from misunderstanding the viewpoints of the target groups.

**Briefings allow an agency to convey a message to the community.** By briefing a specific geographic, social, or professional group, an agency reiterates a message or clarifies an issue. Planners for New York's Long Island Expressway high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane held briefings with local businesses to assess different elements of the design.

### Who leads briefings?

**Well-informed, articulate agency staff people lead briefings.** Since a briefing is an opportunity to improve communication, agencies send senior staff or others who know the project or program thoroughly and are aware of participants' interests or concerns. For discussion of technical aspects, experts may be needed as well.

**Agency staff may share responsibility with a community leader.** The agency need not lead a briefing alone. Community groups may participate more freely if a community leader leads the discussion. In such an instance, an agency representative participates both to satisfy the group's need for information and to get its input. Agency representatives should be prepared to lead a briefing if a community group has no designated leader. In some situations, elected officials or agency board members may take charge.

### What do they cost?

**A briefing is relatively inexpensive.** The primary cost is preparation time, travel (if necessary), and the meeting itself. Research or presentation materials may be needed.

**Special preparation costs may be limited.** It is often possible to use pre-existing presentation materials. An agency may use project-specific presentation materials to maintain continuity. Staff may offer refreshments at a small meeting as an icebreaker.

### How are they organized?

**Arrangements for a briefing are initiated by either party.** An agency offers a briefing to improve communication, or a community group requests a meeting with the agency.

**An agency must respond quickly to a request for a briefing.** Response time reflects an agency's commitment. Having to wait several months to meet with staff seriously damages a group's trust in the agency's sincerity. Every effort should be made to provide a timely response. If an agency has no time to organize a briefing, it may share documents, videotapes, or phone calls as a substitute strategy. (See **Video Techniques**; **Telephone Techniques**.)

**Briefings are customized for each specific situation.** The particular characteristics or concerns of a group suggest the best structure. An agency must be sensitive to the group's needs, nature, and purpose, and identify key people. (See **Key Person Interviews**.) As a sponsor of the briefing, an agency determines where the group would be most comfortable and what approach should govern the meeting. Any good public involvement program includes constant monitoring of the press, meeting feedback, and other sources of intelligence about the community. When an agency knows a community group well—why it exists and where its interests lie—it can prepare well for a briefing and organize it accordingly. New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) officials met with owners of local newspapers and broadcast stations to generate media interest in an HOV lane project.

**An agency sends its best representatives to briefings**—perhaps a team of people with complementary presentation skills. A high-ranking staff member or technical specialist can answer questions and demonstrate an agency's commitment to participation. An agency should exercise care in appointing briefing staff. Not all staff members make good public speakers, and good speakers may not function well in small discussion groups.

**Agency leaders make certain that unanswered questions receive a response.** Such records also help form the basis for subsequent meetings with other groups or the community at large. Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority representatives met with municipal officials in each of eight cities and towns through which its proposed New Bedford/Fall River Commuter Rail Project would pass to inform them about the project and flag local concerns prior to holding a series of open public meetings.

**Communication between an agency and the community is continuous.** While either party initiates a briefing, an agency should continue the communication process beyond a single session. An agency may approach a briefing as the first in a potential series of meetings. The Portland, Oregon, Metro has a policy of returning periodically to neighborhoods to report on changes or findings since the initial briefing.

### How are they used with other techniques?

**Briefings are only one part of a larger public involvement program.** They supplement official and public interaction between community groups and a public agency. Briefings should not be the only means of communication, nor should they result from a group's frustration due to lack of other opportunities for dialogue. Briefings are very important supplements to larger public meetings, but they cannot replace them. (See **Public Meetings/Hearings**.)

**Briefings augment other public education efforts.** Briefings are a good way to introduce a new program or delineate project principles to a community already familiar with an existing project. They also help assuage concerns about a project.

**Briefings generate additional public involvement.** After a briefing, a community group may be willing to work with an agency as the project or program advances. A community may want to participate in subsequent meetings to safeguard its own stake in an agency's proposals.

### What are the drawbacks?

**Over-reliance on briefings lends an appearance of "back-room deals"** and therefore should be strenuously avoided. Holding small, seemingly controlled briefings only in times of crisis or when actions are critical to an agency may alienate a community.

**Briefings may be viewed as an agency tool of little benefit to the community.** Community people may perceive that agencies do not listen and do not absorb feedback.

**Extensive use of briefings can consume agency staff time.**

**Are briefings flexible?**

**Briefings are held at nearly any time.** Good timing helps make a briefing successful. Agency staff must be flexible, since community groups may request briefings on the spur of the moment. An agency may find it beneficial to hold briefings at specific points in a process of planning or project development; for example:

- Immediately before a major event or decision;
- After a crisis;
- After an especially unsuccessful agency effort; and
- Before introducing new strategies.

**For further information:**

- Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2575
- Dane County Regional Planning Commission, Madison, Wisconsin, (608) 266-4317
- Orange County Transportation Authority, Orange, California, (714) 560-5725
- Portland Metro, Portland, Oregon, (503) 797-1746
- Twin Cities Metropolitan Council, St. Paul, Minnesota, (612) 291-6423

## VIDEO TECHNIQUES

### What are video techniques?

**Video techniques use recorded visual and oral messages** to present information to the public, primarily via tapes or laser disks. Although many people now prefer video as a means of getting information, public agencies are just starting to tap its potential use. During preparation of its statewide transportation plan, the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) opened its regional forums with introductory videos.

### Why are they useful?

**A video is worth a thousand words.** An easily-understood video is more useful to some people than reading or hearing about transportation. With the nearly universal availability of television and the emphasis on visuals in today's society, videos have a role in transportation planning and project development that has yet to be fully explored.

**Videotapes provide an additional medium for reaching people.** Although videotapes are widely used in this country for entertainment, they are also used for education and the dissemination of information about transportation. Videos can describe the steps in a process. They are geared to a group or an individual, depending on an agency's purposes, and enliven the presentation of a potentially dull subject. The Connecticut DOT, for example, prepared videos to enhance public understanding of incident management on an interstate highway. Agencies make videos available through local television stations, public libraries, and video stores or distribute them door-to-door, as has been done in recent political campaigns. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) produced a short video at each major milestone during development of its regional transit ballot proposal and sent it to public libraries as well as interest groups.

**Videos are used to introduce people to meetings and hearings.** Set to replay endlessly, videos present the same message each time without variation. Because these repeated messages are "canned," they should be presented in an informative, lively, and friendly manner. This may be extremely important when used with, say, a formal public hearing. (See **Public Meetings/Hearings**; **Open Houses/Open Forum Meetings**.) The Virginia DOT, for example, used videotapes to introduce and describe an open house public hearing process.

**Agencies use videos to document a planning process.** They can document proceedings of events in a public participation process. Viewers are thus exposed to a wide range of participants and their concerns. Focus group proceedings are frequently recorded on video for later replay and analysis.

**Videos illustrate different planning scenarios or project alternatives** and help people visualize a situation before, during, and after construction. Many incorporate computer simulations, such as a ride on a transportation facility before it is built. (See **Computer Presentations and Simulations**) For example, a New York State DOT video illustrating the impacts of high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes was shown to elected officials, the business community, and the general public. A separate video simulated the experience of driving a car on both 10- and 12-foot-wide HOV lanes.

**Videos help ensure that a consistent message is conveyed** during a series of meetings or other events, particularly when different staff members are in charge. San Francisco's Metropolitan Transportation Commission and Regional Planning Commission both produced videos on their long-range plans and showed them at meetings to make sure the same information was provided to all participants.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Videotapes reach a broad audience for participation.** People who cannot be reached in any other way often respond to videotapes. Presentation software is now available to provide viewers with information they can play on their VCRs. Currently, this technique often uses stationary images similar to slides, but in the near future video presentations for television will include live action as well as stationary and animated material.

**Dry runs of presentations are often videotaped.** Presenters rehearse a presentation, review it on tape, critique elements such as substance, voice modulation, posture, body language, jargon, and use of visual materials, then make changes accordingly.

**Agencies often distribute videotapes over a large geographic area and in more than one language.** They frequently clarify a complex process to supplement an oral presentation. For example, Boston's Central Artery/Tunnel project uses videos to simulate driving through a tunnel and along a surface street during various stages of the project. Videos also update the community on construction staging plans and mitigation proposals.

### What do video techniques cost?

**Costs of producing videotapes vary.** Simple videos produced in-house are inexpensive but may not be successful in reaching the target audience with the right message. An amateurish production may alienate people from an agency's approach or goals, because its unprofessional quality reflects on the caliber of the project itself. A more professional production is expensive initially but more cost-effective in the long run. Reproduction of tapes is relatively cheap.

**Length varies in accordance with the message** to be delivered: videotapes are prepared with a brief message or with more substantive content. For example, in Missoula, Montana, a four-minute videotape was used to introduce people to the principal issue of a meeting—the improvement of a single, complicated intersection.

**Video production demands a high level of staff expertise.** Even with donated video equipment, it is often difficult for agency staff to produce a good video. Staff may be available to record highway or transit rights-of-way, but these rudimentary skills fall short when a video must be credible and informative about complex issues. If the in-house staff does not have sophisticated production skills, outside assistance is required to produce a high-quality, cost-effective videotape.

### Who develops these techniques?

**Video usage requires a lead person** within an agency—a creative and adventuresome person interested in trying new techniques for involving the public in transportation. This can be an existing staff person or a staffer hired for the purpose. Agency staff people are the best resource to draft a video script and ensure that it is consistent with written materials and the particular goals the agency is aiming to achieve.

**Production frequently requires outside assistance.** Although personal recorders are widely used, videotapes to portray public activities should be professionally and competently produced, using professional-quality equipment.

### How do they relate to other techniques?

**Video techniques are often part of a media strategy.** A video can be released for use on television as camera-ready copy. An agency thus provides the news media with an accurate portrayal of a process or project to be shown as part of regular programming. Videos are a good means of providing information about meetings or ongoing planning processes. (See **Media Strategies**.) Seattle's Regional Transit Project, for example, used videotapes for 30-second advertising spots broadcast more than 300 times on five local television stations.

**Videos reach people who would not otherwise participate** in transportation processes, including people with disabilities. Special efforts should be made to accommodate hearing disabilities. TDD (Telephone Devices for the Deaf) phones are available with small screens and keyboards to aid people who are deaf or have hearing disabilities. (See **People with Disabilities**.)

**A video is always part of a larger process** and closely related to other techniques. Because a videotape is a one-way device, suitable for disseminating information, it has many potential applications. It can be an element for discussion in a focus group or charrette. (See **Focus Groups**; **Charrettes**.) It can record the points of view expressed at public meetings and hearings. (See **Public Meetings/Hearings**.) It can document positions established at civic advisory committee meetings. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.) It can report on agency progress at a transportation fair. (See **Transportation Fairs**.) A video should not be used in isolation from other techniques. It cannot replace face-to-face encounters with other participants and agency staff. Public involvement participants should always be fully informed if they are being recorded.

**Videotapes can substitute for field trips.** A video can illustrate the characteristics of a region or a corridor, alternative modes of transportation, alignments and adjacent neighborhoods, potential impacts, mitigating measures, and methods of participation. (See **Site Visits**.)

### How are they produced?

**Videotapes incorporate a variety of technologies** such as live action, computer images, graphics, maps, and charts. They can be produced incrementally. Slide shows can be augmented by scripts. Scripts can be recorded and slides shown at pre-determined intervals. A finished script and storyboard (picture sequence) can be developed and turned into a video. Special equipment and processes are required to transfer computer information onto tapes, and the level of quality varies.

### Who participates? And how?

**Any community member can use videotapes.** The only requirements are a television set and a playback machine. Printed materials such as brochures often complement the information presented graphically in a video. It is also important to provide telephone contacts for access to agency personnel for further information.

### What are the drawbacks?

**Videotapes are not two-way.** Unless special provision is made for an individual to respond, the viewer watches a message without being able to give feedback and without hearing opposing views. Thus, a tape should include a means of contacting staff or obtaining additional information. Some cable television stations use interactive techniques, including playing a video and allowing responses from viewers by telephone. (See **Interactive Television; Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks**.)

**Video viewers are basically self-selected.** Access is limited to viewers with a playback machine. Special attention should be given to the needs of people with disabilities. Interpreters may be needed to make the information available to individuals with hearing disabilities. Text must be sufficiently large so people with sight disabilities are able to read it. For the blind, narration should be sufficient to explain the material even though it cannot be seen.

**Video techniques are rapidly changing.** While videos are available now principally via home rentals or scheduled programming, in some localities it is already feasible for viewers to call in to view non-scheduled material immediately or at a viewer-chosen hour on a specific channel. Increasingly interactive techniques are being developed in the media. For example, in a few years, it will be possible for agencies to compose videotapes with information about specific processes to be broadcast on television, with community residents able to register opinions in a poll immediately following the presentation.

**Agencies sometimes over-estimate viewers' attention spans,** making videos too detailed or too long. A good norm is probably 5 to 15 minutes. Agencies should seek sound professional advice about how to define their message succinctly and with an appropriate level of detail. For easy comprehension and retention, a good video strikes a balance between substantive information and simplicity.

**For further information:**

- Central Artery/Tunnel Project, Boston, Massachusetts, (617) 951-6448
- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1357
- Missoula, Montana, Department of Transportation, (406) 549-6491
- New Jersey Department of Transportation Long-Range Plan, (609) 530-2866
- New York Department of Transportation Region 10, (518) 360-6006
- Puget Sound Regional Council, Seattle, Washington, (206) 464-7090

## TELEPHONE TECHNIQUES

### What are telephone techniques?

**The telephone offers a unique, two-way medium** for public involvement. It can be used to obtain information and to give opinions. Its use has entered a new era of potential applications to community participation, going beyond question-and-answer techniques toward the evolving new multi-media connections with television and computers.

**Telephones have long been used** for community involvement. However, innovations are available for expanding telephone use. For example, Iowa City, Iowa, offers telephone contact to an information television channel, which includes bus routes and transit information, a route finder to specific streets and points of interest, transportation for the elderly and persons with disabilities, and a "tow list" of all license plate numbers that have more than $15 in accumulated parking fees.

**Potential telephone techniques for public involvement** include:

- ***Auto attendant***—a series of tiered recordings leading an inquirer to a recorded answer or the appropriate staff person;
- ***Information bureau***—a staff person responds orally to a broad variety of standard queries, such as bus schedules or meeting dates;
- ***E-mail***—a staff person responds to computer queries; (See **On-line Services**.)
- ***Hotline or voice bulletin boards***—a staff person or recording answers questions about a specific project or program; (See **Hotlines**.)
- ***FAX-on-demand***—a recorded message provides a menu of documents available by FAX and how to obtain them;
- ***Telethon***—a telephone call-in for comments during a television program; (See **Interactive Television**.)
- ***Electronic town meeting***—a telephone call-in combined with a scheduled television program, which shows results of public calls; (See **Interactive Television**.)
- ***Interactive voice response system***—information retrieval from a main computer using telephones or terminals; and
- ***Interactive cable television information***—a series of information boards or videos that can be called up by phone to a television screen. (See **Interactive Television**.)

### Why are they useful?

**Telephone techniques are basically interactive.** The telephone is used to initiate a conversation or a query, and a response of some kind is made to advance the action. Responses can vary from pre-recorded messages to staff responses on specific topics. For example, a toll-free hotline number was provided for public information during the Washington, D.C., Bypass Study, which covered an area of 6,600 square miles in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. (See **Hotlines**.)

**Telephone techniques reach out to a broad variety of people** who might not otherwise participate in transportation processes, including people with disabilities. (See **People with Disabilities**.) They are used in community surveys to reach a statistically viable sample of the general population. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.) When combined with television, telephone techniques potentially open a new audience for public involvement. (See **Interactive Television**.) For example, in Savannah–Chatham County, Georgia, a local television station presented a VISION 2020 program, process, and critical issues, followed by an invitation to give opinions by telephone; results were tabulated and shown later on the same station like election night returns.

**Do telephone techniques have special uses?**

**Agency use of telephones can cover many topics.** An audio text service can be programmed to give answers to many pieces of information, including times and dates of community meetings. For example, in Virginia Beach, Virginia, a municipal telephone service is capable of answering 700 commonly asked questions; after receiving information, people leave messages and respond to survey questions.

**Agency use of telephones covers a large geographic area** and shows a desire to communicate with the general public. Telephones can be available around the clock for messages and can be programmed to respond in more than one language. They can be used to poll community opinions. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

**Telephone techniques are easily understood.** Special training for participants to get involved or express ideas is not required. For example, to introduce new users to its municipal service telephone information system, Colleyville, Texas, provides refrigerator magnets as a telephone directory to three-digit subcategories for guidance when calling about specific topics, including transportation.

**Telephone techniques can combine several applications.** For example, in Diamond Bar, California, an aggressive telecommunications project is enhancing public communications and reducing vehicle trips by combining an electronic bulletin board, optical imaging technology, geographic information systems, electronic and voice mail, and FAX systems.

**A FAX-on-demand system can deliver documents** in response to queries. These documents can be works-in-progress or final results of a process. Costs can be covered through use of a 900 number (the call is charged to the caller's phone bill) or a credit card billing. In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the State House of Representatives uses a FAX-modem system to provide documents to its members.

**Who participates? And how?**

**Any community resident can participate** in most telephone techniques—the exception being the structured telephone survey, which requires specific individuals as part of statistical sampling techniques. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.) In using the telephone, it is important for an agency to provide background information to participants to bolster the ability to understand the subject matter and this method of participation. Agencies need to make special efforts to accommodate people who do not speak English. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.)

**People participate by phoning their queries or ideas** to an agency. The agency is responsible for noting and recording ideas presented in this way and for informing inquirers of how their comments are being recorded and considered. Participation is further encouraged if results of telephone interactions can be displayed and distributed to participants.

**How do agencies use the output?**

**Telephone survey results are especially useful** in sampling public opinion. They demonstrate the degree of public support for an agency's proposals and thus shape the results. They show potential political difficulties, becoming useful in developing policy.

**Hotlines help people reach the right staff person** to give out information about a program. They help an agency receive and disseminate accurate information. (See **Hotlines**.) For example, Fort Collins, Colorado, offers a pothole hotline in its City-Line telephone service for people to report pothole locations. Fort Collins also offers information on right-of-way permits, highway access, excavations and construction activities, signal problems, bike lanes, and buses and carpools as well as city council and neighborhood meeting dates and subjects.

### How are they organized?

**Highly technical telephone techniques** require outside assistance from specialized agencies or firms. The evolving relationships with cable television are likely to require expertise and specific programs or equipment.

**Telephone techniques need a lead person** within an agency—a person who is vitally interested in trying new techniques for reaching people. The Loveland, Colorado, interactive telephone/cable television service was initiated by the City Manager.

### How do they relate to other techniques?

**Telephone techniques can be part of a media strategy.** They can provide information about meetings or ongoing planning processes. (See **Media Strategies**.) For example, nine cities in the Dayton, Ohio, area provide a community calendar of upcoming events, accessible by phoning a local cable television station.

**Community surveys are sometimes made by phone.** Telephone surveys or opinion polls are frequently used to obtain information that is not otherwise available to an agency. They are also used during a process when a specific piece of information is required. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

**Results of telephone polls are used in many other situations.** They can be part of a focus group—as an element for discussion; they can be part of a charrette—to establish the points of view of the community at large; they can be used in civic advisory committees—to deal with community feedback on a program or project. (See **Focus Groups**; **Charrettes**; **Civic Advisory Committees**.)

**Special efforts should be made to accommodate hearing disabilities.** Text telephones such as TDD (Telephone Devices for the Deaf) phones are available with small screens and keyboards to aid people who have hearing disabilities. (See **People with Disabilities**.)

**Telephone techniques are not used in isolation** from other techniques such as public meetings or hearings. (See **Public Meetings/Hearings**.) They are especially useful in obtaining community reactions after programs or proposals have been adequately explained. They cannot replace face-to-face encounters with other participants and agency staff. (See **Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses**.)

### What do telephone techniques cost?

**Costs of telephone techniques depend on the extent of a program.** Simple answering devices are inexpensive but not interactive. Staff assignments may be necessary in nearly all other techniques.

**Telephone surveys are often inexpensive** but in all cases involve a sampling technique that should be statistically valid for subsequent use and for credibility.

**Basic interactive machines for cable television use are becoming less expensive,** and some channels donate air time as a public service. The expense of producing a telethon or cable television program depends on the extent of information to be presented. Live action and animation are the most expensive portions of a presentation. (See **Interactive Television**.)

### What are the drawbacks?

**In recorded messages, participation is strictly limited** unless a means of contacting staff or obtaining additional information is offered. Information is frequently disseminated without a means for people to offer opinions or to reach appropriate staff people for further queries.

**Telephone techniques may not be democratic,** if a large part of the population has no phone. This reduces the possibility of all participants having an equal status and an equal opportunity to participate.

**Telephones do not always allow people to hear other opinions.** A hotline provides agency information only. In telephone surveys, participants must wait until the results are posted for them to read. However, in electronic town meetings the results are posted shortly after polling is completed.

**For further information:**

- Colleyville, Texas, (817) 281-4044
- Diamond Bar, California, (909) 396-5689
- Fort Collins, Colorado, (303) 221-6522
- Miami Valley Cable Council, Dayton, Ohio, (513) 438-8887
- Pennsylvania House of Representatives, (717) 783-6430
- Virginia Beach, Virginia, City-Line, (804) 427-4068
- Washington Bypass Study, Virginia Department of Transportation, (807) 786-2935

## MEDIA STRATEGIES

### What are media strategies?

**Media strategies inform customers** about projects and programs through newspapers, radio, television and videos, billboards, posters and variable message signs, mass mailings of brochures or newsletters, and distribution of fliers. Working with the media, an agency takes an active role in disseminating information. For example, the San Francisco area's annual "Beat the Backup" program during California Rideshare Week promotes ridesharing in partnership with a full range of the media.

**Media strategies take a variety of forms.** The simplest examples are fliers about projects within a corridor (a targeted market area) or variable message signs on highways that inform motorists (a targeted market) of delays ahead or of alternate routes. (See **Public Information Materials**.) Promotional brochures are used in direct mail campaigns or—as in Portland, Maine—through a full-size newspaper supplement explaining the regional transportation plan. Briefing reporters and editorial boards of both newspaper and broadcast media with in-depth background on a project or program prepares them to analyze an agency's approach and report on aspects of an issue in an even-handed way. (See Briefings.) In New Jersey, media executives were briefed on high-occupancy vehicle HOV lane proposals at the outset of planning for the project.

### Why are they useful?

**An agency proactively frames the message,** rather than allowing the media to do it. Framing the message takes thought and attention about all aspects of a program or process. Media strategies are routinely incorporated into projects that need public focus, consensus, and understanding in order to move forward. In Idaho, the Department of Transportation uses video to introduce programs to the public and to provide news stories accompanying press releases.

**Effective media strategies deliver a uniform message** to alleviate the spread of misinformation that often becomes a barrier to understanding or implementation. Strategies can be styled to meet varying levels of interest. For Seattle's regional transit plan, a detailed program of media coverage was integrated with other forms of community outreach.

**Many people rely heavily on the media for information** about events, plans, or projects that affect them. The media are an important resource for people who have little time to attend meetings or participate in public involvement activities.

### Do they have special uses?

**Media coverage helps generate interest** in a project or program. In any program, the critical first step is to develop a central message addressing such questions as: What is the plan or project? What does the public need to know in order to participate effectively? Who is the audience? Once these questions have been addressed, the specific media to carry the message are defined—the kinds of media that will best serve the need of encouraging public participation.

**The media disseminate information widely.** This includes informing and educating the public via major articles and profiles on television and in print as well as eye-catching ads to supplement the more formal, required legal notices. Specific transportation projects typically reach out to community residents along the affected corridor, to interest groups, and to municipal officials. A media strategy for these kinds of projects involves many activities. For example, in Washington, D.C., a media program to encourage ridesharing ranges from mall banners and decals for shop windows to an education program in elementary schools called "It's Cool to Pool."

**Cable television is particularly useful** as a tool for getting the word out. It is much cheaper than paid network advertising and has a more local flavor. Public access channels often videotape public meetings and other forums and play them repeatedly over a period of time. (See **Video Techniques**.) In addition, local cable channels have news programs, guest editorials, and interviews where project issues can be highlighted. For assurance of broad outreach to people who do not watch cable channels, programming on regular stations and networks is an effective alternative.

### Who participates? And how?

**Stakeholders and agencies often cooperate** in a media program for a project. Civic advisory committees or other community representatives help identify the best way to get the word out. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.) As individuals directly affected by a particular project or program, or through past experience, they may know the best way to reach the public. Agencies use community residents as part of speakers' bureaus that send representatives out to promote a project at meetings of organizations such as Rotary or Lions' Clubs and chambers of commerce.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Agencies monitor reactions to a media plan.** Random surveys test market penetration and determine whether the message is meeting a targeted population.

**A media plan elicits community responses.** Mass mailings can include simple questionnaires to be returned to the agency. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.) A television presentation can suggest that reactions be mailed to the agency. On two-way talk shows, agency staff interact with community callers to answer questions directly. As programs and projects evolve and progress, media activities are adjusted to reflect their status and to introduce new information.

**The key is to put together a plan that informs and educates** the public by delivering the central message, no matter which type or types of media strategies are identified.

### Who leads media strategies?

**Media strategies are led by agency staff,** either the staff members most closely identified with the project or the public affairs officer. The involvement of local people is particularly important to a successful media campaign. Community input and feedback help to "take the pulse" of a program to be sure the media chosen are appropriate and effective.

### What do media strategies cost?

**Because media strategies are often expensive, they must be used carefully and efficiently.** A minimum strategy includes a central message, perhaps contained in a basic press kit with maps, fact sheets, and other background information, supplemented by a media tour of the project site. Complex projects call for a more elaborate strategy. For example, in New Jersey a strategic media plan was developed for outreach to print and electronic media to support the long-range transportation plan.

**Time involved is often substantial** over the life of a project or program. Some strategies are relatively low-cost. Briefings with editorial boards of both print and electronic media, as well as regular low-key contact with reporters and other media staff, are low-cost ways to deliver a message. (See **Briefings**.) A public service announcement is usually a low-cost activity.

**Costs rise with the kind of media used.** A television/radio or newspaper campaign can be costly, involving air time and production/printing costs. Costs vary by project complexity and length. There are low, moderate, and high levels of investment for utilizing the media. Depending on the needs of the project, a media strategy ranges from relatively simple placards or videos to a high-profile media campaign involving radio and television ads in prime time.

**Although costs of a paid media campaign are high, the investment pays off,** particularly when:

- An agency wants to guarantee that an announcement, information, or meeting date is published or broadcast;
- An audience probably will not be reached in any other way, or maximum exposure is needed;
- An agency wants a say in the placement of the material; for example, requesting a certain page location for a paid ad or a certain time slot for radio/television;
- A map, graphic, logo, slogan, or written material needs to be shown in a certain format or with a certain design that identifies the project or plan;
- An agency wants to assure that its message goes out exactly as written—paid advertising is not edited;
- The media are likely to give an agency better *free* coverage if it is already known as a paying client.

**How are they organized?**

**Media strategies should be comprehensive.** Strategies need to be evaluated as they are being assembled and after implementation. Questions to ask include:

- Breadth of techniques to use—How many and what kind of techniques are appropriate?
- Effectiveness—How many people were reached and how did they react to particular media?
- Ease of implementation—How easy or difficult is it for the agency to implement the various elements? Is an outside consultant needed? and
- Cost—What are the cost-effective benefits in view of constrained resources?

**How do they relate to other techniques?**

**Media strategies are used in conjunction** with other techniques. For example, televising civic advisory committee meetings enhances the participation process by giving it a wider audience. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.) Results of brainstorming, visioning, charrettes, and community surveys can be reported in the media. (See **Brainstorming**; **Visioning**; **Charrettes**; **Public Opinion Surveys**.) News stories can promote a telephone hot line for answering questions. (See **Hotlines**.) A visioning process in Atlanta included televised town hall meetings, newspaper editorials, and a six-newspaper survey of public opinion that produced 10,000 responses.

**Are they flexible?**

**Media strategies are extremely flexible.** A wide range of techniques is used, depending on the project, its budget, and the complexity of the message. In Los Angeles, a commuter newsletter bulletin was prepared for widespread distribution to inform commuters about ride options and programs.

**Preparation and monitoring is crucial.** Advance work is essential for staff to prepare the overall program and central message and to identify the targeted audience. In New York, for example, a range of media has been designed to promote the new HOV lane on the Long Island Expressway: a video on ridesharing for businesses to use at their companies; posters in the workplace on carpools and vanpools; local cable channels for advertising spots; and variable message signs along the corridor. All these target a specific audience—either residents or employers in the corridor or daily expressway users.

### What are the drawbacks?

**Media outlets may outpace an agency** by looking for a scoop and framing the message without agency or community input. Public agencies have little control over stories before publication or broadcast. Agencies frequently spend valuable resources to explain a message or to try to reshape public opinion rather than framing the message in the first place.

**Media strategies take a high level of commitment** sustained over time to be successful. Strategic planning starts at the outset of a project with the development of a detailed central message.

### When are they most effective?

**Media strategies should be developed early** and sustained over time. In this way, the public is well-informed and aware from the beginning, thus enhancing the public participation process and creating greater opportunity for successful implementation of the project or program.

### For further information:

- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1730
- Idaho Department of Transportation, (208) 334-4444
- New Jersey Department of Transportation, Communications, (609) 530-4280
- Rides (Commuter Services), San Francisco, California, (415) 861-7665
- Washington, D.C., Council of Governments Ride-finders Network, (202) 962-3327

## SPEAKERS' BUREAUS AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT VOLUNTEERS

### What are speakers' bureaus and public involvement volunteers?

**Speakers' bureaus are groups of specially-trained representatives** who can speak about a process or program. They can be community people or agency staff. Bureau members meet with public and private organizations and groups on behalf of a project, program, or planning activity. Members of a speakers' bureau provide information about planning or project activities, listen to people's concerns, answer questions, and seek continued participation and input from the public. Agencies sometimes call them "listeners' bureaus" to emphasize two-way communication and the intention to listen to the public.

**Public involvement volunteers are people from the community** temporarily enlisted to assist an agency in developing and implementing a public involvement program. In Georgia, the Atlanta Regional Commission's Family of Partners' nearly 800 volunteers work with the commission on designing and implementing its public involvement program. The Family of Partners trains its volunteers to run meetings with local groups and neighborhoods and to move agency planning information down to the grass roots level.

**Public involvement volunteers add to the capabilities of a speakers' bureau.** Volunteer programs and speakers' bureaus may be used together or separately. Speakers can be either community volunteers or agency staff.

### Why are they useful?

**Speakers' bureaus and public involvement volunteers serve a variety of community groups.** Speakers can be organized to address civic groups, social clubs, professional organizations, neighborhood associations, and other groups, but they have other uses as well. The Maryland State Highway Administration created a speakers' bureau to cover the five-county U.S. 301 corridor project study area. Speakers addressed county chambers of commerce, county commissioners, local Rotary clubs, neighborhood associations, building industry associations, churches, political clubs, city councils, local planning commissions, the regional delegation of the State legislature, the regional council of governments, the State association of counties, the regional transportation association, the professional engineering society, and real estate firms.

**They expand possibilities for community participation.** Speaking to community groups at a place of their choice increases the number of participants in a planning process. (See **Improving Meeting Attendance**.) Local groups involving people on their own terms and issues enhances interest and thus helps broaden participation. Groups such as business or professional organizations welcome community issues to the table at their own meetings, where they focus on specific issues and concerns.

**They help the agency understand community viewpoints.** Community representatives value the opportunity to present their concerns directly to an agency representative who has come to speak with and listen to them. They expect the representative to carry their comments back to the agency for incorporation into plans or programs.

**They help the community understand an agency and its work.** Speakers and volunteers help an agency establish closer relationships with various organizations, facilitating communication and involvement in its planning efforts. Working with several groups, they help develop a base of support for implementation of the agency's efforts. The League of Women Voters worked with the Port Authority of Allegheny County on the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Light Rail Transit project.

**They add vigor to the public involvement process.** Speakers and public involvement volunteers help agencies respond quickly to requests from local organizations for an agency representative to attend a community meeting. The Missouri Highway and Transportation Department established a public involvement strategy team made up of mayors, Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) heads, and other local leaders for speaking in transportation districts throughout the State. This arrangement stimulated many creative efforts, including school curricula on transportation, writing contests, information tents at football games, and a variety of open houses. (See **Games and Contests**; **Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses**.)

### Do they have special uses?

**Public involvement volunteers can help assemble a community perspective on a project or program.** Volunteers who live in the community offer special insight into a process or project. They understand its potential benefits and impacts and have a well-defined perspective an agency staff member might lack.

**Speakers' bureau presentations can be tailored to address specific concerns.** Presentations can address the special interests of business, environment, or local neighborhood groups. An agency can receive details of the concerns and amplify its understanding of the perspectives of different constituencies. An improved understanding helps an agency incorporate community points of view into its products.

**Public involvement speakers and volunteers are useful at events** like open houses, where person-to-person communication is a focus. (See **Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses**.) They also represent agencies at transportation fairs or events sponsored by other agencies. (See **Transportation Fairs**.) For the New Haven, Connecticut, Q Bridge project, members of the project advisory committee staffed an open house.

**Public involvement volunteers can distribute information** in meetings or door-to-door. In Boise, Idaho, the highway district pays groups to distribute materials such as reports and other documents. These public involvement volunteers disseminate information on the streets or in other public places; in some cases, they are prepared to answer simple questions as well. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

**Public involvement speakers and volunteers help bridge communication gaps.** Multi-lingual speakers serve as interpreters at events with a sizable non-English-speaking representation. During its statewide planning process, the Alaska Department of Transportation (DOT) used community volunteers as Inuit interpreters for meetings in rural areas. When DOT planners were on the agenda at traditional council meetings, where many elders do not speak English, they took along Inuit interpreters to translate their long-range plan presentations and facilitate question-and-answer sessions.

**Public involvement volunteers serve functions in addition to speaking.** As part of an agency's public involvement program, volunteers serve as assistants and auxiliary staff, or they may actually lead or assist in organizing large events such as transportation fairs or agency open houses. (See **Transportation Fairs**; **Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses**.)

### Who participates?

**A variety of people serve as speakers or volunteers**—members of partnership agencies, consultants, agency board members, elected officials, or community residents. Speakers from civic and technical advisory committees have the advantage of being already familiar with a planning effort. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.) Agency representatives (including public involvement and technical specialists) serve as a nucleus to help in training. The Maryland State Highway Administration called on people from its staff, the consultant team, and a State-appointed civic task force to create a speakers' bureau for the U.S. 301 corridor project.

**Many groups of people are reached by speakers,** including homeowner organizations and neighborhood associations, chambers of commerce, regional environmental and civic organizations, labor unions, professional associations, religious groups, fraternal and philanthropic organizations, and educational institutions.

### How do agencies use speakers' bureaus and public involvement volunteers?

**A speakers' bureau functions as an on-call service.** Once a public agency selects and trains speakers, it relies on them as an on-call resource to respond to requests by community groups for agency presentations. The Puget Sound Regional Council in Washington State has established a speakers' bureau to improve understanding of freight movement as the circulatory system of its economy. The Council works with volunteers from the private sector's Regional Freight Mobility Roundtable to set up its speakers' bureau calendar.

**Public involvement volunteers have an advantage in eliciting concerns and issues.** Community volunteers genuinely portray themselves as part of the general public. They are often seen as more neutral than agency staff.

**Speakers and public involvement volunteers contribute to an agency's written communications.** The San Francisco, California, Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) encourages its speakers and public involvement volunteers to write newsletter articles. People who have served as members of the agency outreach team can help establish a rounded perspective in the agency's written communications. (See **Public Information Materials**; **Media Strategies**.)

**A public involvement volunteer program helps identify people for leadership positions.** Volunteers frequently include interested individuals or stakeholders. If they are effective speakers with well-developed interpersonal skills, they may be candidates for further leadership in the community. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**; **Collaborative Task Forces**; **Citizens on Decision and Policy Bodies**.)

### Who leads?

**An agency appoints a staff person to coordinate speakers and volunteers.** Project managers often control staffing for their projects, and they may be equipped to select and manage speakers and volunteers. Alternatively, an agency's speakers' bureau can coordinate the speakers or public involvement volunteers for all projects and programs of the agency.

**Agency staff must provide training to help speakers and volunteers be most effective.** For speakers and volunteers, training should be simple and continuous. Volunteers with public speaking experience may need instruction on technical issues or a political context. Other volunteers and agency staff may need coaching in the art of speaking. Training should be available to speakers from the beginning of their involvement, and periodic refresher sessions should be worked into the program.

**Leadership is sometimes found outside an agency.** As speakers and volunteers address organizations and associations, people are drawn into the process. This widening pool of individuals may include many dynamic and influential people who, as they become interested in an agency's work, may be tapped for additional outreach efforts. If they are community group leaders, they may become key players in mobilizing their organizations to assist an agency with its program or a specific project.

### What are the costs?

**Speakers' bureaus are relatively inexpensive.** Basic costs are incurred in sending speakers to a public meeting, whether they are volunteers or not, including travel, handout materials, feedback cards, presentation equipment, and (possibly) refreshments. Some agencies reimburse volunteers for travel costs, including meals.

**Public involvement volunteers can stretch a limited outreach budget.** An agency keeps public involvement costs down by making efficient use of volunteers. Volunteers also enable an agency to greatly expand the scope and intensity of its outreach program. Volunteer speakers provide assistance to agency staff that lets the agency hold more meetings and reach more people on a limited budget.

**Even volunteer bureaus have a cost to the agency.** Start-up costs are associated with organizing the bureau and recruiting and training speakers. Staff time costs are associated with debriefing speakers after their meetings and with necessary record-keeping and meeting follow-up. The Atlanta, Georgia, Regional Commission trains volunteers to be speakers and sends a junior staff person to every meeting led by a public involvement volunteer to take notes and ensure agency follow-up.

**Public involvement volunteers and speakers are sometimes paid for temporary work.** For special events, projects, or programs, it is useful for an agency to pay its volunteers and speakers a nominal sum for their efforts. The use of speakers and volunteers extends staff capabilities for a brief period or for an extended period of planning or development.

### How are speakers' bureaus and volunteers organized?

**Speakers' bureaus are initiated before or after community requests.** Agencies that are pro-active create a speakers' bureaus first, then solicit invitations for speakers to come to meetings of community groups.

**Agencies recruit representative candidates for their speakers' bureaus.** Since speakers are perceived as representatives of an agency, it is imperative that the agency recruit people qualified and willing to do the job. Speakers function as ambassadors, and their work should represent an agency's best efforts.

**Agencies train and equip the speakers for their work.** People frequently need help preparing for the role. Basic training includes tips on posture, elocution, diction, and timing. While practice sessions and role playing help in training, new speakers can attend presentations by veteran speakers to see what the work entails.

**Speakers need adequate materials and preparation.** A core presentation can be devised for speakers to use, including handouts, maps, videos, or presentation boards. Prior to meetings, agency staff can assist a speaker in tailoring the presentation to the host group's special interests. Many speakers' bureaus also distribute questionnaires to the host groups and prepare a list of specific questions to be discussed at meetings. Speakers should be given an easy method of reporting back to the agency.

**Speakers rely on agency staff for support and assistance.** Junior staff people accompany speakers to meetings to take notes, help with materials or equipment, and assist with follow-up and reporting. Written records of all meetings are prepared, with special attention given to major comments, perspectives, and concerns. Agency staff helps speakers follow through on responses to questions or requests that cannot be immediately addressed at a meeting.

**Speakers and public involvement volunteers are matched to community group needs** so their particular backgrounds and skills are effectively employed. In a large-scale project, many organizations learn of the agency's efforts and seek additional information. The agency speaker/helper coordinator then works to assign appropriate speakers to the various host groups.

**Agencies offer the speakers' bureau as a special public service.** The initial task is to let groups and organizations know such services are available. An agency contacts the prominent civic and social organizations within a study area and offer speakers for future meetings. This arrangement allows the agency to distribute meetings over time to make the best use of time available to its speakers.

**Speakers and volunteers focus on communication and follow-up.** Within a speakers' bureau, the essential functions of communication and follow-up must be stressed throughout. Speakers and volunteers facilitate communication between an agency and its constituency and get the right information out to people who request it.

### How are they used with other techniques?

**Speakers' bureaus are used in conjunction with written material or videos** and other graphic information pieces. They are also used to follow up mailings of brochures or fliers. (See **Public Information Materials**.) Rochester, New York's Genesee Transportation Committee includes in its basic outreach materials a brochure about its well-established speakers' bureau.

**Speakers' bureaus and public involvement volunteers are integrated into a larger effort** with a variety of other public involvement techniques. Although they are useful and relatively inexpensive, they cannot substitute for other methods of reaching and involving the public.

**Civic Advisory Committee members are ideal candidates for speakers' bureaus.** Since they are already actively involved in an agency's efforts, they can speak comfortably about the agency's project or program. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.) The Governor of Maryland appointed 76 people to a task force to study the U.S. 301 corridor. Several qualified speakers from this task force volunteered to speak to community groups and to make presentations to their own organizations or societies.

**At open houses, speakers and volunteers help explain an agency's work.** Open houses can be labor-intensive, with many simultaneous one-on-one discussions. The support of volunteers makes the effort easier for an agency with limited full-time staff. Public involvement volunteers also assist staff in the variety of tasks involved in preparation and implementation of an open house. (See **Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses**.)

**Public involvement volunteers staff drop-in centers or booths at transportation fairs.** They direct people to displays or written literature and answer questions. If they cannot answer specific questions, they take names and addresses for follow-up by an appropriate agency staff member. (See **Transportation Fairs**; **Drop-in Centers**.)

**Trained public involvement volunteers offer advice on program elements.** With speaking experience and exposure to community groups, volunteers have useful perspectives on an agency's public involvement program. The League of Women Voters helped the Metro Transit Authority in Seattle, Washington, improve its public involvement program. The Austin, Texas, MPO enlisted community volunteers to help monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of an entire public involvement program for an alternatives analysis/draft environmental impact statement.

### What are the drawbacks?

**An agency has less control over unpaid volunteers.** Unpaid volunteers, acting as speakers or volunteers, are not employees and are not entirely under the control of the agency. An agency may design the speaking program, but it cannot completely control the message the speakers give out. To minimize this difficulty, the leader of the speakers' bureau needs to select speakers carefully to match speaker with audience.

**These techniques do not substitute for staff involvement.** Speakers' bureaus volunteers are not shields between the public and agency officials. Agency heads, project managers, program coordinators, and technical staff still need some exposure to the community during the public involvement process. Speakers and volunteers play an important role in the outreach process, but they must not be "fronts" for a distant agency.

**An agency has a responsibility to volunteers** and is aware of their best interests. An agency does not expect volunteers to put in the same hours or travel the same distance as paid staff. While an agency may not be able to pay its volunteers, it acknowledges their contributions and guards against demanding too much from them.

**Volunteers lose credibility and standing in the community if things go awry.** At a critical stage in a project, especially if there is a potential for confrontation, it is best to avoid using volunteers for presentations. They have more to lose in the local community than an agency does. Agency staff, however, may be seen as "only doing their jobs" during tough going.

### Are speakers' bureaus and volunteer programs flexible?

**Speakers and volunteer programs are shaped and modified** as conditions change and requests come in for agency presentations at group meetings.

**These techniques make an overall program more flexible.** By creating a speakers' bureau or organizing volunteers, an agency adds flexibility to its outreach. Speakers and volunteers bring a variety of additional skills, contacts, and personal qualities to an agency's program or project that might otherwise not be found among agency staff.

### When are they used most effectively?

**Speakers' bureaus are effective when approaching a milestone event,** a critical decision, or a program review. Getting the right speaker before the right group at the right time is very effective. Some speakers are considered "big guns"—people of high stature within the community. In addition to political influence, some individuals or groups may command greater respect within the community, and a well-timed endorsement or sign of support helps an agency's project.

**For labor-intensive events, it is cost-effective to use volunteers (paid or unpaid) to augment staff or stand in for staff.** A group of trained, informed volunteers helps agency staff do more in the time available. Volunteers staff information tables, collect names and addresses, and forward inquiries to staff for response.

### For further information:

- Alaska Department of Transportation, Juneau, Alaska, (907) 465-2171
- Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2500
- Austin Urban Transportation Study, Austin, Texas, (512) 472-7483
- Bay Area Rapid Transit, Oakland, California, (510) 464-6172
- Connecticut Department of Transportation, (860) 594-2000
- Genesee Transportation Committee, Rochester, New York, (716) 232-6240
- Georgia Department of Transportation, Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 656-5267
- Idaho Department of Transportation, Boise, Idaho, (208) 334-8300
- League of Women Voters, Washington, D.C., (202) 429-1965
- Maryland State Highway Administration, Baltimore, Maryland, (410) 333-6431
- Metro-Dade Transit Agency, Miami, Florida, (305) 375-5675
- Missouri Highway and Transportation Department, Jefferson City, Missouri, (314) 751-1685
- Port Authority of Allegheny County, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, (412) 237-7000

## Chapter 1. INFORMING PEOPLE THROUGH OUTREACH AND ORGANIZATION

### D. TAKING INITIAL ACTION STEPS

Getting started in public involvement need not be difficult. Here are some steps an agency can take to organize a process that involves people in transportation planning and project development:

1. **Determine what kinds of information are needed for and from the public, when, and why.**
   Clearly define the goals and objectives of the public involvement program—make them specific to the needs of the particular transportation project or plan. Ask: Who is the "public" for this venture? What information does the public need in order to understand it? What kinds of information does the agency need from the public? When in the process will this information be most timely? In what ways will it be used to develop the best possible project or plan?

2. **Meet with community members and key people to further refine the goals and objectives.**
   Make initial contacts with people known to be interested in or directly affected by an agency's proposal or planning process. Include residents and businesses from the general area where improvements are proposed. Include a representative sample of stakeholders from throughout the planning region as well as the transportation underserved and other hard-to-reach groups. Solicit initial comments on the proposal itself, on who the appropriate target audience is, and on how best to involve them in the process. These might be individuals, community representatives, or special interest groups (such as business, freight, and environmental organizations). Document the input and note the reasons for specific approaches.

3. **Scan for stakeholders and potential participants.**
   Identify potential participants from a list of people likely to be directly affected by a project or planning process. Include special interest groups, other agencies, freight interests, community leaders, the disability community, minorities and ethnic groups, low-income people, and the poorly educated. Ask people to recommend other potential participants or groups that represent the community or specific interests.

4. **Build a contact list and mail introductory information.**
   Set up a contact list of potential participants that includes their affiliations and notes their particular concerns. Welcome them to the participation process. Describe the purposes and goals of the project or planning program, provide an overview of the ways people can become involved, and give date, time, and agenda for initial meetings. Establish personal contact with those who are unable to read a mailing.

5. **Organize participants who are intensely interested into core groups, and establish means for others to participate as their input is needed.**
   Offer people ways to participate that match their level of commitment. Invite those who are highly involved to address specific tasks or issues on a regular basis. Offer an array of other participation options for people with less time or a lesser stake in the project or plan.

6. **Set up a first meeting.**
   Choose a date or dates convenient to the most participants. Consult community leaders for best times and places for meetings. Notify the public and the media; send a mailing to everyone on the contact list.

7. **Evaluate the approach with participant advisors.**
   Seek early feedback from community advisors to see if the public involvement approach is working. Identify needed changes. Determine the effectiveness of agency communication links.

## Chapter 2. INVOLVING PEOPLE FACE-TO-FACE THROUGH MEETINGS

Meetings—formal and informal—are the backbone of a public participation program. People like and need firsthand opportunities to discuss agency programs and plans.

### Why are meetings important?

Meetings provide a time and place for face-to-face contact and two-way communication—dynamic components of public involvement that help break down barriers between people and the agencies that serve them. Through meetings, people learn that an agency is not a faceless, uncaring bureaucracy and that the individuals in charge are real people. Meetings give agencies a chance to respond directly to comments and dispel rumors or misinformation.

Far from being passive gatherings, meetings are interactive occasions when people discuss issues of consequence to them and their neighbors, listen to opposing viewpoints on the issues, and work together for the common good. Agency staff people who handle public meetings need to be trained in skills that encourage interaction and also keep the process focused and productive.

### Do agencies have options in organizing meetings?

The particular circumstances of a plan or project determine the type of meeting that is appropriate, when it is held, the way it is organized, and how it is conducted. Most meetings work best when they are adapted to a specific purpose—for instance, for stakeholders in a proposed project or plan to monitor its progress and effects, or for an agency to build consensus and support. Because they demand time and effort from all participants, meetings must be planned and implemented carefully. Options for organizing meetings are described on the following pages:

**A. Determining the type of meeting;**
**B. Selecting an organizing feature for a meeting; and**
**C. Taking initial action steps.**

## Chapter 2. INVOLVING PEOPLE FACE-TO-FACE THROUGH MEETINGS

### A. DETERMINING THE TYPE OF MEETING

The type of meeting, its timing, and its level of formality are determined by its purpose in the overall public involvement effort. An effective strategy tailors meetings to the target audience, the corridor or region, or the types of stakeholder groups—and, in some instances such as public hearings, to the legal requirements.

Scheduling for a meeting depends on what information participants need and when they are likely to need it, as well as on when agencies need information from the public. Sometimes a series of meetings is appropriate:

- A kickoff session;
- Periodic meetings throughout the process, especially timed with major planning milestones and decision points; and
- A meeting or meetings near the end of the process

The underlying principle is to provide timely and adequate opportunities for participation.

Flexibility is crucial. Agencies may vary meeting types to grab attention or focus on specific elements of a plan or program. Near the completion of a process, if an agency is legally required to hold a public hearing, it may choose to prepare potential participants with further informational gatherings and discussions. In cases where time is insufficient, agencies might schedule another date when discussion can continue.

Agencies tailor the type of meeting to its substance and purpose, as outlined below:

- **Public meetings/hearings;**
- **Open houses/open forum hearings; and**
- **Conferences, workshops, and retreats.**

## PUBLIC MEETINGS/HEARINGS

### How do meetings and hearings differ?

**Public meetings present information** to the public and obtain informal input from community residents. Held throughout the planning process, they are tailored to specific issues or community groups and are either informal or formal. Public meetings have been used for many years to disseminate information, provide a setting for public discussion, and get feedback from the community. Over 100 public meetings were used to develop a subway extension in Boston. While the technique itself is not innovative, some creative applications are being made. For example, Delaware used public "exhibits" in an informal open house format with one-on-one discussions as a focal point of each phase of a highway planning effort.

**A public hearing is a more formal event than a public meeting.** Held prior to a decision point, a public hearing gathers community comments and positions from all interested parties for public record and input into decisions. Public hearings are required by the Federal government for many transportation projects and are held in transportation planning at the discretion of the sponsoring organization. Public notices in a general circulation newspaper cite the time, date, and place of a hearing. The period between notice and hearing dates provides time for preparing comments for submission to an agency. During this period, the agency accepts questions and provides clarification. The Georgia Department of Transportation (DOT) expands the question-and-answer period by holding an open house in conjunction with a public hearing. (See **Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses**.)

**Meetings and hearings have these basic features:**

- Anyone may attend, as either an individual or a representative of specific interests;
- Meetings may be held at appropriate intervals; hearings are held near the end of a process or sub-process before a decision;
- Hearings require an official hearing officer; meetings do not;
- Hearings usually have a time period during which written comments may be received; and
- Community comments are recorded in written form as input to an agency.

### Why are they useful?

**Meetings and hearings are forums for receiving community comments.** Both are widely used to achieve a basic level of community input and to exchange information with a wide representation of community residents.

**Public meetings are optional events and thus tailored to agency and community needs.** Public hearings, by contrast, are frequently used to fulfill regulatory requirements. Meetings and hearings can, however, be linked. For example, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) in both Atlanta, Georgia, and Bridgeport, Connecticut, held multiple meetings on a transportation improvement program (TIP) at local public review meetings, followed by a public hearing at the MPO level.

**Public meetings are flexible and can be held as part of MPO or statewide planning or part of a single project.** There can be multiple sessions on a single topic: the Kentucky DOT held community meetings on the State TIP over a three-month period. Meetings can be held in multiple locations, as can hearings.

**A public hearing is a single opportunity for people to be heard.** If held at the end of a process without other opportunities for involvement, it does not provide opportunity for early and continuing involvement as described in Federal regulations. More frequent community input is essential to agencies and more satisfying to people as a means of meeting participation requirements and goals. In Seattle, for example, the Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) took part in more than 1,000 community meetings, forums, open houses, and hearings to provide information and receive public input on the Regional Transit Plan. As part of this effort, agency representatives participated as guest speakers in meetings of groups such as the MPO.

### Do they have special uses?

**Each meeting or hearing facilitates participation.** Scheduling these opportunities demonstrates progress toward involving community residents in projects and programs. They provide a place to identify positions and report a consensus or divergence of opinion to an agency. In Brisbane, California, a "Have Your Say Day" was held to obtain individuals' ideas for the city's planning efforts.

**A single meeting can address several related projects or community planning issues.** This is more efficient for agencies, in terms of both staff time and mailing costs, and it helps avoid participant burnout, particularly when many of the same people are interested in several projects or plans. Joint meetings also help to place individual project issues and goals within a broader community context. For 10 projects along the San Francisco waterfront, the city created a Waterfront Transportation Projects Office that coordinated all the city agencies involved. The office used a common mailing list, coordinated newsletters, and joint meetings. Through this cooperative effort, participants saw their specific concerns in relation to the "big picture."

### Who participates? And how?

**All community people can participate in meetings or hearings.** In some instances, participation is structured, either within larger meetings or for geographic areas. Both the Baltimore and Washington, D.C., MPOs provide time for formal public comment periods (15–20 minutes) at each of their meetings. In Portland, Maine, the MPO received input from neighborhood associations. The New Orleans MPO made special efforts to reach out to businesses by sponsoring two major conferences dealing with transportation issues of interest to businesses. The Mobile, Alabama, MPO brought in Chamber of Commerce representatives to review TIP projects and worked with them and others to forge a consensus. Meetings, but not hearings, can be focused on particular groups.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Meetings and hearings help monitor community reactions** to agency policy, proposals, and progress. By observing reactions at periodic meetings or at a hearing, agencies and people are made aware of opinions and stances. If public meetings are held early in the process, these opinions may be analyzed and responded to before they become solidified or difficult to modify. Public hearings provide formal input to decisions.

**Meetings can become a driving force for technical work.** The MPO of Dane County (Madison), Wisconsin, devoted one year of a three-year, long-range planning process to responding to community input and comments brought up at a series of meetings scheduled throughout the period.

### Who leads public meetings or hearings?

**Meetings may be led by an agency staffer or a member of the public.** In some instances, it may be appropriate to hire a professional facilitator to lead a meeting, especially if the issue to be discussed is highly divisive or controversial. A "discussion document" helps prepare people for participation if distributed prior to public meetings, as is done in Los Angeles.

**By contrast, hearings are led by a public hearing officer,** who is an agency representative. Agency staff helps disseminate information, particularly when a public hearing is combined with an open house. Virginia DOT publishes a step-by-step guide for open house public hearings, emphasizing that people can attend at a time of their own choosing and can present comments either formally or informally, as desired. The Georgia DOT reports that proportionally more citizens make comments at open forum public hearings.

**What are the costs?**

**Resource and staff needs can be substantial,** depending on the type of meeting. Delaware's exhibit meetings were heavily staffed—16 to 18 professionals were stationed throughout the room to answer questions and determine the concerns of the 300 to 500 people who attended each event. In a meeting or hearing preceded by an open house, displays of major elements of a plan or process are required for full explanations to community residents. Sketch overlays, notepads, or comment sheets are needed to record public comments at the meeting.

**How are they organized?**

**An agency organizes a public meeting or hearing** and prepares pre-meeting materials, including meeting announcements and agendas, displays, audio-visual materials, and any mailings or publicity that are necessary. The public should be made aware of the free access to these materials. (See **Public Information Materials; Mailing Lists**.) In San Diego, the MPO publishes an agenda and monthly digest of its meetings for public distribution. Agencies consider the needs of people with disabilities and transit access in selecting a convenient place and time.

**An agency or community people may want to set up ground rules** for meetings. These include:

- Recognizing the legitimacy of others' concerns;
- Accepting responsibility for coming to a meeting prepared for discussion;
- Listening carefully and sharing discussion time with others;
- Encouraging everyone to participate;
- Discussing with intent to identify areas of agreement, clarify differences, and search for common understanding; and
- Establishing a speaker's time limit.

**For a public meeting, an agency provides meeting summaries** in written form, describing areas of agreement and disagreement. All points of view must be clearly and fairly stated. A hearing transcript is formally prepared, based on a stenographic record or tape.

**How are they used with other techniques?**

**A media strategy is always necessary** for either a public meeting or a public hearing to attract the widest possible audience. (See **Media Strategies**.) For example, adequate advertising for public events always includes more than a single newspaper advertisement. During a public meeting, a brainstorming, visioning, or charrette technique may be used. (See **Brainstorming**; **Visioning**; **Charrettes**.) A facilitator may be appropriate. (See **Facilitation**.) Special provisions need to be made to comply with the needs of disabled people for access to the meeting. (See **People with Disabilities**.) Video or audio tapes of proceedings are important for analytic or other purposes. (See **Video Techniques**.)

**An open house is similar to a transportation fair,** for either a public meeting or a public hearing. Presentations, slide shows, and one-on-one discussions continue throughout the event. Exhibits are laid out as a series of stations: a reception area; a presentation area for slide shows or short talks; areas for one-on-one discussions between community people and agency staff members, and displays of background information, activities to date, work flow, anticipated next steps, and an array of primary subject panels. (See **Transportation Fairs; Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses**.)

**What are the drawbacks?**

**A public hearing is an insufficient level of public involvement when held at the end of a process** and not accompanied by other opportunities to participate. In such a case, community members feel their concerns cannot be addressed because they are heard too late and have little chance of being integrated into the final decision. At open house public hearings, although people may present views publicly, they are heard primarily by the agency and not by other participants. Such hearings in Delaware include time for speakers to talk in front of others who may have conflicting viewpoints.

**Public meetings do not always allay community doubts** about agency credibility. Although they improve the possibility of adequate public involvement, meetings must be frequent enough and well-focused enough on issues to demonstrate agency concern about public involvement. In addition, an agency needs to make clear the link between meeting input and decision-making. Public meetings must be held early in the process and reasonably frequently thereafter to dispel fears that they are perfunctory or that an agency is not listening to community concerns. Large meetings or formal hearings may intimidate people and restrain commenting.

**A very small percentage of the public attends public meetings,** so such meetings should be only one component of a more comprehensive public involvement program.

**For further information:**

- Atlanta Regional Commission, (404) 364-2500
- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1357
- City of San Francisco Chief Administrative Office, (415) 554-5782
- Dane County, (Madison), Wisconsin, (608) 266-4137
- Delaware Department of Transportation, (302) 739-4348
- Georgia Department of Transportation, (404) 986-1360
- New Orleans Metropolitan Planning Organization, (504) 568-6611

## OPEN FORUM HEARINGS/OPEN HOUSES

### What are open houses and open forum hearings?

**An open house is an informal setting in which people get information about a plan or project.** It has no set, formal agenda. Unlike a meeting, no formal discussions and presentations take place, and there are no audience seats. Instead, people get information informally from exhibits and staff and are encouraged to give opinions, comments, and preferences to staff either orally or in writing.

**An open forum hearing expands a public hearing to include elements of an open house.** In addition, after reviewing exhibits and talking with staff, participants can comment on a proposal for the formal transcript of the public hearing. Open forum hearings require formal notice, even though the hearing itself is informal.

**Open houses and open forum hearings have the following common characteristics:**

- Information is presented buffet-style, and participants shop for information, including graphics, maps, photos, models, videos, or related documents. Space is allocated for tables or booths, and information is mounted on walls. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

- Agencies reserve table space for comment sheets where people write their opinions. Participants turn in comment sheets at the time or mail them in later. Pre-paying postage for comment sheets increases the likelihood they will be returned. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

- Agency or technical staff people are present to answer questions or provide details. Often at least one person staffs each table, but agency representatives also are positioned at displays or roam throughout the room.

- These events can be used for either a planning process or project development.

- Since there is no fixed agenda, these events are usually scheduled for substantial portions of a day or evening, so that people can drop in at their convenience and fully participate. Hours should be clearly set and well-publicized. In areas where people work in shifts, open houses/hearings can be scheduled to overlap the shift changes.

- Brochures or videos introduce the open house/open forum process. (See **Video Techniques**.)

- Agencies usually provide take-home written materials, brochures, or maps. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

- These events can include non-agency displays. Sister agencies and community proponents or opponents may be given space to present a point of view, displays, documents, or handouts in separate, visible areas. Some agencies have found that allowing public groups to set up tables outside the meeting or hearing room helps the public distinguish official agency information from other sources.

**In addition to having all the features of an open house, an open forum hearing has the following distinctive characteristics:**

- A formal public notice of a fixed time and date must be published.

- People have a chance to clarify individual comments by reviewing materials before putting their opinions “on the record.”

- Comments are formally recorded. People can comment orally before a designated staff person or court reporter, or they can write opinions on comment forms at the time of or after the event and return them prior to the announced deadline. (See Public Opinion Surveys.)

- The transcript of comments is made available to interested people after the event.

**Why are they useful?**

**Open houses and open forum hearings provide an informal, casual, and friendly ambience.** People drop by at their convenience, get the information that interests them, and stay as long as they wish. Informality encourages participants who are intimidated by formal meetings to attend and give input; often the quality of responses is higher. The short time required for participation attracts people who do not want to sit through long public meetings.

**Participants have many opportunities for questions** and for detailed answers. One-to-one conversations between agency staff and participants encourage information exchange and foster courtesy and attentiveness. Question periods have no strict time limits.

**Participants have direct interaction with staff** who might not otherwise be readily available. Making technical staff available shows an agency is open to community input. It allows for an informal exchange of information, with everyone learning from each other. People can receive immediate responses to questions about issues. Technical staff is available to reduce misinformation and rumor. The New Mexico Department of Transportation (DOT) includes a local district engineer in its open houses on planning topics to address immediate project concerns. The Arizona DOT used a series of open houses at various locations throughout the State to develop the statewide transportation plan.

**The format focuses on issues rather than positions.** This focus allows participants to consider strategies to help an agency identify issues and propose solutions. Participants may request information and comment on a proposal.

**Open houses can be tailored to participants' specific needs.** They are held as necessary to improve public understanding of a process or project. Graphics or other materials are prepared to directly address issues of public concern. The California and Nevada DOTs held a joint open house on the I–80 Rail Corridor Study, which included maps and displays with a video on potential new rail equipment for operation in the corridor.

**Do they have special uses?**

**Open houses help get a community interested** in programs, plans, or projects. The publicity and the procedure call attention to a process that is underway. For a Cleveland, Ohio, light rail transit project, open houses were scheduled to gain name recognition for the project and to call attention to the potential of the line.

**Open houses are used when a project is complex.** A project can be broken into smaller pieces to enhance understanding. Detailed information is presented graphically or in text. The format allows plenty of time for people to see displays and documents close-up. Agency staffers give oral information to supplement displays.

**Open houses are held at an early stage** in planning or project development to gather information from people. Further along in the process, they update this information or seek comments on the progress of a draft plan or a project. The Pennsylvania DOT used a combination of open houses with workshops to develop issues, goals, and specific policies for its long-range transportation plan.

**Open forum hearings are used primarily with projects**, although a State or a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) may choose to call a public hearing for other purposes. During the environmental process for a project, the Nevada DOT uses the open forum format for an "informational hearing" at the beginning of the process and for a design public hearing at the end of the process. The Nebraska DOT holds formal public hearings at the location stage of a project and open forum hearings at the design stage. The Georgia DOT uses open forum hearings for virtually all of its projects. If attendance is large, the Department gives out numbers for those wanting to speak during the event and make their comments before court reporters.

**Who participates? And how?**

**Anyone interested in a plan or project development can attend.** New Jersey Transit used open houses as an integral part of its major investment study of a potential Monmouth–Ocean–Middlesex Commuter Rail Line.

**Individuals with a specific stake in an issue are urged to attend.** They are especially encouraged to attend open forum public hearings and make their opinions known.

**Open houses or open forum hearings accommodate people who are reluctant to speak** in front of an audience. Casual settings are not as intimidating as a public meeting with a large audience. Participants are encouraged to ask questions. The Orange County, California, transit agency provided bi-lingual staff at an open house in connection with a major investment study. Staffers were identified by blue dots on their name tags.

**The media should be encouraged to attend.** Information provided is generally comprehensive and may include useful visuals. Staff people involved in the project are available for details. People give their opinions of agency proposals or projects.

**Stakeholders prepare visual and written materials to make their viewpoints known.** Space can be made available for community viewpoints expressed in documents or graphics. At the invitation of the Tennessee DOT, American Indians and environmental groups teamed up to display their own materials at a table during an open forum hearing. People representing these groups were present to discuss their position.

**People interact directly with staff.** To get a "true" sense of a meeting, public hearing officers circulate around the room, listening to questions and answers. Circulating also gives staff members a chance to "relieve" others who are being monopolized by one person. The Tennessee DOT uses a court reporter and comment cards at hearings, along with a two-week period for further comments by letter, petition, or note.

**How do agencies use the output?**

**Agencies use community comments for guidance in planning or project development.** Comments help an agency take the pulse of the community, shape and modify plans, and monitor reactions of the individual stakeholders most affected by the proposal or project. Participants in the Orange County, California, transit agency's open house provided advice on how to best structure the subsequent public involvement program.

**Agencies review comments and incorporate them into the work wherever possible.** They also provide responses for the record to document and acknowledge receipt of public input. For open forum public hearings, comments and responses form the bulk of the formal transcript of a session, which also includes the agency brochure, summaries of agency displays, a transcription of oral comments, and copies of all written comments.

**Who leads the process?**

**Agency staff members always take the lead** for hearings and usually for open houses as well. They are responsible for organizing the session, setting up materials, getting staff to the session, recording the testimony, and documenting the process and community attendance. Staff members also respond to comments made at the session.

**Agency representatives with expertise in the issues staff the tables** at open house sessions. Technical experts or consultants may assist in the process. At open forum hearings, a public hearing officer is appointed by the agency to assure a session's smooth operation and the agency's response to comments.

**What are the costs?**

**Open houses and open forum hearings involve significant staff time** in preparation and reproduction of materials, such as displays, graphics, brochures, and other materials. (See **Public Information Materials; Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks**.) Significant staff work on publicity efforts is required to make a session successful. (See **Media Strategies**.) Staff can be briefed to assure that similar questions receive the same answer.

**Open houses and open forum hearings are minimally expensive or more elaborate.** Expenses increase with the complexity of the project and the scale of graphics or display materials required. Special large graphics dramatize the elements of a project. Expenses also increase as an agency makes extra effort to publicize the event.

**Staff needs to be present at sessions held outside normal working hours.** If consultants are involved, their contribution is helpful during complex projects or processes.

**A hall is needed for the event, and rent may be required.** A neutral space is desirable, depending on the level of controversy associated with the session.

**How are they organized?**

**As an early step, an agency defines the issues to be presented.** This process guides the choices and preparation of audio-visual materials (whatever graphics tell the story best). The process also guides the selection of written materials to be distributed.

**Based on the issues, an agency designates an event coordinator.** For example, the coordinator may be from the planning disciplines if the subject is long-range planning, or from the engineering disciplines if a project is to be announced or explored.

**The agency coordinator sets a date and time for the event.** Both date and time should be convenient for people who are employed during the day. The Regional Transit District in Sacramento, California, held evening and Saturday open houses to review alternatives for an extension of existing light rail into South Sacramento. In experimenting with alternative times for open forum hearings, the Georgia DOT determined that 4:00 to 7:00 P.M. met most community needs. The Michigan DOT has found that 3:30 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. and 7:00 P.M. to 8:30 P.M. work best, in part because rural communities often "respect" the dinner hour. Longer hours are essential for controversial or large-scale projects when many people want to participate. Alternatively, multiple sessions may be held at various times.

**The coordinator finds space** large enough to accommodate not only tables and displays but also traffic flow for people to move efficiently and comfortably between areas. At hearings, space should include a location for taking oral testimony, and the facility should be relatively quiet, comfortable, easy to find, free of conflicting events, and handicapped accessible. Places to sit and rest should be provided. Drinking water is essential.

**Multiple locations are desirable for large geographical areas and for planning processes.** To encourage people to attend meetings for its Statewide Transportation Improvement Program, the Oregon DOT held open house meetings in school cafeterias, libraries, senior centers, and a community theater. (See **Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events**.)

**An agency gets the word out about the event.** A media strategy helps an agency determine content and spacing of announcements. Media announcements dramatically enhance public awareness. Handouts are distributed in areas of potentially high interest. (See **Media Strategies**.)

**The agency prepares illustrative materials for display.** Presentation boards, copies of documents, maps, and videos are very helpful. (See **Public Information Materials; Video Techniques**.) Topics to be illustrated can include traffic, noise, specific sites, economics, design, neighborhood impacts, routes, goals, evaluation criteria, and policy issues. Fact sheets or maps can be provided for visitors to take home. The South Carolina DOT uses color coding on graphics intended for community review to emphasize and highlight the projected impacts of a project.

**Tables are provided for specific purposes** that allow people to address issues in depth. Each table should be clearly identified. During the feasibility study for the Los Angeles–Bakersfield High Speed Ground Transportation Project, tables were provided for the following: sign-in; orientation and video; routes and stations; environmental study; engineering; train technology; costs; statewide policy; and terminal station location.

**The agency staffs the event.** Staff people with specific areas of expertise are scheduled for each table. Reception staff people are essential to welcome new arrivals and to let them know how the open house works. The Georgia DOT uses a "greeter"—a staffer who welcomes participants and helps them understand the process. Other staff members can aid in recording comments or in explaining issues to people. South Carolina DOT personnel wear name tags to identify themselves and encourage questions from participants.

**A method for recording comments from the community is established.** At open house sessions, an agency can provide cards for people to fill out, for either immediate or mail-back return. For mail-backs, pre-paid postage on the card or envelope speeds response.

**For open forum hearings, an agency must provide a formal means of recording comments.** The Georgia DOT uses a court reporter to record comments, while the South Carolina DOT provides a staff person to tape record them.

**Long lines at stenographer or tape recording stations detract from the informality and convenience** of this format for the public. Agencies may provide multiple stenographers or recording stations. The Georgia DOT used two stenographers for an open forum hearing attended by about 1,500 people. Another strategy is to use speaker time limits. At an open house on its statewide plan, the New York State DOT used a traffic signal as a device to let speakers know when their speaking time had expired. The Delaware DOT schedules its speakers in order of sign-up and adheres to a specified time limit. In other locations, however, time limits would be unacceptable. Agency staff in Michigan successfully rely on the rest of the audience to encourage brevity. Knowing when time limits are essential or appropriate requires a thorough knowledge of the community involved.

### How are they used with other techniques?

**Open houses can be combined with public meetings.** Displays, brochures, documents, videos, and other materials can introduce a meeting and help people prepare for it. (See **Public Meetings/Hearings**.)

**Open houses can be partly staffed with civic advisory committee members.** For the New Haven, Connecticut, Q Bridge Study, committee members staffed open houses to help ConnDOT respond to questions about the study and the alternatives being considered. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.)

**Open houses often incorporate brainstorming or focus groups.** The Delaware DOT allowed participants to write comments directly on maps. Other people could then review the comments and add their opinions. North Carolina's Triangle Transit Authority conducted mini-focus groups as part of open houses on long-range transit options for the region. (See **Brainstorming; Focus Groups**.)

**Public information is essential,** including press releases, briefings, speakers' bureaus, brochures, posters, mailings, and media announcements. All information must be timely to assure that public hearing notice requirements are met and to give people time to fit the event into their schedules. Reminders can be sent out a few days before the session. (See **Public Information Materials; Media Strategies**.)

**Mailing lists are used to contact potentially interested people.** An agency should make special efforts to solicit minority and ethnic participation and attendance at the session. (See **Mailing Lists**.)

**An open house is a convenient place to conduct an informal survey.** People can complete the survey right away or mail it back. In this fashion, an agency obtains responses quickly and analyzes the results to ascertain community interest and understanding. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.) The Nevada DOT conducted a survey of interested parties in conjunction with an open forum hearing. As part of work on its long-range plan, New Jersey DOT recruited random participants for focus groups during open houses conducted at a shopping mall.

**What are the drawbacks?**

**An open forum hearing without an audience session precludes debate on a proposal's merits.** Parties do not hear opposing views first-hand—nor do they have an opportunity to clarify stances or raise questions about opposing viewpoints. Some critics charge that agencies use open forum hearings as a "divide-and-conquer" strategy. If differing views are not heard, the public may be surprised to find a controversy exists. When people hear one another, they develop an improved understanding of a proposal and its implications for other people. To assure that multiple viewpoints are presented at an open forum hearing, the Ohio DOT allows community groups to set up exhibition tables near the open meeting tables, labeled clearly to distinguish them from agency tables.

**An open house/open forum hearing only reaches people willing to attend.** Potential stakeholders who do not attend may not receive essential information, and their opinions are not heard. Translators, translations of summaries, and blue dots on name tags of bilingual staff, were used to supplement the Orange County, California, open house, because minority participants said they were ill at ease at such events. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.)

**Outreach is limited to a few days, even if hearings are held in different locations.** A single event should not be the sole opportunity for people to be heard. It does not reach large numbers on a continuing basis—a key factor in successful public involvement.

**Informal conversation does not replace written comment.** In brief conversations with agency officials during an open house, people sometimes get lulled into a sense of being heard and fully understood. Agency staff cannot be expected to retain all opinions and may not have sufficient time to note each statement. Unless official recording is underway, people should be encouraged to present written comments, so their opinions or viewpoints are sure to be heard.

**Constituents do not hear elected officials at an open forum hearing.** At traditional public hearings, elected leaders announce their views. At open forum hearings, however, officials can speak to only a few people at a time.

**Effective displays and materials may be expensive.** Large-scale graphics and photographs are essential to promote rapid comprehension and understanding of a proposal. Video is often used as a method of explaining both the proposal and the process of public review. (See **Video Techniques**.)

**When are they most effective?**

**An open house effectively disseminates information, either at an early stage or prior to decision-making.** Input to decisions or plans is also collected. Additional events update information and obtain further public input. The Montana DOT uses an open house or walk-in session to disseminate information, frequently in tandem with a traditional hearing.

**An open forum hearing is useful at the location or design stage** for gathering information. The Montana DOT uses it when it is essential to register opinions from many subgroups.

**For further information:**

- Connecticut Department of Transportation, (860) 594-2000
- Georgia Department of Transportation, (404) 699-4406
- Montana Department of Transportation, (406) 444-7205
- Nebraska Department of Transportation, (402) 479-4871
- Nevada Department of Transportation, (702) 687-3463
- New Mexico Department of Transportation, (505) 827-3228
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, (717) 772-2563
- South Carolina Department of Transportation, (803) 737-1350
- Tennessee Department of Transportation, (615) 741-2221

## CONFERENCES, WORKSHOPS, AND RETREATS

### What are conferences, workshops, and retreats?

**Conferences, workshops, and retreats are special meetings** to inform people and solicit input on specific policy issues, plans, or projects. In size and importance, they range from a subset of a larger meeting to a large multi-day event.

**A conference is a highly-structured program of presentations and discussions.** Conferences usually have an overall theme, with multiple related sessions throughout the day. They can have presentations or panel discussions followed by questions. Top officials or panels of recognized experts help boost interest in attendance. Conferences often have plenary sessions attended by all participants, followed by breakout sessions on various elements. Conferences are as short as half a day or as long as three days. The Kansas and Pennsylvania DOTs held all-day conferences on their long-range statewide transportation plans. Workshops dealt with specific issues of the plans.

**A workshop is a task-oriented meeting** organized around a particular topic or activity. Typically, it involves a relatively small group (20–40) and addresses aspects of a narrowly-defined topic. Workshops are usually one to three hours in duration for small groups to work on specific agenda. Because they are relatively short and task-focused, workshops can be part of a larger meeting, conference, or retreat. The Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission includes workshops at the beginning of every meeting to provide information and discussion on specific topics to be handled later in the meeting.

**Retreats are workshops held in non-traditional settings without distractions.** A retreat is especially useful to work on personal conflict resolution and communication. Participants give their undivided attention to specific issues without interruptions for phone calls or everyday distractions. Like workshops, retreats are typically task-oriented and work on focused topics. Because of the complexity of an issue or topic, a retreat may require one full day and sometimes longer.

**Conferences, workshops, and retreats have several common characteristics.** They:

- Are special events, publicized separately from other events;
- Highlight specific aspects of issues;
- Are applied in either planning or project development;
- Set the stage for plans or projects;
- Showcase and refine specific aspects of plans or projects;
- Provide focus and direction to participants; and
- Often require advance registration or are invitational.

### Why are they useful?

**Conferences, workshops, and retreats are useful at any stage of a process.** As special meetings, they are used early to set the stage for formulating plans or projects. They are used mid-process to showcase and refine specific aspects of plans or projects, resolve conflicts, and work toward consensus. Near the end of a process, they demonstrate findings and conclusions of the work effort. The Albany, New York, MPO scheduled conferences at the beginning, mid-point, and end of development of its long-range plan.

**Special meetings allow people to better understand a project or plan.** They help individuals see the viewpoint of others. They give a “snapshot” of community concerns and reactions to proposals. The Portland, Oregon, Metro conducted mode and alignment workshops that generated good ideas from community residents. Participants worked on maps to illustrate their concerns and place proposed alignment options.

**Special meetings offer a way to zero in on specific issues and concerns.** They deal with a single topic and its ramifications, or focus on notable impacts of concern to individuals or groups. They provide an opportunity for detailed discussion on a wide variety of elements of a plan or a project. The Massachusetts Highway Department sponsored a series of conferences on the future of Route 128, Boston's beltway. One metropolitan-level conference included presentations by experts from around the country, while the other two focused on State and local concerns.

**Do they have special uses?**

**A conference helps "kick off" a planning process or project development.** Agency or elected officials add credibility to a process by being on the program to discuss their hopes for the project.

**A conference provides a forum to discuss statutes and regulations.** The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) held a public conference called "The Right Route: Pollution Prevention and Transportation Planning in New England." National leaders from EPA and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) first addressed plenary sessions dealing with the implications of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA,) the Energy Policy Act, and the Clean Air Act. Workshops were scheduled for late morning and afternoon to deal with issues and develop a list of potential outcomes to be reviewed by a panel of regional policy leaders at the closing plenary session.

**Conferences are used to celebrate the successful completion of a process.** Local residents and agency staff come together to review and evaluate a process and its product. Local officials and participants may officially bring closure to a successful process. Celebratory events reinforce the value of an inclusive planning process and give agencies an informal way to thank community members for their time and effort.

**Workshops are particularly useful for smaller groups of people** who want to participate intensively. A small number of participants gives each a way of being heard and registering thoughts and opinions. Small groups allow a greater appreciation of others' views through opportunities for more extensive interaction. Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, used workshops to ascertain local concerns and demonstrate how the concerns might be met, largely through urban design solutions.

**Workshops and retreats are inherently participatory** and encourage a "working together" atmosphere. The informality encourages discussion and give-and-take. By focusing on narrow topics, workshops allow time for every participant to express a viewpoint. They are easily integrated into a larger participatory process. The North Dakota Consensus Council, a public-private partnership, sponsors forums on issues ranging from education to local government services. Facilitators elicit diverse views, using consensus-building techniques to resolve conflicts and find common ground. (See **Facilitation**.)

**Workshops and retreats make it easier to participate without "going on the record."** Typically, participants can speak out without being quoted at a later time. Questions are asked to glean information. Participants raise and discuss points without formal attribution, and the "trial balloons" that are a positive feature of negotiation are floated. The Rochester, New York, Telephone Corporation held workshops to solicit concerns and views about potential deregulation of the telecommunications industry in that city.

**Retreats are used to develop details of a transportation program.** The Georgia DOT held a two-day retreat with 40 representatives of transportation users, operators, customers, and groups to "tell us what the public involvement process should be." The University of Georgia's Institute of Community and Area Development was retained to organize, conduct, and facilitate the meeting, resulting in short-term recommendations that have been implemented by the Georgia DOT.

**Retreats can “clear the air” on contentious issues,** bringing disputants together to hear all sides of an issue and work out differences. They can work on thorny problems and look for elements of agreement. With a neutral facilitator, retreats provide an off-the-record means of stating and working on issues between opponents. The process of addressing difficult issues helps loosen adversarial relationships and creates the possibility for compromise and consensus.

**Who participates? And how?**

**Special meetings target specific stakeholders for presentations and discussions.** Conferences, workshops, and retreats help deal with specific local concerns. They help garner suggestions and support by explaining a proposal thoroughly. The State of Washington’s Western Area Power Administration used workshops to develop and select strategies of its plan for future power needs using customer preference exercises.

**Conferences, workshops, and retreats can be tailored to subsets of groups** or constituencies who do not normally participate. The level of impact on specific portions of a community may warrant establishing specific meetings for them. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.) Over time, it may be appropriate to add workshop sessions to incorporate local concerns into planning or project development. Costa Mesa, California, organizations sponsored “living room dialogues” among small groups to air feelings and issues about day laborers gathering in a park and shopping center while waiting to be hired. Discussions resulted in establishment of a hiring center for day workers and a new human rights commission.

**Conferences are customarily open to the public.** Workshop and retreat participants come from the entire community or by invitation. Special efforts are needed to assure that all potential stakeholders are aware of the event. Invitations can be extended to business leaders and active members of civic clubs or organizations, along with agencies and interest groups. Inviting elected officials to special meetings is always appropriate. Certain conferences are attended by invitation only. The Minnesota Metropolitan Council invited key players in business, government, and education to a conference on regional economic strategies as part of a plan to build council identity.

**Knowledgeable people should be part of each special meeting.** For conferences, experts in specific fields serve as speakers or presenters of information. For workshops and retreats, resource people are essential for providing information and answering questions. Agency people ordinarily act as individuals in the meetings, unless specialized questions are asked. For breakout sessions, workshops, and retreats, a trained facilitator acts in the neutral, central role of leading the meeting and keeping it on course.

**Workshops and retreats can target specific groups.** The Edison Electric Institute held a two-day retreat to improve communication between industry and consumer groups. A group of 20 to 24 people were invited, chosen by their demonstrated ability to effectively present a position for their groups. Time was allowed for socialization to encourage personal relationships and dialogue among the participants.

**During a special meeting, participants ask questions and add their points of view** to the discussion. They challenge agency reasoning on projects or plans. They discuss alternative uses of resources.

**Agencies hold meetings in local areas convenient for participants.** Planning for the Central Valley water project in California included public workshops at disparate locations held every four or five months over a three-year period. The project involved four rounds of meetings throughout the valley.

**Participants need preparatory information prior to a meeting.** An agency sends information to potential participants in advance to let them choose whether or not to attend a special meeting. (See **Mailing Lists**.) A conference agenda or brochure displays topics, speakers, and opportunities for participation in discussion. A telephone number or agency contact helps participants find further information.

**How do agencies use conferences, workshops, and retreats?**

**Special meetings send a message of agency commitment to public involvement** and enhance agency credibility in a process of planning or project development. A conference held in Atlanta, Georgia, helped define new interagency approaches to fostering public participation of people affected by transportation investments. The conference was jointly sponsored by the Federal Highway, Transit, and Rail Administrations and the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University.

**They give plans and projects a high profile and attract interest.** By focusing events and presentations on a single proposal, an agency attracts many participants, including the media, to an event where they can be guided toward presentations or discussions that interest them.

**Conferences give in-depth information about a project or plan.** The complexity of a planning effort or project development can be portrayed at a conference where detailed information can be obtained. A conference includes sub-meetings and presentations on a variety of topics. A conference program has several topics presented at the same hour in separate rooms, allowing participants to choose among them.

**Special meetings provide input to a plan or project.** Agencies obtain new ideas in response to their proposals. Participants have an opportunity to offer suggestions for policy changes or for alterations in details of a project. Special meetings provide an opportunity for participants to debate the issues with one another.

**Who leads them?**

**A conference may require specialized organization and leadership.** The scope of a conference, involving many presentations and break-out sessions, may be challenging for existing staff to manage. An agency conference manager may be needed. Consultant staff may be required to manage the event.

**A conference can be co-sponsored by more than one agency,** thus broadening the range of concerns and attracting new participants. The Missouri Highway and Transportation Department has had successes with co-sponsored conferences.

**Conferences with few speakers may be managed by a small staff.** Organizing date, place, time, and speakers is manageable if the event is uncomplicated.

**A workshop is led by an agency staffer or community volunteer,** if the size of the group is manageable. A large workshop requires special skills to moderate the event and keep it on target. An agency project manager may attend a workshop but usually should not lead the session if issues are highly controversial, since that may compromise the objectivity of the process. Workshops may be led by citizens themselves. The Puget Sound Regional Transit Project has financially supported citizen-initiated workshops. This alleviates the issue of government control and promotes community leadership.

**Retreats require a neutral moderator.** Agency staff members may be able to lead the session but are seen as biased if they are involved in the process or project. A neutral moderator should remain unbiased in soliciting ideas and comments from all participants and should direct the proceedings toward the goals of the retreat. (See **Facilitation**.)

**What are the costs?**

**Initial costs include renting meeting space and breakout rooms**, if necessary. Conferences require staff for entrance and registration areas and preparation of individual rooms for specific presentations. They include arranging for speakers or presentations, including costs for hotels and food if out-of-town speakers are used. Costs frequently include refreshments for participants. For a full-day conference, it is wise to arrange for lunch for the speakers and the participants.

**A few conference costs are offset by registration fees.** The fee ordinarily covers only the costs of printing and refreshments. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, a community organization, charged $15 for a conference to inform people about transportation issues, the importance of public involvement, and new opportunities for involvement. The conference included skills workshops dealing with gaining media exposure, influencing decision-makers, and building a coalition. The Albany, New York, MPO charged small fees to cover meals for its conferences but provided scholarships for low-income participants.

**Workshops are less costly than conferences.** A workshop usually requires only a room and a staff person to manage materials, welcome participants, and document the process. Fees for a workshop or retreat are usually not appropriate, because they can discourage people from attending.

**A retreat requires a room and a facilitator.** The facilitator must be neutral and not a proponent of an agency's agenda. Like a workshop, a retreat requires only a room and a staff person to serve the needs of both the facilitator and the participants. (See **Facilitation**.)

**Finding rooms in publicly-owned sites helps keep costs down.** Colleges or universities provide good locations for conferences, workshops, or retreats**.** These sites are usually neutral locations where participants feel welcome.

**Supplementary funding sources may be available.** The Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, MPO received financial support from a local foundation to pay for all costs of a weekend retreat for a blue-ribbon panel reviewing the long-range plan.

### How are they organized?

**All special meetings are coordinated with the community,** which provides input on what issues to cover and who from the community should be involved. Publicity is funneled through neighborhood channels. The community may suggest a place and date for the special meeting. (See **Key Person Interviews; Civic Advisory Committees; Public Opinion Surveys**.)

**Conferences require a rigid structure and agenda** for speakers, presentations, and break-out groups. Preparation for a conference requires a good deal of staff work to organize the content and publicize the event to the community.

**Agency staff organize a conference, if resources are available.** Agencies should be aware that the resources are significant. Specialized consultants may be necessary as conference assistants.

**Workshops and retreats have a flexible structure.** They can be organized more casually than a conference and are flexible in selection of date, place, and format. However, they require leadership to assure that they accomplish the assigned task or goal. Both workshops and retreats need an agenda, noting the time available for discussion of agenda elements, and information on what the agency intends to do with the information from the meeting.

### How are they used with other techniques?

**Brainstorming is an integral element** of conferences, workshops, or retreats and a useful way to quickly involve many participants in the process. (See **Brainstorming**.)

**Visioning is advanced by workshops and retreats.** A special meeting can focus on establishing a vision for the future. With an allotted time period to explore varied aspects, the special meeting is well-adapted to this use. Oregon DOT used workshops on issues and visions at six locations along the Pacific Coast in developing a draft master plan. (See **Visioning**.)

**Facilitation is an important element** of special meetings, especially workshops and retreats. Participants need a facilitator's guidance on timing, focus, and reporting the events of a workshop or retreat. (See **Facilitation**.)

**Small group techniques are used in workshops** to open a meeting and gain participants' interest. They can then be used to set goals for the meeting and to guide the process. (See **Small Group Techniques**.)

**Special meetings supplement regular meetings.** Conferences, workshops, and retreats are high points of an overall program of public participation and cannot by themselves constitute a public participation program.

### Are they flexible?

**Workshops are used in a variety of ways**—as a break-out of a conference or retreat or as special events on their own, to involve people in discussions and resolution of thorny issues. In Washington State, Seattle's Puget Sound Regional Council offered a series of community workshops at several points throughout its planning processes.

**Conferences and retreats can include workshops on the agenda.** Large special meetings can have break-out sessions for concurrent workshops focusing on specific issues.

**Special meetings are held on any appropriate days and at convenient times.** The timing of a special meeting is largely up to an agency, guided by community needs or requests.

**The level of effort for a special meeting is flexible.** A special meeting can be devised to meet community needs within the resources available to an agency. Conferences require the greatest output of resources, while workshops may expend few agency resources.

### What are the drawbacks?

**Special meetings require substantial publicity.** Agencies need to be prepared to expend resources to make the community aware of the meetings.

**All special meetings require extensive preparation by staff.** Resources can be quickly expended during the preparation period.

**Conferences are often expensive and may be viewed as exclusionary.** Arrangements for space and speakers can be significant. Publicity must be extensive to attract media and community attention.

**A retreat requires a skilled facilitator.**

**A workshop is ineffective if leadership is unable to keep it on track.** It is not automatically a positive event, unless effort is expended to assure that staff or experienced personnel are present to guide its progress.

**For further information:**

- Chesapeake Bay Foundation, (301) 261-2350
- Environmental Justice Resource Center, Clark Atlanta University, (404) 880-8000
- Kansas Department of Transportation, (913) 296-2252
- Minnesota Metropolitan Council (Minneapolis/St. Paul), (612) 291-6423
- North Dakota Consensus Council, (701) 328-2000
- Rochester Telephone Company, (716) 777-1000
- University of Georgia Institute of Community and Area Development, (706) 542-3350

## Chapter 2. INVOLVING PEOPLE FACE-TO-FACE THROUGH MEETINGS

### B. SELECTING AN ORGANIZING FEATURE FOR A MEETING

Nearly every meeting focuses on discussion, whether people are giving opinions, debating issues among themselves, or challenging an agency by questioning fundamental assumptions. Meetings can be exploratory (for instance, “design-ins” where participants draw on maps to illustrate community values or activity patterns) or consensus-building (including collaborative problem-solving).

Specific techniques for organizing meetings are useful in helping people think about and discuss issues, how they are personally affected, and how proposed solutions impact community life. They help make meetings more creative, stimulating, and engaging. Appropriate, well-organized meetings also enlighten people about an agency approach and its openness to community involvement.

Traditionally, meetings often begin with a presentation by one or several speakers, a slide show, or a simple video, followed by discussion. Some meetings focus on developing solutions to pending problems or suggesting alternatives to existing situations, and their productivity may be enhanced by the use of non-traditional meeting structures.

Organizing features, as described below, are tailored to participants’ needs and interests, as well as to the specific goals of a meeting:

- Brainstorming;
- Charrettes;
- Visioning; and
- Small group techniques.

While the choice of meeting types and frequency lies principally with an agency, it often helps to work with participants or community leaders to determine the best times and formats. People feel more involved if asked for advice and if meetings fit their needs and their styles of communication.

## BRAINSTORMING

### What is brainstorming?

**Participants "brainstorm" when they come together in a freethinking forum to generate ideas.** As now used, brainstorming is no longer an unstructured method of eliciting ideas from a group. Used properly—either alone or in conjunction with other techniques—brainstorming can be a highly effective method of moving participants out of conflict and toward consensus. For example, the Cape Cod Commission in Massachusetts used brainstorming to develop goals and objectives to guide transportation planning.

**Brainstorming has these basic components:**

- Generating as many solutions to a problem as possible;
- Listing every idea presented *without* comment or evaluation;
- Grouping and evaluating ideas to reach consensus; and
- Prioritizing ideas.

**Experience suggests that each task can be further subdivided** to improve understanding of the overall process and its results. For example, ideas may need clarification for the group to grasp and evaluate, or the role of brainstorming in issue resolution may need to be explained. As a basic means of involving people, it has few peers if carried out successfully.

### Why is it useful?

**Brainstorming brings new ideas to bear on a problem.** The freethinking atmosphere encourages fresh approaches. Creativity is enhanced, because individuals are encouraged to bring up *all* ideas—even those that might appear outrageous. Even imperfectly developed thoughts may jog the thinking of other participants. In Atlanta, Georgia, a brainstorming effort produced future options in the Vision 2020 process.

**Problems are defined better as questions arise.** Alternatives appear in a new or different perspective. Novel approaches to an issue can arise during the process. Brainstorming gives participants a sense of progress and accomplishment and helps them move onto more difficult tasks.

**Brainstorming helps reduce conflict.** It helps participants see other points of view and possibly change their perspective on problems. It may not be useful in resolving deeply felt conflicts but can help set the stage for a different technique if an impasse has been reached. Civility is required of each participant. (See **Negotiation and Mediation**.)

**Brainstorming is democratic.** All participants have equal status and an equal opportunity to participate. No one person's ideas dominate a brainstorming session. Brainstorming heightens the awareness of community and sensitizes individuals to the behavior of the group and its participants. It helps mold participants into a working group.

### Does brainstorming have special uses?

**Brainstorming demonstrates an agency's openness to new ideas** and its commitment to working with community participants. It leads to further study of unexplored ideas. It helps find common ground for consensus about a solution. Brainstorming has been used by the Connecticut Department of Transportation (DOT) in exploring multi-modal alternatives in an interstate bridge reconstruction project in New Haven.

**Brainstorming is easily understood and implemented.** No special training is required for participants to express their ideas. All sides expect open and frank exposition of points of view. Argumentative behavior is discouraged and creativity appreciated.

### Who participates? And how?

**Anyone can participate in a brainstorming session.** It is useful to encourage participants from diverse backgrounds and interests in the issue to be discussed. Providing background information to participants bolsters the ability of each to contribute. Information should be distributed in advance of the session, if possible. Large groups can be divided into smaller subsets to promote full participation. (See **Small Group Techniques; Public Information Materials**.)

**People participate by bringing their ideas to the table, working in groups of 6 to 10.** All ideas are duly noted and recorded to reassure participants that their comments are being adequately considered. Participants can record ideas on newsprint or butcher paper, or the agency can supply staff to record their ideas. People can prioritize their ideas by using strips of colored adhesive dots (found in office supply stores). About seven dots per person works well. Working individually, participants use dots to indicate their preferences. The dots can be divided among several good ideas or concentrated on one idea that is very important. The sheets of paper with dots are an effective display of the prioritization and help identify the group's top priorities. Participation is furthered when notes of the meeting and subsequent events can be distributed to the participants.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Through brainstorming, agencies become aware of issues, problems, and detailed solutions** that might not otherwise come to light. New ideas assist agencies in crafting compromise positions and in setting priorities by using input provided directly by stakeholders. Shelburne, Vermont, and Flathead County, Montana, used brainstorming sessions to clarify and prioritize issues for new area plans.

### Who leads a brainstorming session?

**Brainstorming needs a facilitator or moderator,** who may be found within the group itself, agency staff, or an outside firm. Facilitators must be sensitive to group dynamics and be able to draw statements and positions from participants in an affable way. They must assure that all participants are heard and that civility is maintained. An agency staff person may be needed to assist groups that have difficulties with the process. (See **Facilitation**.)

### What are the costs?

**Brainstorming is inexpensive.** The group leader can be an individual on an existing staff, but a person experienced in facilitating the technique is preferable. Depending on the issue to be discussed or the degree of anticipated conflict, an outside consultant may be a desirable addition.

**Material needs are minimal.** A quiet room is essential. Materials should be on hand to provide necessary data and background information. Although this information need not be overly detailed, questions are certain to arise, and it is preferable to be able to respond appropriately. Potential materials include:

- Large newsprint or butcher paper, with markers to record ideas;
- Boards to display applicable data;
- Large, easily visible maps;
- Overlays to allow sketching on maps; and
- Adhesive dots for prioritization.

### How is brainstorming organized?

**Careful management facilitates a brainstorming session best.** Agency staff people organize and implement a brainstorming session. Staff needs are minimal but may include a facilitator and probably an assistant for physical management of charts and recording of ideas. Resource people should be present for responses to questions.

**Initial efforts include planning** the brainstorming session—defining the precise issue to be addressed, identifying potential participants, deciding on the process and schedule to be followed, and determining anticipated outcomes of the session so that players will know the scope and stakes involved. It is also important to detail for participants how the agency expects to use the results.

**Effective brainstorming sessions are small (6 to 10 people).** If the group is too small, participants are not stimulated to generate ideas; if it is too large, the more vocal few may dominate the meeting. At large meetings, participants are divided into groups. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) held five subregional sessions at key milestones. Roundtables of 8 to 10 people at each event used brainstorming to generate regional plans that fit within given financial scenarios for future transit options.

**A brainstorming session usually has a simple agenda:**

- Introductions with brief outlines of participants' backgrounds;
- Discussion of the brainstorming process and how it fits into the overall process;
- Generation of ideas, listed without evaluation or criticism;
- Clarifying and explaining ideas, as required;
- Review, grouping, and elimination of redundant ideas;
- Prioritization; and
- Presentation of each group's results by the moderator to the larger group.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**Brainstorming is always a stage of a larger process.** It is frequently used when an agency is starting a lengthy or complex undertaking with a separate element for public involvement. It can be part of a focus group—to open discussion and introduce participants; it can be part of a charrette—to establish the points of view of participants; it can be used in civic advisory committees —to establish a consensus on a project; and it can be used in public meetings. (See **Focus Groups; Charrettes; Civic Advisory Committees; Public Meetings/Hearings**.) Brainstorming was used in conjunction with public opinion surveys to design a public involvement program for the Albany, New York, area. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.) In Pennsylvania, community members used brainstorming to select representatives for a civic advisory committee.

**What are the drawbacks?**

**Facilitation can pose unique challenges.** A single questioner can disrupt proceedings by continuously raising questions and suspicions about the motivations of participants or sponsors. Unassertive participants may be neglected without active solicitation of their participation. Opponents may refuse to consider each other's ideas.

**Unspoken attitudes may affect results.** Individual participants who feel diverted from more apparently purposeful tasks become impatient if they feel the process is a waste of time. It is essential to focus brainstorming on issues that make sense to the participants and to clearly explain how the results will be used. People who feel they are being controlled or patronized often withdraw from full participation. Agency staff members who feel that the process is leading nowhere may not respond appropriately to questions from participants.

**For further information:**

- Atlanta Regional Commission (Vision 2020), Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2500
- Cape Cod Commission (Cape Cod Regional Plan), (508) 362-3828
- Capital District Transportation Committee, Albany, New York (public involvement program), (518) 458-2161
- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, (206) 684-1357
- Connecticut Department of Transportation, Environmental Planning Bureau (Q Bridge Study), (860) 594-2939
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, Bureau of Environmental Quality, (717) 783-4580

## CHARRETTES

### What is a charrette?

**A charrette is a meeting to resolve a problem or issue.** Within a specified time limit, participants work together intensely to reach a resolution. The sponsoring agency usually sets the goals and time limit and announces them ahead of time. A leader's responsibility is to bring out all points of view from concerned local residents as well as agency representatives and experts.

**Here are the usual components of a charrette:**

- Definition of issues to be resolved;
- Analysis of the problem and alternative approaches to solutions;
- Assignment of small groups to clarify issues;
- Use of staff people to find supporting data;
- Development of proposals to respond to issues;
- Development of alternative solutions;
- Presentation and analysis of final proposal(s); and
- Consensus and final resolution of the approach to be taken.

### Why is it useful?

**A charrette is problem-oriented.** The breadth of background of participants assures full discussion of issues, interrelationships, and impacts. Its time limits challenge people to rapidly, openly, and honestly examine the problem and help potential adversaries reach consensus on an appropriate solution. (See **Negotiation & Mediation**.) For example, charrettes were used to formulate alternatives to a controversial highway project in Knoxville, Tennessee, and a downtown plan for Jacksonville, Florida, by guiding business and civic leaders and neighborhood people to a recommended solution.

**A charrette produces visible results.** It is often used early in a planning process to provide useful ideas and perspectives from concerned interest groups. In mid-process, a charrette helps resolve sticky issues. Late in the process, it is useful to resolve an impasse between groups.

**A charrette enlarges the degree of public involvement** in transportation, reducing feelings of alienation from government. It offers people interaction with public agencies and allows questions to be asked before decisions are made. It supplements, but does not replace, other kinds of public involvement.

### Does a charrette have special uses?

**A charrette calls attention to an issue.** It can dramatize:

- The need for public attention to resolve an issue;
- A deliberately participatory problem-solving process:
- A public agency's openness to suggestions;
- A search for all possible approaches to a question; and
- A democratically-derived consensus.

**Charrettes generate alternative solutions to problems.** The setting encourages openness and creativity. All suggestions from the group—however outrageous—should be examined to encourage thinking about better approaches. (See **Brainstorming**.) In New Hampshire's Community Stewardship Program, for instance, volunteer experts are invited by towns to help assess strengths and weaknesses of town planning.

### Who participates? And how?

**Anyone can participate in a charrette.** A wide range of people with differing interests should attend. Traditional participants represent organized groups, but individuals with any stake in the issue should be encouraged to attend. (See **Minority, Ethnic, and Low-income Groups**.)

**How people participate depends on the charrette leader.** An experienced leader assures that a range of views is heard. The leader invites people to take a stance and present their points of view. All participants are assured an opportunity to speak out, and the leader encourages even the most reticent participant to speak up without fear of rebuke or ridicule. The open, free-wheeling charrette format encourages enthusiasm and responses.

### How do agencies use the output?

**A charrette sharpens agency understanding** of the perspectives of interest groups. Early in project formulation, a charrette offers a glimpse of potentially competing demands and can be a barometer of the potential for consensus. Thus it helps generate alternatives and identify issues. In Minnesota and Alabama, for example, State agencies respond to the needs of individual towns by providing experts for weekend charrettes.

### Who leads a charrette?

**A leader experienced in charrette techniques is a must.** To avoid chaos in a charrette, a high level of discipline is required. The charrette leader should be familiar with group dynamics and the substantive issues the group faces. The leader tailors the setting, background materials, and issues to the goal of the charrette and elicits participation from all group members within the allotted time. One or two staff people should be available for support to the leader and to supply data and information.

**A steering committee usually makes arrangements for a charrette.** It may be composed of representatives of Federal and State transportation or other agencies, consultants, affected municipalities, and community groups. The steering committee should agree upon a leader for a charrette.

### What are the costs?

**A charrette involves significant resources.** The chief items are sufficient space and background materials and an experienced leader. Graphics must be used so that participants quickly comprehend the problem and envision alternative solutions. Background materials must be available at the start of the charrette so that no time is lost in investigating the problem. Preparatory work leading to a charrette is intensive, whether done in-house or by an outside specialist.

**Staffing** should include:

- A leader experienced in the charrette technique;
- Staffers who understand the derivation and use of the data;
- Staffers who have worked on the problem; and
- Staffers who have worked with applicable policy.

**Materials** can include:

- Large maps;
- Overlays to allow sketching on maps;

- Boards to display applicable data;
- Large newsprint pads and markers to record ideas;
- Photographs of sites;
- Handouts of basic goals/time limits/meeting ground rules; and
- Printed background information with background data.

**How is a charrette organized?**

**Organization depends on the issue's complexity and the intended length of the event.** This work includes:

- Obtaining agreement on the process;
- Obtaining agreement on timing;
- Determining potential participants;
- Finding an experienced charrette leader;
- Managing special funding, if required;
- Seeking out resource people;
- Sending out invitations and background material well in advance;
- Finding an appropriate space for meeting;
- Handling required publicity;
- Setting up space to encourage informal discussion; and
- Portraying issues clearly in both verbal and graphic form.

**Is a charrette flexible?**

**A minimum of four hours is essential** for a charrette focused on a modest problem. While the average ranges from one to several days, some agencies hold one- and two-week charrettes or organize them as multiple sessions over a period of time.

**A charrette occurs at any time in a planning process, but preparation is crucial.** Advance work can take a month or more, depending on the issue to be discussed. Charrette materials are flexible and should be tailored to the focus of the meeting.

**How is it used with other techniques?**

**A charrette combines effectively with other techniques.** When matched with a civic advisory committee, it focuses on solving a specific problem. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.) Paired with the visioning process, it is an attractive means of eliciting ideas. (See **Visioning**.) A charrette also focuses on a single issue raised during a brainstorming session. (See **Brainstorming**.) In Portland, Maine, a two-day charrette on the long-range plan followed a transportation fair. (See **Transportation Fairs**.)

**What are the drawbacks?**

**Because it focuses on a specific problem to be resolved or issue to be addressed, a charrette is usually a one-time event.** Thus, the invitation list and timing must be thoroughly considered and discussed to maximize interaction through broad-based participation. Goals must be made clear so the expectations do not exceed possible results. The depth of analysis from a single short session can be disappointing. Follow-up work must be carefully considered both before and during a charrette.

**When is a charrette most effective?**

**A charrette can resolve an impasse.** During such a use, neutral participants should be involved to bring fresh ideas for consideration. When a problem is immediate, a charrette is effective because people are vitally interested in the outcome. For maximum effect, a charrette should have the approval of elected officials, agency heads, and community groups. A charrette is also useful:

- Early in the project;
- Following a brainstorming session;
- When focus on a single issue is required; and
- When a range of potential solutions is needed.

**For further information:**

- American Institute of Architects' Regional/Urban Assistance Team (R/UDAT), (202) 626-7358
- American Society of Landscape Architects, Community Assistance Team, (202) 686-2752
- Minnesota Design Team, Minnesota Department of Trade & Economic Development, (612) 297-1291
- New Hampshire Community Stewardship Program, (603) 271-2155
- Portland, Maine, Area Comprehensive Transportation Committee, (207) 724-9891
- Urban Land Institute's Panel Advisory Service, (202) 624-7133

## VISIONING

### What is visioning?

**Visioning leads to a goals statement.** Typically, it consists of a series of meetings focused on long-range issues. Visioning results in a long-range plan. With a 20- or 30-year horizon, visioning also sets a strategy for achieving the goals. Visioning has been used to set a long-range statewide transportation plan in Ohio, a statewide comprehensive plan in New Jersey, and a regional land-use and transportation plan in the Seattle, Washington, region. The Governor of Georgia, acting as “Chief Planner,” used it to create long-range goals for the State. Central Oklahoma 2020 is a visioning project for a regional plan.

**Priorities and performance standards can be part of visioning.** Priorities are set to distinguish essential goals. Performance standards allow an evaluation of progress toward goals over time. In Jacksonville, Florida, a community report card is used to determine priorities; each target for the future is evaluated annually. In Minnesota a statewide report card was used to evaluate the current status and set up goals and milestones for the future. Oregon established benchmarks to measure progress toward its long-term goals.

### Why is it useful?

**Visioning offers the widest possible participation** for developing a long-range plan. It is democratic in its search for disparate opinions from all stakeholders and directly involves a cross-section of constituents from a State or region in setting a long-term policy agenda. It looks for common ground among participants in exploring and advocating strategies for the future. It brings in often-overlooked issues about quality of life. It helps formulate policy direction on public investments and government programs.

**Visioning is an integrated approach to policy-making.** With overall goals in view, it helps avoid piecemeal and reactionary approaches to addressing problems. It accounts for the relationship between issues, and how one problem’s solution may generate other problems or have an impact on another level of government. It is cooperative, with multi-agency involvement, frequently with joint interagency leadership.

### Does visioning have special uses?

**Visioning uses participation as a source of ideas** in the establishment of long-range policy. It draws upon deeply-held feelings about overall directions of public agencies to solicit opinions about the future. After open consideration of many options, it generates a single, integrated vision for the future based on the consideration of many people with diverse viewpoints. When completed, it presents a democratically-derived consensus.

**Visioning dramatizes the development of policies** to get people involved in specific topics such as transportation infrastructure. In Ohio, the Access Ohio program was designed to establish goals and objectives for development of transportation projects and programs. Other States that have used visioning to establish long-range goals include Kansas, Georgia, Texas, Florida, Iowa, Oregon, and Minnesota.

### Who participates? And how?

**Invitations to participate are given to the general public** or to a representative panel. A broad distribution of information is essential. This information must be simply presented, attractive, and rendered important and timely. It should also include clear goals of participation and show how comments will be used in the process. (See **Public Information Materials; Mailing Lists**.)

**Community residents participate through meetings and surveys.** A typical method of involving local people is through a questionnaire format, seeking comments on present issues and future possibilities. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.) A report card filled in with community opinions was used in Jacksonville, Florida. In Minnesota, opinions were elicited through small or large public meetings at locations distributed equitably throughout the state. In the Research Triangle region of North Carolina, participants drew pictures of their vision of the region's future and of transit opportunities in words and pictures on wall-sized sheets of paper.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Visioning helps agencies determine policy.** Through widespread public participation, agencies become aware of issues and problems, different points of view, and competing demands. Drafting responses to comments aids in sharpening overall policy and assists in focusing priorities among goals, plans, or programs. Visioning also helps bring conflicts to the surface and resolve competing priorities.

### Who leads a visioning process?

**A chief governmental official can lead visioning.** In several States, the Governor has made visioning a cornerstone of State policy planning for infrastructure investments and State operational departments. The governors of Oregon, Texas, Iowa, Minnesota, Georgia, Florida, and New Jersey have fostered visioning for their States.

**Agencies also lead visioning projects.** Statewide agencies led new visioning projects in Maine and Hawaii. Regional agencies led visioning projects in Jacksonville, Indianapolis, and Seattle.

### What does visioning cost?

**Visioning costs vary.** The chief items are staff time and materials sufficient to set up and carry out the program. Staff people should include a leader committed to the process, a community participation specialist who is well-versed in the applicable policies, and staffers who can interpret and integrate participants' opinions from surveys and meetings. Meeting materials are minimal but can include large maps and newsprint pads and markers to record ideas. If forecasts of information are developed or if alternative scenarios are to be fleshed out, research and preparation time can be extensive.

### How is it organized?

**A specific time period is scheduled** to develop the vision statement. The schedule incorporates sufficient time for framing issues, eliciting comments through surveys or meetings, recording statements from participants, and integrating them into draft and final documents.

**Visioning staff members are typically assigned from existing agencies** that are familiar with issues and essential contacts to be maintained. In Minnesota and New Jersey, staff was assigned from the State planning office; in Jacksonville, Florida, from the Community Council/Chamber of Commerce; in Ohio, from the Ohio Department of Transportation.

### Is it flexible?

**Visioning is extremely flexible** in terms of scheduling and staff commitments. Scheduling takes weeks or months. Staff is temporarily or permanently assigned to the project.

**Preparation for visioning is crucial** and touches on many complex issues. Advance work is essential to give time for staff to prepare the overall program, agendas, mailing lists, questionnaires, and methods of presentation and follow-up. (See **Mailing Lists; Public Opinion Surveys**.) The visioning program should be carefully scheduled to maximize local input and response time prior to selecting final policies.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**The visioning process involves many techniques** of public involvement. In the Seattle area, the visioning process on regional growth and mobility futures included the most extensive regional public involvement effort ever conducted in the area: symposiums, workshops, newspaper tabloid inserts, public hearings, open houses, surveys, and community meetings. (See **Conferences, Workshops, and Retreats; Public Meetings/Hearings; Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses; Public Opinion Surveys**.)

**Visioning leads toward other public involvement techniques**. As a policy umbrella, it can precede establishment of a civic advisory committee and guide its work in reviewing individual projects or programs. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.) It leads to brainstorming sessions or charrettes to solve individual problems. (See **Brainstorming; Charrettes**.) Visioning is often the basis for public evaluation and implementation; it led to performance monitoring of State agency activities in Oregon, Minnesota, Iowa, and Texas, followed by reports to the public.

### What are the drawbacks?

**Time and staff requirements are significant** to maintain contact with numerous community participants and carry the program forward. The numbers of participants varies from 100 community leaders in Jacksonville to an estimated 10,000 residents in Minnesota. Listening to participants can consume several months' time. Full-time effort is required of staff when the process is in motion.

**The staff needs patience** to deal with so many diverse views and individuals, time and schedule requirements, and complex issues and interrelationships. Finally, visioning is a one-time event and remains on a generalized policy level; there is a substantial risk that the resulting document will not satisfy all interest groups.

### When is visioning most effective?

**Visioning is of maximum use at an early point** in the establishment or revision of policies or goals. Used in this way, it demonstrates openness to new ideas or concepts suggested by the public. For maximum effect, a visioning project should have the active support of elected officials, agency heads, and community groups.

**Visioning is useful:**

- To set the stage for short-range planning activities;
- To set new directions in policy;
- To review existing policy;
- When integration between issues is required;
- When a wide variety of ideas should be heard; and
- When a range of potential solutions is needed.

**For further information:**

- Iowa Department of Management (Futures Agenda), (515) 281-3322
- Jacksonville Community Council (Quality Indicators for Progress), Jacksonville, Florida, (904) 356-0800
- Minnesota Planning (Minnesota Milestones), St. Paul, Minnesota, (612) 296-3985
- Ohio Department of Transportation (Access Ohio), Columbus, Ohio, (614) 466-7170
- Oregon Progress Board (Oregon Shines/Oregon Benchmarks), Salem, Oregon, (503) 373-1220
- Puget Sound Regional Council (Vision 2020), Seattle, Washington, (206) 464-7090

## SMALL GROUP TECHNIQUES

### What are small group techniques?

**Small groups have fewer than 20 or so members,** making it easier for people to actively participate. They meet as small gatherings or as break-outs of large meetings and offer many opportunities for creative, flexible interchange of ideas and lively, meaningful participation.

**Small group techniques help people participate freely and actively.** They include special activities or formats that help interest and engage people. They foster active participation and steer participants toward constructive activities and dialogue. They help avoid complaint-oriented or conflict-driven sessions.

**Small group techniques have certain basic characteristics:**

- They emphasize active participation and interaction;
- They are usually run by a group leader or facilitator;
- They have a task, theme, or goal;
- They help reach consensus or develop priorities;
- They gather a range of ideas, opinions, and concerns;
- They are applied to either planning or project development;
- In a breakout group, a small group task reflects the larger group agenda; and
- Breakout groups report back to the larger group.

**Specific small group techniques covered in this section include** breakout groups, workshops, seminars, community juries, roundtables, study circles, conflict utilization opinionaires, decision science, delphi, dialogue facilitation, nominal group process, open space technology, Samoan circle, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats), synetics, and value analysis. Brainstorming is also used in small groups and is discussed as a separate technique. (See **Brainstorming**.)

**The definitions given here are generated from common practice and various materials.** However, the techniques are far from standardized, and their names, conduct, and organization vary throughout the country. Some techniques overlap, or a "hybrid" meeting or process uses elements from each. The key to using them is to identify the element or structure that addresses the needs of the participants and the goals of the meeting.

### Why are small group techniques useful?

**They encourage broad participation and promote a sense of equality among members.** Individuals speak and are heard. Participants ask questions and comment freely.

**Small group techniques foster interaction between participants.** People are encouraged to speak frankly and openly. Ground rules, such as allowing only one person to speak at a time, help level the playing field between participants. Open and fair meeting processes promote give-and-take and interaction.

**They make a larger meeting more efficient and productive.** Break-out groups use various techniques to address a specific issue. Many ideas are brought forth in small groups that might not surface in a large gathering. The larger gathering becomes more productive as break-out group findings on specific topics are reported and incorporated.

**Small group techniques foster dissemination of information** to the broader community. Representatives meet in small sessions, cover issues, and report back to their constituents. The

Portland, Oregon, Metro holds small group meetings in neighborhoods throughout the region. Spokespersons from each group report back to their peers, their elected officials, and other people about transit issues.

**These techniques usually make meetings more fun and interesting.** The interactive nature of small group activities makes them spirited and engaging. People are willing to attend and participate when they know the session will be interesting and productive. The Dallas, Texas, Area Rapid Transit uses small group meetings to obtain candid reactions to innovative proposals. (See **Improving Meeting Attendance**.)

**Small group techniques offer a strategy for achieving a meeting goal.** They help keep conversation on track or establish a step-by-step process for handling discussion. They help develop consensus or an action plan. To review elements of its 2020 long-range plan, the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) sponsored four issues groups—economic development, goods movement, and mobility and quality of life—made up of key stakeholders.

### Are there special uses?

**Small group techniques are useful on controversial issues.** They provide a non-threatening venue for all sides to express opinions and encourage mutual respect and constructive listening. They help reduce tension and defuse polarized groups.

**Small groups provide a forum for technical issues.** Complex issues and concepts receive needed explanation and review, because each individual has time to absorb material and ask questions. Participants feel more confident in an analysis if they understand the technical issues and methods involved. The Connecticut DOT used small groups of participants organized by modal interest (i.e., those favoring transit and those favoring highway options) to develop alternatives for repair or replacement of a major bridge.

**Small group meetings can re-charge a participatory process** with interesting and different ways of looking at a topic. Disenchanted group members are encouraged to rejoin if they see a way to achieve goals in a new and focused process. To critique and revise its public involvement program, the Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) called together 60 community leaders and organized them into small groups to work on specific elements of the process.

**Participants affect the substance of plans and projects** through small group work. The Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission used a small group to simplify its Transportation Improvement Program for easier understanding by the public.

### How are small groups structured?

**The style, format, and organization of small group meetings vary.** Some techniques are familiar and regularly used; others (frequently with fancy names) are less common. Some use innovative, creative group processes.

- **Breakout groups** are subdivisions of a larger meeting to deal with specific issues. Small groups meet in separate areas—corners of a large room or several smaller rooms. Each group appoints or elects a discussion leader, and each participant has a chance to express an opinion. Afterwards, groups report back to the large meeting. In neighborhood meetings to discuss transit service issues, the Boston Transportation Department asked breakout groups to identify priority issues. After each group reported, the larger meeting set priorities to report to the regional transit authority. In Washington, D.C., breakout groups from sub-regions worked within a larger meeting on the area's long-range transportation plan and reported their area concerns to the larger group.

**Some small groups are established from the beginning,** instead of being formed from a larger group. The format is designed specifically to accomplish the goals of the session.

- **Workshops** are small groups that focus on one or more topics, working intensively over a short period of time. (See **Conferences, Workshops, and Retreats**.)

- **Seminars** give participants an opportunity to learn about a particular topic and exchange information and viewpoints. A seminar usually focuses on a single topic. Often, a seminar offers a short presentation followed by discussion by a panel or participants. A seminar is distinctive in the high level of interest and knowledge participants bring to it. In Wilmington, Delaware, the Metropolitan Area Planning Coordinating Council began a larger meeting with a seminar with experts to stimulate discussion. Wisconsin DOT sponsored five issue-based seminars on land use, economic development, urban and rural issues, tourism, and freight shipping for its long-range transportation plan.

- **Community juries** consist of individuals impaneled to hear testimony related to a specific issue. Jurors, chosen for their impartiality, hear reviews of an issue by neutral experts. The jury discusses and deliberates and subsequently issues its findings. Always non-binding and with no legal standing, the findings of such juries can pinpoint “fatal flaws” or gauge public reaction. The Minnesota DOT assembled a community jury to determine public attitudes toward congestion pricing as a traffic-reduction measure. The jury met for five days of hearings with more than 20 witnesses and voted in favor of reducing traffic but against congestion pricing. The jury then voted for increases in the gas tax and for allowing its use in funding transit improvements.

- **Roundtables** are meetings, usually around a table, to examine an issue through discussion by all participants. Each participant is a stakeholder, so the issue is debated from many sides. Free discussion and diverse opinions are encouraged. Experts in a field can participate, as well as residents, business people, and interest groups. Roundtables are often breakout groups, focusing on one or more topics related to the entire issue or project. Seminars and workshops often use a roundtable format, but what is distinctive about roundtables is their emphasis on thorough discussion of an issue. The Kansas DOT, Albany’s Capital District Transportation Committee, and the San Diego Association of Governments use roundtables in many projects and long-range planning efforts. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority held numerous roundtable discussions with community and business leaders to identify priorities for its regional transit plan.

- **Study circles** hold a series of meetings to discuss critical issues. Members are assigned readings and other tasks between meetings. The process is very structured, often using study guides and discussion questions developed by an agency or a steering committee. Participants discuss each facet of the issue in detail. The same group meets periodically to investigate and debate the issue. Participants are appointed or self-selected. In Lima, Ohio, 40 churches with Caucasian, African American, and other members held study circles led by trained leaders to discuss ways to alleviate racial tensions. Study circles on race relations have been formed in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Louisiana; Portsmouth, Virginia; and Columbus, Ohio.

### How do people work within a small group?

**Problem-solving strategies are essential for small group accomplishment.** Small groups need a specific format or process to achieve the goals of a meeting. These alphabetically listed techniques can be used within the specific meeting structures cited above:

- A **conflict utilization opinionaire** uses survey techniques to explore how individuals deal with conflict. It enables a group to use writing and discussion to deal with conflicts or controversies. Before addressing the project issue at hand, a group of 8 to 20 people meet and fill out a questionnaire or complete a writing task to express their attitudes about conflict. They then discuss how staff or leaders should deal with it and suggest the best techniques for reaching consensus or understanding.

- **Decision science** is a process of reaching consensus or formulating alternatives. It narrows the focus of discussion to the distinguishing characteristics of various options. A group begins by agreeing on elements that are not in dispute. The group agrees on as many points as possible; for example, “We all agree that we should minimize the impact on the agricultural properties,” or “We think improved access to that abandoned factory will encourage economic development.” Eventually the group reaches points on which they do not agree. By laying a foundation of mutually agreed-upon assumptions, decision science enables subsequent discussion to directly target unresolved issues. The technique requires a facilitator to develop the consensus items and organize discussion to resolve an issue or formulate a group of alternatives. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service used this technique to develop water management alternatives and explore structural versus operational solutions to water resource issues.

- **Delphi** (also known as policy delphi) reaches consensus by asking a small group of experts to give advice. The results can generate further discussion at committee or public meetings. The delphi process begins when an agency distributes questionnaires to a panel of experts, whose responses are then tabulated. Results are sent back to the panelists, who reflect on their colleagues’ opinions and either alter their stances or provide reasons for holding to their own positions. This process is continued until basic concepts and elements of a project or plan are identified by a majority. The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) conducted a delphi process to define critical issues facing the region and to suggest possibilities for the future. These findings were presented at ARC’s Outlook Conference in May 1992 to launch the VISION 2020 public process. Delphi is considered a survey technique as well as a way of involving small groups.

- **Dialogue facilitation** lets participants speak on deeply-held personal beliefs about an issue. People hold conversations that are outside the bounds of the topic under discussion. They can focus around a meal as an icebreaker. Here, individuals do not know which side of the main issue other people are on; they chat about families, interests, etc. Participants then discuss the main issue—not as enemies or antagonists, but as individuals. Consensus is not expected. Rather, the goals are to open up communication and knowledge that differing opinions can be held. Using a principle of family therapy (you have to live together, so you might as well get along!), dialogue facilitation asks each person to participate in conversation.

- A **nominal group process** is a term used for several different methods of identifying issues and priorities. One variation, employed by the Pennsylvania DOT, uses index cards for participants to register priority issues and other information; the cards are then tallied or analyzed. In another variation, participants generate ideas silently as individuals, and then list them as a group. They discuss what each means and then silently and individually rank the ideas. Yet another method is to have experts discuss an issue with a small group and prepare suggestions for participants’ reactions. To develop priorities for watershed management, the New Jersey Water Resources Authority held successive small group sessions. In the first, after a brief presentation, experts and participants discussed the issue. In the next session, the experts presented in ballot form an array of personal concerns and opinions culled from the previous discussion. The group used the ballot to rank their collective views. The top quarter of the selected priorities formed the basis of a survey mailed to other people participating in the public involvement effort. The results helped to define the Watershed Management Plan.

- **Open space technology** is a method of assigning meeting leadership. The Colorado DOT used this to manage breakout sessions of a large group. Participants introduced a topic or concern, wrote it on a card, and posted it on the wall. Examining the cards to choose a topic, group members signed their names on the card of their choice. Topics with the largest number of names were chosen for discussion groups. People who introduced the topic were responsible for leading a breakout session on it. The Colorado DOT chose issues from these sessions as part of a management review effort.

- A **Samoan circle** derived its name very loosely, with only vague reference to the Pacific island group called Samoa. In fact, the formal structure began during a land use study in Chicago. Its purpose is to organize discussion of controversial issues or within large groups, instead of holding a free-for-all, no-holds-barred complaint session. It serves to identify stakeholders or to give priorities to actions to be taken or areas of agreement, although this is not a frequent used. A Samoan circle has no facilitator, chair, or moderator. Participants are expected to maintain their own discipline. They gather in two concentric circles—an inner circle with a table and four chairs, and an outer circle, with ample walking and aisle space. Everyone begins in the outer circle. The issue is presented, and discussion begins. Those most interested take chairs in the inner circle. Those less interested stay in the outer circle. All are able to move in or out of the center as the discussion flows or topics change. Each speaker makes a comment or asks a question. Speakers are not restricted in what they say or how they say it, but they must sit in the inner circle. Someone wishing to speak stands behind a chair; this signals those already in the circle to relinquish their chairs. No outside conversations are allowed. Comments are often recorded. Votes of opinions held by non-speakers are taken at the end, if desired. To close a meeting, empty seats are taken away one by one until there are no more chairs. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers frequently uses the technique for both internal and public meetings to define priorities and stakeholders in project planning. The Village of Northfield, Illinois, used it to organize discussion of controversial proposals for community development plans in a forum of 150 residents and officials. The technique was used in a meeting of FHWA officials and representatives of six Midwestern states in discussing ways to improve working relationships around environmental protection concerns related to projects and planning.

- **SWOT** (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis takes an analytic approach to a concept or issue, identifying its strengths and weaknesses, along with opportunities it represents and threats to its success. Using those criteria, the group evaluates chances for success or effectiveness. Priorities are resolved by voting and reaching consensus within the group. The Iowa DOT used the technique in establishing the basis for its strategic plan. In a related technique, force field analysis, a group defines “helping” or “hindering” forces and their effects on the group’s objective or discussion.

- **Synetics** re-charges a discussion by diverting it away from the issue being addressed. After discussing an unrelated topic, a group analyzes the dynamics of the side discussion to shed light on interpersonal relationships during discussion of the main topic.

- **Value analysis** helps evaluate alternatives and their consequences in terms of values (say, a clean environment or governmental cost reductions) widely held in the community. This technique is frequently used in the utilities industry. Participants compute the attractiveness of each alternative, assign points for each value, then total them into composite scores. The technique shows what values are in conflict and what trade-offs might be possible. It is often used in siting decisions—for example, by the Florida Power Corporation. It has been used by the Department of Energy in planning for a Tank Waste Remediation System in Washington State and for the Santa Barbara County (California) Oil Transportation Plan. The Oregon DOT has used it to evaluate specific agency actions in relation to project alternatives’ analyses. The Ohio Housing Finance Agency used it to establish suburban integration incentives in Cleveland.

**How do agencies use the output?**

**Agencies use results to refine plans or projects and move a process forward.** Small groups generate information, ideas, and opinions. The Wisconsin DOT interviews small groups about preferences and viewpoints. Small groups are a way to achieve consensus.

**Small groups provide creative solutions or new ideas and scenarios.** In a small group session in Boston's Charlestown neighborhood, a local resident architect sketched out a bold idea that became the conceptual design for a major roadway reconstruction. Small groups foster further interaction between agencies and the public, often with a heightened level of trust.

### Who leads?

**Agency staff or outside experts lead small groups,** but training is necessary to lead them effectively. Training overcomes individual worries about acting as a discussion leader.

**Community people also lead small groups.** A neutral outside facilitator is important for small groups dealing with difficult issues. Some agencies offer training for local residents in leading discussions; others use outside experts. In Wilson, North Carolina, a local bank donated the time and expertise of several senior staff members to supplement agency managers. Working on the county's strategic planning/visioning process, the bank staff helped facilitate breakout groups focused on specific transportation topics.

**Small groups usually have one or two leaders.** Co-leaders are chosen from opposing sides of an issue to make sure all positions are adequately heard. This is important when no one group leader is viewed as neutral or objective on the issue being discussed.

**The choice of a leader depends on the complexity of the technique.** In cases where a specialized technique is attempted, it is important to have an experienced leader.

### What do small group techniques cost?

**While actual monetary costs are minimal,** staff time for preparation and management is sometimes considerable. The staff records events and reports back to a larger group or to the agency. A person is assigned the role of recorder to write down ideas on newsprint or blackboard. In some instances, agency staff facilitate. Triangle Transit Authority in North Carolina used staff members as facilitators of sub-groups analyzing transit potential and land use/development impacts of a new fixed guideway.

**Training staff or participants to run small groups is a factor.** Training improves productivity and leads to fewer meetings, thus offsetting training costs to some extent. One alternative is retaining consultants to manage small group sessions. Also, with minimal training, participants can play other roles that help cut outside costs, acting as recorders or reporters or in other support roles. These roles reduce the need for staff effort.

**Meeting facilities become a cost when a neutral location is desired.** To contain costs, publicly-owned facilities such as schools or colleges should be considered.

**Equipment, supplies, and refreshments usually have modest costs.** Adequate provisions engender good will between a sponsoring agency and group participants.

### How are they organized?

**The format and organization of small group work need to be carefully conceived.** Good preparation is necessary. The choice of technique must be targeted to the intended goals and topics of the meeting and whether the process is short- or long-term. The organization of the process should aim to achieve limited goals within a specified deadline. Policy-makers must be informed of the process and its goals to assist in its support.

**Small group techniques must respond to both agency and participant needs.** Agencies may want to solicit opinions, develop action items, and evaluate alternatives, while participants want to explore impacts, suggest various alternative actions, and make their voices heard. To remedy low attendance at large regional forums, the New Jersey DOT sent staff out to hear from certain populations about its long-range plan. Small groups met on Saturday afternoons in senior citizen centers, colleges, and center-city neighborhoods.

**Participants need to feel that a meeting is structured well enough to produce results.** Audiovisual techniques—video, overheads, displays, laptops—are just as important in small groups as in large meetings, particularly when technical information or concepts are being discussed. (See **Video Techniques**.) They help engage participants, grab their attention, and establish a firm beginning. Meetings should be dynamic, fun, and interesting for participants. A method of summarizing, documenting, and reporting findings and agreements must be established before a meeting. Even a large meeting that is not well-attended can produce results when participants work in small groups to focus on specific issues or tasks.

**The process must be fair and open.** All participants need to have equal roles and be treated as peers. A group must be as inclusive of as many points of view as possible. Potential interests and stakeholders must be identified before assembling a small group, so that no one is ignored. If a large number of interests are represented, agencies often hold more than one small group session.

**A method for selecting leaders must be determined before a group meets**—whether leaders are to be appointed or chosen by the group. In some cases, it is appropriate to train small group leaders and clarify the responsibilities they are to undertake.

**Participants need to understand the process, their role, and the expected outcome** of a meeting. As in a larger session, the context, purpose, and goal of a meeting should be carefully explained and understood. If the process is unusual, participants need an animated leader to explain it and carry it forward.

**Specialized and unusual techniques have specific guidelines for implementation** that should be carefully explained to a group. Before beginning a meeting, it is essential to review the use of small groups, the proposed format, and the procedures, as well as possible issues that may arise and the results anticipated.

**Adequate facilities and supplies are important.** Groups use easels with newsprint and markers to record ideas. Refreshments help create a comfortable, informal atmosphere. Equipment such as overhead projectors aids in reviewing a proposal. Breakout rooms are desirable for small-group sessions that are part of larger meetings. Supplies must be available for specific techniques, such as cards for the open space technique.

**Implementation validates both the findings and the process.** If follow-up is required, staff or appropriate parties make sure it is done. A small group that is part of a larger gathering should be linked back to it. Pennsylvania DOT held large public meetings for its statewide pedestrian and bicycle plan, breaking into smaller facilitated sessions. Participants identified critical design problems as they affect cyclists and pedestrians. The groups then offered possible solutions and reported their key findings to the large group.

### How are they used with other techniques?

**Small groups must be integrated into an overall public involvement strategy.** A regular series of small group meetings ascertains participants' views. Small group meetings are held periodically to update community groups and interested people on the progress of a planning effort or project development. Such meetings supplement larger group meetings by developing detailed information or exploring specific issues.

**Small groups adopt techniques available to larger groups,** including charrettes, facilitation, visioning, and surveys. (See **Charrettes; Facilitation; Visioning; Public Opinion Surveys**.) Alternative dispute resolution techniques such as mediation are used when an impasse is reached. (See **Negotiation and Mediation**.)

**Small groups can meet by teleconferencing.** The use of telecommunications brings people together without the need for extensive travel. (See **Teleconferencing**.)

### What are the drawbacks?

**Preparation takes time and extends a project or planning process.** But small groups also *save* time in the long run if they provide opportunities for many people to participate and become familiar with a proposal's its elements and impacts.

**Small groups require care and feeding.** Space must be available and notices distributed promptly and to the right people. Staff often lead meetings or record their progress. Agencies sometimes provide a neutral site and refreshments for the group.

**The support of small groups requires a commitment from both the agency and the public.** Both need to be assured that small group meetings are worthwhile, productive, and needed and that the results will be of use in the overall process of public involvement. It is sometimes appropriate to have agency officials participate in small groups or observe the process to demonstrate its utility.

### Are they flexible?

**Small groups are inherently flexible.** They are used in a variety of situations, with a number of different organizing techniques, at various times in the process, at nearly any location, and with a wide variety of participants. They are organized to respond to specific issues and participants. Also, small groups meet just about anywhere. Many meet in public agency offices, schools, or universities; some in private business facilities. Staff members from the New Jersey DOT have met with small groups in private homes. (See **Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events**.)

**Small groups contribute to almost any larger process.** The intended use of small groups must be identified early in a meeting process so interested people can comment. In a large meeting, breakout sessions should be identified on the agenda.

### When are they used most effectively?

**Small groups are effective at many different times in a process.** They are effective at the beginning to alleviate polarization and early perceptual problems. When a process stalls, small groups re-start public involvement or move it forward. They are used before issues reach an impasse, or if participants are feeling excluded. They are used in either planning or project development to prioritize issues or work on action items.

### For further information:

- Breakout groups: Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, Washington, D.C., (202) 962-3200
- Community juries: Minnesota Department of Transportation, (612) 296-3000
- Decision science: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, (415) 989-1446
- Delphi: Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2575
- Dialogue facilitation: Public Conversation Project, Cambridge, Massachusetts, (617) 491-1585

- Nominal group process: Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, (717) 783-1068
- Open space technology: Colorado Department of Transportation, (303) 757-9163
- Roundtables: Capital District Transportation Committee, Albany, New York, (518) 458-2161
  Kansas Department of Transportation, (913) 296-2252
- Samoan circle: Dallas Area Rapid Transit, (214) 749-2581
- Seminars: Metropolitan Area Planning Coordinating Council, Wilmington, Delaware, (302) 737-6205
- Study circles: Study Circle Resource Center, (203) 928-2616
- Value analysis: Oregon Department of Transportation, (503) 986-3455
  Washington State Department of Energy, (509) 376-1065

## Chapter 2. INVOLVING PEOPLE FACE-TO-FACE THROUGH MEETINGS

### C. TAKING INITIAL ACTION STEPS

Face-to-face contact and two-way communication are vital elements of public involvement. Meetings can provide both. Here are some steps an agency can take to get people together:

✓ **Meet with community groups to discuss and set up a meeting schedule.**
Contact community groups to establish a basic meeting schedule. Optimize participation by asking them what kinds of meetings should take place and how often they should occur.

✓ **Consider the scope and substance of meetings.**
Outline the goals of a meeting or series of meetings in advance, so that participants can comment and offer suggestions. Consider if general meetings need to be supplemented by meetings focused on specific topics for specialized audiences. Share findings and ask if further development or discussion of individual points is desirable. Explain how and when agency decisions are made and how meeting output will affect decisions.

✓ **Select organizing principles for the meeting(s).**
Explore different types of meetings that may attract interest and outline potential meeting structures, so that maximum participation occurs. Vary sponsorship or leadership of meetings.

✓ **Place the meeting in the context of the whole plan or program, including decision-making.**
Anticipate where the process will go and why. Determine from the beginning what information is needed, when it is needed, and how it will be incorporated into agency decision-making. Make this context clear to participants, so they understand how their input will affect the plan or project.

✓ **Evaluate the approach with participant advisors.**
Seek perceptions and advice on the process from people outside the agency. Evaluate whether the intended scope, substance, and style of meeting are likely to be beneficial to the agency itself and to the participants.

## Chapter 3. GETTING FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

Besides dispensing information and arousing interest in a transportation plan or project, public involvement programs elicit public feedback and support. Public comment comes to agencies in the form of questions, challenges, or suggestions for alternative ways of dealing with issues.

### Why is feedback important and how can it be used?

Feedback—positive and negative—provides new ideas and perspectives to help agencies devise plans and projects that meet the public's needs. It also helps them determine how well the public understands specific issues and where additional information is needed for better understanding and support. A more specialized use of feedback is to determine the success of an outreach program—how many people have been reached, what percent of the public is represented, and what portion supports the proposal. As agencies assess feedback, they take stock of plans and programs to be certain they are providing the intended public service in the best possible way. Thus, feedback from the community vitally affects an agency's decision-making process and the results it generates.

### How do agencies improve methods of getting feedback?

This chapter provides a guide to the following steps toward reaching people and getting their feedback:

**A. Establishing places people can find information;**
**B. Designing programs to bring out community viewpoints and resolve differences; and**
**C. Taking initial action steps.**

# Chapter 3. GETTING FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

## A. ESTABLISHING PLACES PEOPLE CAN FIND INFORMATION AND INTERACT

Giving people information about transportation projects and plans is a fundamental step toward getting their informed feedback. To “get the word out” to diverse stakeholders, agencies need to establish a variety of places where information is readily and conveniently available. Many agencies start by providing recorded, basic information around the clock and staffing phones during ordinary working hours to respond to questions and give more detail. Human contact is vitally important and should remain a staple in public involvement, even when an agency utilizes many other methods to reach people.

New places to give out information are crucial. Neighborhood locations are highly desirable but not always practical. Low-tech methods such as voice mail and answering machines are relatively cost-effective and enhance an agency’s ability to communicate quickly with the general public.

“High-tech” technology, including the Internet, opens up exciting possibilities for reaching people with the information they need and offering them new ways to interact. FAX-on-demand services, modems, and on-line services reach people fast. Wireless communication devices, such as cellular phones or Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), are able to receive and transmit voice, text, and image information from remote, portable locations. Communication is possible in a specific service area through the use of sophisticated radio frequency telecommunication; much like an AM/FM radio can be used within a particular broadcast area. Although, as yet, relatively few people obtain agency information this way because they do not understand or have access to computers or other equipment, agencies are beginning to capitalize on the technology’s potential usefulness in public involvement.

Offering people a variety of ways to get information increases the chances it will reach them. The following techniques supplement more conventional methods:

- On-line services;
- Hotlines; and
- Drop-in centers.

## ON-LINE SERVICES

### What are on-line services?

**On-line services provide communication through a computer network round-the-clock.** They are a cross between a personal computer and a telephone line. With a computer modem and a subscription to an on-line service (similar to a cable television subscription), users are connected to the computers of other subscribers. At their own computers, they find information or participate in dialogues with other users. On-line services can be the basis for an electronic bulletin board or E-mail.

**The rapid evolution of computing technology has now allowed individuals to communicate with on-line services through hand-held, portable devices** instead of being fixed to a computer terminal and telephone line. As the cost for these devices and subscription services continue to decrease, a greater number of individuals will be able to communicate anytime and anywhere on specialized topics of interest.

**On-line services enable people to give and get information when they want it and where they want it.** They afford people instantaneous access to information in documents or on bulletin boards. They allow people to post information that includes opinions, suggestions, or support for agency proposals or programs. On-line services also allow for participation from a geographically dispersed audience. People do not have to attend meetings to have their comments recorded. Alaska provided on-line services to public libraries for access to information including dates and times of meetings and the text of its State Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

**On-line services have the following components:**

- A specific electronic address for the individual or agency;
- A “home page”—a place for messages or an index; and
- A connection to the Internet via modem and telephone lines, along with appropriate software.

**On-Line services may be subscription-based or free**. On-line services are generally available through the Internet, a worldwide connection of computers and information sources. Users of on-line services usually connect through the Internet to a specific electronic address where information of interest is available. The connection to the Internet may be “free” to the user (available at public libraries) or based on access and/or usage charges, to be paid by the user (like a cable TV subscription). The Internet Service Providers (ISPs) provide the necessary software and other key information necessary to explore the Internet. Some agencies have established their own on-line services (web sites) from which users can access information about plans, projects, and events.

### Why are they useful?

**They enable agencies to post information about services or recent activities.** The California State Government On-line Network includes California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) as one of its divisions so people can contact it for information. Washington’s Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) has a home page directory leading to information about its history and organization, current news, newsletters, and public access network. The Institute for Transportation Research and Education, working with the North Carolina Department of Transportation (DOT), offers up-to-date information on highway construction projects and ferry and train schedules.

**On-line services connect individuals to a wide-reaching network of agency information.** Individuals and organizations pull up information files and print those that interest them. Users send instantaneous messages about the information to other on-line users, including the agency. They “surf” among options, with an enhanced sense of access and ability to communicate. Using on-line services to reach an agency home page concerning a proposed transportation project or planning process, a local resident may:

- Collect information;
- View a picture, animation, or video;
- Direct a specific inquiry to the agency or the appropriate staff member;
- Submit a comment; or
- Register a concern.

**On-line services allow interest groups to communicate and share information.** The Institute of Transportation Engineers provides a listing of computerized bulletin boards with information and data on transportation topics. The Institute for Global Communication has several special-interest on-line services for its 9,500 members, ranging from health reform to marine habitat preservation to labor relations. In Texas, the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (Houston) offers free on-line service. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has an on-line bulletin board, PRESERV LINK, with 100 members providing information.

**On-line services are used at any stage in a long-range planning or project development process.** The output is used in the same ways as output from public meetings or messages on an answering machine. The State of Alaska has a home page, as do the Alaska DOT and its Transportation Planning Section. They regularly get comments from users.

**Information sharing takes place at any time of day.** Agencies post completed information about proposals or programs. Participants read the information and comment via the on-line network at a time of their choice. The on-line programs record and retain the information for agencies or others to read later.

**On-line services are also used as a continuous communications medium** during program or project development. On the Central Puget Sound RTA’s home page, users get agency history, project-specific information, and a list of topics discussed in further detail on later pages. The most recent newsletter is also available. When a copy of the latest issue appears, it may be printed from the screen. The North Central Texas Council of Governments uses a free subscription service to keep interested parties informed in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Subscribers can receive a monthly newsletter and updates on website postings, GIS activities, and census data releases.

**Do they have special uses?**

**On-line services can focus on specific interests**. For example, the Washington State DOT offers a home page about bicycling that includes books, bicycling clubs, and calendars of events. It also offers bicycling information from other States, as well as E-mail addresses for subscriptions to bicycle newsletters. Lastly, it lists the on-line links into special sections of the Internet Bicycle Archives.

**On-line services give access to vast databases.** The library of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission/Association of Bay Area Governments in Oakland, California, links systems of databases covering literature in over 400 subject areas, in 21 million volumes, in over 10,000 participating libraries. The library is also linked to on-line catalogs of materials in libraries at the University of California campuses, California State University, and Stanford University.

**On-line services help develop a mailing list.** The Washington State DOT offers a mailing list option. A user follows a home page instruction to insert his/her name into the program, thereby automatically joining the mailing list. (See **Mailing Lists**.)

**Larger commercial services offer "conversation rooms" for discussion of specific subjects.** In this use, an on-line service allows several paying subscribers to participate simultaneously in an electronic conversation.

**For local people, these services offer an added degree of privacy.** People who are uncomfortable speaking in front of groups can quietly compose a message or carefully word a concern. They also converse one-on-one with other concerned people. Records of their participation are kept only if the user identifies him/herself.

**Agencies offer surveys or preference questionnaires via on-line services.** A comment form encourages participants to review issues and write personal opinions. The Transportation Research Center at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas offers a comment form that can be transmitted by E-mail. On-line services can also be used to administer public opinion surveys. With the rise of Internet usage, a standard public opinion survey may be augmented by some set of participants responding via a website or e-mail. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**).

**Quick community reaction can also be solicited on a website.** For example, the West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc (WEACT) posts a poll question dealing with environmental quality and/or environmental justice on its home page. Users can submit their opinion as well as review current poll results.

**On-line services help reduce trips to meetings and agency offices.** In a study of the potential municipal use of on-line services, the Claremont Colleges New Liberal Arts Clinic Program suggested that such services could reduce vehicle trips by providing an alternative means of conducting business with government. Community people could use on-line services to participate in a two-way public discussion or to petition an elected official without arranging for childcare or even worrying about proper attire.

**Who participates? And how?**

**Computer-oriented people are likely to participate,** but attracting local people with the greatest stake in a project or interest in a program is difficult if they are not computer literate. Agencies also need to consider how information can be made available to people with disabilities and people who first language is not English. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low Income Groups; People with Disabilities**.) As computer use continues to increase and on-line services become more common in public libraries and through organizations, these limitations become less pronounced. However, everyone does not need a computer to communicate. Wireless cellular phone service, for example, offers the capability to connect to on-line services and receive voice, text, or image data. Other types of portable devices are emerging to allow a wider range of people to participate. The magnitude of the acceptance and accessibility to on-line services will be dependent on a number of factors including cost, convenience, social acceptability, and useful information.

**Usage is limited to those who have access to a computer with connections to the service** and the time and inclination to participate. Nominal computer skills are necessary, in addition to familiarity with a keyboard, but these skills are becoming more common. However, a computer purchase may be too expensive for many households. Public computers are not generally available, although some public and university libraries as well as offices of advocacy organizations and neighborhood centers now make on-line services available. In addition, some private services are beginning to appear.

**People with a computer and a modem use on-line services right from their home, whenever they want.** A subscription to an on-line service helps users reach most sources of information. On-line services are also used from places of work, some public libraries, schools or universities, and offices of organizations.

**Agencies must publicize the availability of on-line materials.** As use of the Internet and on-line comment forums becomes more commonplace, agencies need to inform people that documents are available at on-line locations. Agencies publicize on-line connections, usually by providing their website address, via mail, public information materials, advertisements, or telephone. More advanced users of the Internet and on-line services are able to use sophisticated search engines to seek out detailed information or specialized websites, including agency websites.

**Who leads their use?**

**Any public agency can take advantage of existing commercial on-line services.** These services connect an agency to its constituents and tap into larger data-sharing resources. The design and development of a successful on-line service begins by evaluating a public agency's hardware and software capabilities and determining the information management objectives. Agencies may have to hire outside information management consultants to design, set up, and troubleshoot an on-line system.

**Public agencies are developing their own websites. In addition, public agencies and not-for-profit organizations often support community web pages**. Because of the usefulness of Internet-based communications, many agencies and organizations have developed their own capabilities to plan, design, develop, operate, and maintain on-line services. These "web hosting" capabilities have been supported by decreasing costs, increasing standardization of the technology, and improving availability of skilled technicians. Many organizations create an "internal" website, which is accessible only by authorized individuals (usually employees) and an "external" website, which contains information for the public, such as the agency mission and organization, major plans and projects, key upcoming events, recent newsworthy articles, a selection of archived data, and the means for contacting the organization.

**What are the costs to an agency?**

**Cost will vary depending on the requirements and complexity of the website or on-line services.** Developing a website requires knowledge in public relations, communications, computer technology, telecommunications, agency regulations/procedures, and planning/budgeting. The website or on-line service costs may range from several hundred dollars to several thousands of dollars for start-up and operations. A careful analysis of requirements and the website design is necessary to be able to estimate the life cycle costs. Public agencies may provide agency staff for the development, operations, and maintenance of these websites or contract for some or all of these services.

**If an agency needs an outside contractor** to design, set up, and monitor system operation, costs depend on the extent of help needed.

**Costs to an agency may be shared with individuals** who use the services. A variety of pricing and cost recovery business models are in use. Some models have both the agency and the users pay monthly subscription fees. These fees are in the same general range as cable television fees and vary with usage, like pay-per-view services on television. In other models, access to websites and on-line services are free, with the user bearing the cost to connect to the website. A user's cost typically is the expense of using their personal equipment plus the subscription cost to an Internet Service Provider. Other users may access the website through free services, such as those available at public computer stations in government offices or public libraries. Free, public kiosks may also provide access to certain types of agency information.

**Once an on-line service is running, other costs to an agency are relatively low.** Agencies incur costs to maintain public-access websites or on-line services. Overall, on-line services are cost-efficient, because many similar requests for information are handled at once, or staff members are better positioned to understand and collect input from the public. On-line services are less costly ways to disseminate information than direct mail, although outreach is limited to those who can receive them.

**Website and on-line services need to conform to agency policies and procedures**. The use of web-based services or on-line services requires special attention to agency policies and procedures for receiving and transmitting information.  Many times, the website will receive only a limited amount of information, if any.  While a website that disseminates information is a value means of establishing a common place where individuals can receive information, many agencies restrict the placement of information by the public on a website due to computer security risks and/or the complexity of tracking and monitoring requests.   The scope and scale of these restrictions vary by agency.

**Such on-line or website services are subject to the policies of the sponsoring or host agency.** With public involvement activities, much of the information generated, organized, and captured in documents or other electronic formats (e.g., video) is in the public domain.  As such, these materials qualify as fair use for which there is usually no fee associated with the cost of accessing the materials.  For example, a public participant may access a project website through a free public library computer station website in order to read about a project or plan.  The citizen may even copy the information to electronic media or send it electronically to other interested individuals, usually at no charge.  In this case, there is not direct cost to the citizen.

**However, there may be circumstances in which copyrighted or other proprietary materials, associated with a public involvement activity, are made available to the public.** A detailed technical report, produced by an academic or private institution but not sponsored by an agency, may be available as part of an on-line or website service in order to provide a more complete perspective on the project or plan.  For example, a non-profit organization may produce a copyrighted report on global warming and transportation.  A project or plan website may list this report in a "related reports" section to inform the public participant of related materials or topics. Accessing and copying of these materials are usually restricted to the conditions and compensation associated with copyright or license laws and regulations.  Costs for these access privileges may range from a few dollars to several hundred or more.

**Agencies also need to consider how to archive electronic documents.** People may be interested and have the right to access past plans and studies as well as "what's new".  The volume of information that is available electronically makes storage, cataloguing, and retrieval important issues.

**Because of the increasing need for information, many public agencies are providing their public information in a variety of languages** (multi-language versions relevant to their communities) as well as in different formats to enable individuals with disabilities to have easier access the information through special equipment, software (text-to-voice translators), and other devices.  Care needs to be taken to ensure that all materials offered in on-line or website services comply with these requirements.  Consequently, access to non-conforming materials may be possible, but warnings or notices may be required to alert the user.

### How are on-line services organized?

**On-line services include the following:**

- A specific electronic address for an individual or agency becomes a "mailbox" to receive information via electronic mail.  Note that not all agencies have an electronic mailbox, but instead encourage communication via fax or written response mailed to an agency address or point of contact.  These restrictions are imposed primarily to meet agency computer security requirements.

- A "home page"—a place for messages or an index of an agency's projects and programs — identifies the agency, its location, its telephone numbers on- and off-line, and a home page custodian for direct communication.  Some home pages offer recent news headlines, telephone directories, and the time of the most recent update.

- The home page serves as a table of contents—a guide to further pages with details on projects or programs.  Users "click" on a topic, and the requested detailed pages are opened, offering maps, graphics, or more specific information about projects and programs. This ability to click on desired topics and reach further information is called hypertext.

- A connection to the Internet via modem and telephone lines or wireless devices, along with appropriate software, is essential.

- Computers available to users must be equipped with platforms using a mouse for "clicking" topics on the monitor screen. As technologies advance, voice activated commands are becoming available.

- Accessibility to disabled or visually impaired users. Increasingly, agency websites and on-line services are conforming to the special needs of the visually impaired by providing enhanced imagery and special codes to improve readability. Federal agencies, for example, are required to comply with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act electronic and information technology accessibility standards for website development and operations.

**As a first step, agencies set a home page on local or regional on-line services.** To take further advantage of the technology, they add ways for users to begin agency-to-user conversation forums. Initial actions include informing the public of these opportunities for communication. Once these services are integrated into an agency's range of techniques, they become a routine part of project planning or program development and a reliable method for gaining public input.

**An agency fosters education and participation through greater information sharing.** Active use of on-line services helps agencies better understand the public's needs, monitor reactions, and improve public awareness. The increasing use of discussion forums by individuals and all levels of government to share information suggests that government agencies may learn about themselves through communication with each other and with their constituents.

**On-line services give detailed information about agencies.** The Minnesota DOT maintains an on-line telephone directory that lists departments and projects alphabetically. Important contact people are named by agency. This service effectively brings the DOT phone directory to the user's living room, eliminating the sometimes difficult and frustrating effort of getting an agency operator to connect a caller with the right office and contact person.

**On-line services give detailed information about construction projects and their impacts.** Many states, such as the North Carolina DOT and Texas DOT, provide specific information about current road conditions and construction projects. From a statewide map, users choose projects in their area, obtaining details on project purpose, dates of construction, lane openings, a corridor map, affected side streets, frequencies of highway advisory radio channels, and construction-zone safety tips. The service lists a telephone number for more information. Armed with such data, a motorist can make choices on how to avoid delays due to road construction.

**Data and research on transportation are shared.** Caltrans worked with a private firm in an experimental program to provide traffic counts by freeway entrance/exit for Southern California. Caltrans also offers limited use of agency-developed software. The University of Nevada at Las Vegas has a home page describing the work of its Transportation Research Center. Users call up summary information of research projects underway at the University of California at Berkeley, whose research work, distributed via the California State Government Network, includes executive summaries of projects and results.

### How are they used with other techniques?

**On-line services supplement an agency's conventional outreach techniques** such as preparing public information materials and contacting individuals. (See **Public Information Materials**.) They should not become the public's only means of participating. On-line services are evolving into a primary method of communication, but they do not preclude or substitute for techniques such as public meetings, personal interaction, and mailings.

**Electronic bulletin boards promote and facilitate information exchange.** The New York Metropolitan Transportation Council (NYMTC) has established an electronic bulletin board system with message boards to explain its work, its methods, and its specific products and services. The Council's electronic menu offers messages about the region's transportation improvement plan, long-range plan, and potential use of congestion management in developing its travel models. NYMTC will continue to hold hearings and solicit input in its forecasting and planning efforts through other traditional methods.

### What are the drawbacks?

**Use of on-line services is limited due to access, expense, and skill requirements.** Although usage is growing, on-line services and computers reach only a fraction of the total population. Some people are always suspicious of machines, and some resist using means of communication they consider cold and impersonal. Adjustment to technological change is slow, and some social and economic barriers will persist. Just as there are people who do not have cable television, there will always be those without computers and on-line services. Concerns about equity among participants should be kept in mind when choosing this technique. For example, Agencies need to consider how to make information available to people with disabilities and people whose first language is not English. (See **People with Disabilities; Ethnic, Minority, and Low-Income Groups**.)

**Participants in on-line services do not represent the entire community.** In particular, ethnic groups, minorities, disabled people, the elderly, and other people traditionally underserved by transportation often have limited access to these resources. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups; People with Disabilities**.) As computer use continues to increase in the workplace and on-line services become more common and more available in public places, such limitations may become less pronounced.

**On-line services must be used in conjunction with other techniques** that allow people to obtain information quickly. They require people to make a commitment to using a computer to obtain information. Users cannot be reached as quickly as with a printed pamphlet, fact sheet, report, or other materials delivered to the door. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

**On-line services cannot replace meetings,** which allow participants to interact with one another and focus on key points of discussion. Even with the interaction on-line services provide, they lack the dynamic face-to-face interplay that generates and airs ideas during a meeting or focus group. (See **Focus Groups; Small Group Techniques**.)

**Information overload is a potential problem.** As on-line services make communication easy and many people join in, the sheer volume of information available becomes overwhelming. Agencies are unlikely to receive individual comments unless they help people focus on specific issues. Frequently, this involves communicating through traditional public information materials and meetings.

### Are on-line services flexible?

**The format of a home page or bulletin board is modified and adjusted as needed,** while the essential characteristics of the medium remain unchanged. Other specific on-line actions are also changed frequently. The flexibility of the technology itself (e.g., round-the-clock availability, adjustable format or applications) is one of its most attractive features. The NYMTC Transportation Information

Exchange established 5 bulletin boards and 13 explanatory files, with the express belief that with time and user interaction, more bulletin boards and issue-specific files would be added.

**On-line information is changed as often as an agency wishes.** It should always carry the date when updated information was entered. The Caltrans home page shows the date of the page's latest update and includes a listing of the information most recently added to the page, with dates next to each item. Seeing how recently the information was added and how recently the whole page was updated adds credibility and a sense of immediacy. It also makes the on-line service more of a here-and-now resource.

**A home page can include information from outside an agency.** This is the concept of a "portal" in which "one-stop shopping" for information is available to the user. The portal manager collects and organizes similar information about a topic, providing cross-references to other websites and frequent updates of events and plans/projects. One service offered on the Caltrans home page is San Francisco Bay Area Transit Information. It is operated as a pubic service of the University of California, supported by student volunteers working to improve campus on-line services.

### When are they used most effectively?

**On-line services are best used to improve and expand opportunities for communication, to include dedicated or focused small groups, to bridge great distances, and for providing busy people basic information when they want it.** King County Metro Transit in Seattle has used them to give the riding public information about Metro's Rider-Link program. Integrating text, photographs, and video, they give potential riders information about fares, schedules, routes, and connections with other services. With this service, anyone in the Seattle area can get transit information from a desktop computer. In Lexington, Kentucky, the Metropolitan Planning Organization—Urban County Government—puts its TIP and Americans with Disabilities Act reports on electronic bulletin boards.

**Over time on-line services strengthen public involvement programs** as a means of communication and information exchange. Their sustained use increases as more people become accustomed to on-line services and their advantages.

### For further information:

- Alaska Home Page, http://www/dot.state.ak.us/
- Lexington Urban County Government, Division of Planning, (606) 258-3160; E-mail lsfusg.com
- Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (Houston), (713) 739-4000; E-mail webmaster@www.hou-metro.harris.tx.us
- New York Metropolitan Transportation Council, (212) 938-3300; bulletin board (212) 938-4371
- San Francisco County Transportation Authority, (415) 557-6850; E-mail sfcta@thecity.sfsu.edu/~sfctamel
- Texas Employment Commission, Public Information Office, (512) 463-2217; E-mail telnet://hi-tec.state.tx.us:23/
- Editor and Publisher, *Urban Transportation Monitor,* (703) 764-0512; E-mail drathbon@ix.netcom.com
- California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), (916) 654-5266; E-mail webadmin@dot.ca.gov
- North Central Texas Council of Governments, www.dfwinfo.com
- West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc., www.weact.com

## HOTLINES

### What are hotlines?

**Hotlines are agency telephone lines that receive inquiries** from the general public. They offer updated information on a project and general news regarding a special program, as well as taking specific inquiries from callers. The hotlines are staffed by a contact person or operate automatically with recorded messages.

**Most hotlines have the following basic features:**

- An established, well-publicized telephone number that operates—at a minimum—during business hours; many hotlines offer 24-hour toll-free communication access via an 800 number;
- An answering machine to receive calls when staff is unavailable;
- A staff person designated to receive and respond to calls; and
- A policy for ways in which agency staff should respond to calls.

### Why are they useful?

**Hotlines allow anyone with access to a telephone to contact an agency.** They are inexpensive and easy to use for informing a wide range of individuals about a project or planning process and for allowing them to ask questions or voice opinions. The Denver Regional Council of Governments uses a hotline to announce public meetings, hearings, and other events. The Maryland Department of Transportation (DOT) uses an 800 number during project development, and the Colorado DOT uses one during its planning process. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) uses a hotline to announce events and take questions and comments from the public.

**Hotlines are used to deliver recorded messages,** using one or more telephone lines. Such operations provide specific information to update community members on upcoming program events or announce recent project milestones and decisions. Agencies check the line regularly and make responses promptly. Messages are updated frequently, so that information is current and callers are confident that the agency is monitoring the system. Special technologies are available to enable people with hearing and speech disabilities to activate all hotline features. (See **People with Disabilities**.)

**Hotlines are a useful method of two-way communication.** They offer both information and an opportunity to register opinions or ask questions. Staff members give real-time responses. Answering machines should include a mechanism to record callers' names and addresses as well as questions or opinions. The Twin Cities Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) in Minnesota has an automated telephone response system. (See **Telephone Techniques**.)

### Do they have special uses?

**FAX-on-demand services can be provided by a hotline.** The Pennsylvania State Legislature provides a FAX-on-demand service to its members and plans to do so for constituents as well. This service provides a caller with facsimile copies of information (in this case, legislative bills) from a prepared menu. A person calling the hotline selects a desired document, provides a number for the receiving facsimile machine, then awaits the agency's transmission. This service eliminates delays that come from telephoning, requesting, and waiting for a mailing, or the redundancy of agency staff answering dozens of identical requests for a "hot" piece of information. For short documents, FAX-on-demand is cost-competitive with traditional mail services, particularly if transmissions are sent in off-hours, when telephone rates are lower.

**Hotlines are used prior to open houses or open forums.** In this way, they enable staff members to research answers and better prepare for an event. (See **Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses**.) New Jersey Transit uses a hotline for its Monmouth–Ocean–Middlesex major investment study to receive questions from the public prior to project open houses. Callers are asked to state their questions in detail, along with their names and the open house meeting they plan to attend.

#### Who participates? And how?

**Anyone with access to a telephone can use a hotline.** Blanket publicity is the key to making sure that the telephone number is well-known. New Jersey Transit hands out refrigerator magnets with its hotline number at all public events. Members of a project technical team hand out magnets when they meet people in the field.

**TDD (telecommunications device for the deaf) services make hotlines accessible** to people with hearing or speech disabilities. These callers contact a TDD-compatible hotline through their own service. The service then contacts the hotline. The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority regards this service as an essential component of its compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). (See **People with Disabilities**.)

**Staff people must be available to respond.** Hotlines with recorded messages do not offer callers immediate personal contact with a staff person. A member of a project or agency staff calls back once messages are retrieved. Answers to information requests need to be timely and responsive in content.

**To be effective, hotlines must be well-publicized.** Publicity is particularly crucial, since people must know about them and know the telephone numbers before they can make use of them. Publicity can be in print media, at meetings, and on public documents. (See **Public Information Materials**; **Media Strategies**.)

#### How do agencies use the output?

**Agencies gauge public opinion about a project.** They identify specific, recurring issues or questions. Calls received do not represent a random sample, but they are an indicator of the opinions within a community. If an agency receives several questions in a certain subject area, it can adjust its outreach program to improve general understanding of those issues. Changes may be in order in the content of analyses and plans to respond to participants' concerns. New Jersey Transit keeps a database of comments received on its hotline and at public events that can be referred to by subject area or geographic area.

**Recordings allow an agency to prepare a thoughtful response** rather than to put staff members in a position they might feel pressure to "shoot from the hip" (especially when dealing with an irate caller).

#### Who leads the technique?

**No special background is needed** to set up and operate a hotline. The actual setup is coordinated with a telephone company. Operation of the equipment is a fairly simple task, although the person who records the greetings should enunciate clearly.

**The person who answers the calls should be well-versed** in the specifics of the project and be able to answer follow-up questions. The North Carolina Department of Tourism and the Wisconsin DOT have trained State prisoners with no prior experience to staff hotlines. In North Carolina, the prisoners receive extensive preliminary training on the subject matter and on phone etiquette before staffing phone banks, and they are equipped with brochures and materials that assist them in answering questions. The system has been in operation for over five years, and its sponsors regard it as a success.

**What are the costs?**

**Hotline costs vary, depending on the complexity of the system,** use of a standard or toll-free telephone number, and the staffing plan. A hotline can be as simple as a telephone hooked to an answering machine, usually costing less than $100. The costs increase when additional branch lines are added, requiring specialized equipment.

**Staffing costs are linked to usage.** Staff members only need to dedicate time when they are actually on the telephone, with some additional time needed for documentation and other administrative tasks.

**How are hotlines organized?**

**Hotlines are easy to set up.** Most long-distance companies are able to provide assistance in organizing an answering system. Special equipment is required to set up the answering mechanism if multiple answering modules are to be employed. An alternative approach is to contract with a telephone company to provide the service and permit the agency to access it via an office telephone. This arrangement works only for a system with recorded messages. A toll-free number can be used, and telephone company's bill based on its usage, so operating costs are closely linked to effectiveness.

**An agency staff member checks messages** regularly to assure prompt responses. If staffing permits, a member of the project team is designated to answer calls as they come in, at least during business hours. This person should be well-versed in several aspects of the project so that she or he can answer a variety of questions. Project management may maintain a contact sheet of team members who can answer detailed questions about specific issues.

**How are they used with other techniques?**

**Hotlines are integrated with a variety of other techniques** in the public involvement toolbox. The Denver Regional Council of Governments and the Central Puget Sound RTA use hotlines, along with media advertisements and newsletters, to publicize public meetings and events. (See **Media Strategies; Public Information Materials**.) New Jersey Transit uses its hotline as an RSVP device for committee meetings. The hotline itself is advertised at these events and in project newsletters. A hotline can be used to build a project mailing list. (See **Mailing Lists**.)

**What are the drawbacks?**

**Callers may be frustrated if they receive a recorded message** rather than reaching a live staff member. An unhappy caller who is already upset with some aspect of an agency's program becomes more upset when unable to make immediate human contact. This problem is alleviated if a staff member answers the telephone during peak business hours or if the answering system at least gives callers the option of reaching a person. If a satisfactory response to the inquiry comes promptly, most callers overcome their initial frustration at not having their call answered in person.

**Hotlines require regular notice in agency newsletters and publications.** The Pennsylvania DOT has expressed some dissatisfaction with hotlines due to the constant publicity needed to make hotline use effective. Some agencies have been able to take advantage of word-of-mouth notification through community organizations, but this method should not be the sole means of publicizing a hotline. (See **Media Strategies**.)

**Are hotlines flexible?**

**Hotlines can be changed to meet specific functions.** Depending on need, a hotline provides a calendar of upcoming events, heralds project milestones, or offers a clearinghouse for questions from concerned local people. Frequent adjustments to hotlines assure the timeliness of information.

**When are they used most effectively?**

**Hotlines are most effective when integrated with other techniques.** They are used as part of an outreach program that includes a variety of printed, electronic, and personal media. Hotlines complement other outreach techniques, providing a means of building mailing lists and initiating more meaningful personal contacts.

**For further information:**

- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1357
- Denver Regional Council of Governments, Denver, Colorado, (303) 455-1000
- Maryland Department of Transportation, Baltimore, Maryland, (410) 859-7367
- New Jersey Transit, Newark, New Jersey, (201) 491-8077
- Pennsylvania State Legislature, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, (717) 783-6430
- Puget Sound Regional Council, Seattle, Washington, (206) 587-9487

## DROP-IN CENTERS

### What is a drop-in center?

**A drop-in center is a place for give-and-take exchange of transportation information** within a neighborhood or community. An easy-to-find location on home turf makes it convenient and easy for people to get information on a program or plan and to express their concerns and issues. A drop-in center offers informal, continuing contact with the community. It can have other names: field office, site office, or clearinghouse.

**A drop-in center has the following characteristics:**

- It is visible to the community—an office, storefront, or trailer in any visible, accessible, and convenient location within a project area or corridor.
- It can be mobile, using a van or trailer, to maximize contact with various stakeholders.
- It is open during specific, regular hours, not just occasionally or sporadically.
- It is usually in existence for a designated period of time, such as during the planning or construction phase of a project.
- It is usually staffed by planning, project, and/or liaison personnel knowledgeable about the area and the issues.

### Why is it useful?

**A drop-in center provides easy, convenient access to information** for people who might not otherwise participate in a planning process, particularly if doing so requires a long trip to an unfamiliar location. Informal, day-to-day contact between agency representatives and members of a community is easier and more likely if a drop-in center is established in a highly-visible area. In San Francisco, the Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) rented storefronts in shopping malls and maintained them from pre-scoping periods through construction of rapid transit lines.

**An agency makes a visible commitment to communication** to and from the community by going to the trouble and expense of establishing a drop-in center. Establishing a drop-in center may help convince the community that an agency wants to involve people in planning or project development. Sioux City, Iowa, set up a drop-in center in a downtown storefront and two malls for two weeks during its Vision 2020 planning process. The "design workshops" made it easy for people to talk to planners and designers about physical issues in the city and contribute ideas for change.

**Staff gets first-hand knowledge of the community's needs and concerns.** In Boston, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) established a drop-in center in Dudley Square—a transit node/shopping district—for a study of ways to improve transit services to that community and others. Planners and engineers were able to see and experience the concerns of residents and transit users and have regular, close contact with area residents and businesses.

**A drop-in center provides low-risk access for community residents** to get answers and make comments about a process and project. Many people are not comfortable asking questions at public meetings, and some do not want to make statements of support or rejection in front of their peers. (See **Public Meetings/Hearings**.) A drop-in center offers a low-key, easy way to ask questions or make comments.

**Does it have special uses?**

**A drop-in center is often used during high-visibility, controversial projects** with major impacts. In Colorado, the Department of Transportation (DOT) opened a drop-in center as part of a controversial highway project on State Highway 82. Input from it led to significant revisions over the three years of planning and environmental work.

**A drop-in center provides continuity and historical reference** in long-term, comprehensive projects. Boston's Central Artery/Tunnel project set up drop-in centers in three neighborhoods affected by the project. Established during planning and design, these offices will remain open through the ten years of construction.

**Drop-in centers help when an agency is based far from a project site.** A drop-in center is a cost-effective way to learn about a community and its concerns. It also gives the community better access to the agency. District offices that reach out and interact with community residents are good examples of permanent drop-in centers. The Arizona DOT set up a Tucson District Office as a drop-in center for the Department as a whole—thus enabling it to reach local constituents, monitor consultants, and improve its ability to communicate with local residents and businesses.

**A drop-in center in a seasonal community helps get stakeholders involved.** Tourists and other seasonal people often need more incentive and assistance to get involved.

**A drop-in center is used to break down barriers** between agencies and communities. A drop-in center in a neighborhood that is racially, ethnically, or economically different from an agency's home base helps show that the agency is serious about addressing community concerns. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.) In Denver, Colorado, the Regional Transit District (RTD) established a drop-in center in a low-income community through which a light rail line was being built. By being involved with the community and walking along the corridor regularly, the RTD staff was able to answer questions and reduce anxiety about the construction.

**Who participates? And how?**

**Any member of a community, particularly residents and businesses, can use a drop-in center.** An office located, for instance, on the first floor in an area with heavy foot traffic draws passers-by off the street.

**Neighborhood groups, other agencies, and consultants benefit** if the office is well-situated and well-supplied with materials and equipment. Sharing space for public purposes is cost-effective. A transit project drop-in center in San Francisco was shared with a community policing effort. The two groups provided visitors for each other, and the community policing unit provided security for the drop-in center.

**People stop by for information.** A sign or display in the window encourages people to walk in and give or get information. An all-day public forum in Little Rock, Arkansas, for the U.S. 67/167 major investment study featured information booths and exhibits in a storefront drop-in center. Although not permanent, the storefront location was well-publicized and highly visible.

**Meetings are held at the drop-in center.** Community groups can use it for their own meetings. This draws people to the center and introduces them to its resources. It also brings other agency representatives, elected officials, and interest groups into the neighborhood to help them understand its people and their issues. The MBTA's site office in Dudley Square was used for weekly Friday morning community/agency meetings for the duration of Phase I of the Replacement/ Transit Improvement Study.

**People use a drop-in center as a library/resource center** to review documents and plans and to get information. A drop-in center should be well-stocked with information pieces to give away, plans to review, documents to read and photocopy, and other materials explaining aspects of the project or process.

### How do agencies use it?

**A drop-in center gives agencies opportunities for broader outreach and communication.** With more frequent contact with the community through a drop-in center, an agency is in a better position to listen, address concerns, and counter misinformation. The Portland, Oregon, Tri-Met used a rehabilitated city bus in its planning for systemwide fare changes. The bus was driven to schools, business areas, and grocery stores, staying as long as a week in each location. Trained fare collectors ran the "Bus School," explaining the new fare information to the 150,000 people who used it. A video about the fare changes was also available.

**Agencies use drop-in centers to communicate one-on-one with people.** Specific abutter concerns or particular issues raised by interest groups are often easier to respond to face-to-face rather than at a public meeting.

### Who leads?

**Staffing patterns vary with the nature of a project.** Some drop-in centers are staffed by three or four people, while others have just one. To a large extent, staffing depends on the project's scale or the degree of controversy it engenders. It also varies with the level of participants' use.

**Drop-in center staff members must be knowledgeable** about the area and about technical issues and programs. They must be good listeners and be aware of and involved in community concerns. Drop-in centers set up by San Francisco's BART are generally staffed by one person from Community Services. Several times a week throughout a planning process, personnel from the design, engineering, and other technical sections staff the office to learn about the community's concerns first-hand.

**The staff must communicate concerns, questions, and sentiments of the community** to other project personnel. Staff members must be good communicators for liaison between the community and project officials. They should also be friendly and personable, not confrontational or defensive. Sometimes, drop-in centers are staffed by community members who provide local knowledge, input, and contacts. In Colorado, the staff in a drop-in center for the State Highway 82 Corridor Study included a municipal planner/liaison who assisted the DOT staff engineer.

**A drop-in center can be staffed by an existing neighborhood agency** familiar with the issues. If possible, that agency should be involved in transportation and able to answer questions about a proposal or direct people to a knowledgeable person.

**A drop-in center can function primarily as exhibit space** with no staff on hand other than a security guard or caretaker to protect the displays. However, most drop-in centers are professionally staffed, because interaction between staff and visitors is key to a successful planning process.

### What are the costs?

**The cost to establish and maintain a drop-in center can be high.** Assembling an office staff, renting space, installing a telephone, and supplying office equipment can be expensive, especially if the office is in existence for a long time. Creating an inviting, friendly atmosphere and maintaining a comfortable environment can also be expensive. Costs are partially allayed when unpaid public involvement volunteers help staff a center. (See **Speakers' Bureaus and Public Involvement Volunteers**.)

**A mobile drop-in center such as a trailer is somewhat cheaper.** A mobile center can be moved to different sites to reach more people. It can also be used on more than one project, if necessary. The Arkansas DOT has used trailers as drop-in centers for the past decade. During the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Planning Organization's visioning process, a "vision van" visited numerous neighborhoods, gathering and giving information. For minority areas (Spanish ethnic, African-American poor, elderly poor, and ethnically-mixed areas), the van was customized with visual, easy-to-read signs and displays.

**Large quantities of handout materials may be necessary.** The potentially high volume of visitors to a drop-in center requires multiple copies of many documents. Encouraging interest in a project leads to requests for more detail or different types of information.

### How are drop-in centers organized?

**A drop-in center can be established at the beginning of a planning process** when an agency needs to build relationships with the community. It is also used when interest in a process is at a peak. Peak interest may be generated as a project advances or media coverage increases. It can also arise in response to an issue or problem related to construction.

**A drop-in center can follow up through design and construction phases** of a project. A long-term center provides continuous contact with project personnel after a planning phase. For a $300 million highway project affecting Boston's Charlestown neighborhood, a drop-in center set up during the planning phase continued through construction. The center linked a highly-interactive planning and design process with the construction phase.

**The drop-in center must be easy to find and visible from the street.** Storefronts with first-floor access are ideal. A drop-in center must be an inviting and active place that welcomes the community. It must have adequate space for exhibits, reading tables, and a small project library. It should have room and chairs for small-group meetings.

**A drop-in center must have convenient hours.** It should not confine its hours to between 9:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M., for most people are not able to visit during those hours. Opening on weekends and evenings maximizes opportunities for community visits. Shorter weekday accessibility combined with some Saturday time keeps hours to 40 or under per week. The MBTA maintained a 40-hour-per-week drop-in center in Roxbury's Dudley Square during design and construction of a new transit station. The center was open during business hours, but because the area—a major shopping node adjacent to a large public housing development—is very busy all day long, many people visited. The center was used frequently for night meetings as well.

**The agency, its consultant, or members of the community can staff a drop-in center,** in any combination. A professional staff person should be present at all times. Community people may want to play a role in the center and could be remunerated for their time, if resources permit. A disinterested caretaker can be employed for emergencies only and instructed carefully on how to greet visitors.

**Preparation for opening day is essential.** The community should have 15–30 days' notice before a drop-in center is opened. The existence of a center must be publicized in many community publications and with signs in the windows. The office telephone must be operable, and its phone number must be publicized and accessible. A sufficient supply of materials (charts, maps, handouts, brochures, fact sheets) must be ready for the opening. On opening day the drop-in center can have a sign that is attractive and visible from a distance. Finally, opening day might include a special event to publicize the office and kick off the public involvement effort. (See **Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events**.)

**How are they used with other techniques?**

**A drop-in center can become a locus of activities for public involvement.** It is an ideal place for meetings and charrettes. (See **Charrettes**.) The center can host a hotline or other telephone techniques, such as voice mail for comments, fax-on-demand, and a menu system for project information. (See **On-line Services**.) Citizen training and coordinator-catalyst activities can be organized through a drop-in center. It often serves as a community planning center, clearinghouse, and location for open houses. (See **Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses**.) Teleconferencing centers can be set up at drop-in centers to allow people to communicate not only with the office staff but also with agency personnel in the main office. (See **Teleconferencing**.)

**A drop-in center is a source for information pieces.** Information is distributed via brochures, flyers, or posters, and displayed on computer terminals or interactive kiosks. (See **Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks.)** Information is augmented and detailed by staff. Public information materials include the address and telephone number of the drop-in center, so that people can call or stop by for additional information. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

**What are the drawbacks?**

**Rental costs can be high.** Renting a storefront is costly in a central, easily accessible area. Because a downtown, visible location in Basalt, Colorado, was so expensive, the Colorado DOT set up a drop-in center for the State Highway 82 Corridor Study in a suburban office park on the highway. An agency may be able to obtain donated space in the community.

**A drop-in center requires a commitment to keep it open** for a specified time period or as needed. This commitment includes staffing and running the office carefully to make it successful.

**Staffing needs can be daunting.** One or two full-time people may be needed over a significant period of time. The cost effectiveness should be explored before an agency makes a commitment to a drop-in center. One way to hold down staffing needs is to make the drop-in center available for fewer hours per week. Another is to utilize public involvement volunteers to help staff the center. (See **Speakers' Bureaus and Public Involvement Volunteers**.)

**A drop-in center can be poorly implemented, despite good intentions.** An "exhibit"-type drop-in center, with graphic displays and little else, is less flexible and interactive than a staffed office. A lightly staffed, under-maintained office will not help an agency or a project. A community is alienated by an unattractive drop-in center and an uninformed staff. A field office must have updated materials, displays that are understandable to lay people, and an interested staff.

**Location sometimes becomes an issue.** A neighborhood can be angered and feel betrayed by placement of a drop-in center in an adjacent community. Boston's Central Artery/Tunnel Project avoided controversy by setting up three drop-in centers simultaneously, even though construction would affect the areas at different times.

**The agency may want a high degree of control over information distribution** at a drop-in center. For a center to be successful, staff needs to be able to give information relatively freely without having to go through channels at the main office. If access to information is restricted or unreasonably slow, credibility suffers and community activity at the center drops off.

**Liability issues are a consideration.** Maintaining a drop-in center of any type carries with it a responsibility that the office be safe and clean for neighborhood visitors.

**Is a drop-in center flexible?**

**A drop-in center can be set up at any time during the process.** However, once established, it should be maintained for the specified time frame and at a consistent level of staffing. Setting up a center is less cost-effective late in a project or planning process.

**When is it used most effectively?**

**A drop-in center is effective in project development.** Many State DOTs use drop-in centers at project locations to give information to people and obtain comments and opinions about the project as it is detailed and more fully developed by the agency.

**A drop-in center is valuable as an introduction to the planning process.** In Boston, the MBTA Replacement/Transit Improvement Study drop-in center was set up at the very beginning of the planning process.

**A drop-in center is particularly useful where community residents are underrepresented** in transportation planning or project development. In Denver, certain minority and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, unaccustomed to major construction work, were concerned about upcoming light rail construction. The drop-in center helped a committee of local residents monitor construction.

**A drop-in center is used during design and construction stages** to maintain contact and build trust within a community. Continuity from planning through design and construction phases is an asset to an agency in terms of working closely with a community.

**For further information:**

- Arizona Department of Transportation, Tucson, Arizona, (602) 255-7768
- Arkansas Department of Transportation, (501) 569-2281
- Colorado Department of Transportation, Denver, Colorado, (303) 757-9266
- Denver Regional Transit District, Denver, Colorado, (303) 299-2401
- Little Rock Metropolitan Planning Organization, Little Rock, Arkansas, (501) 372-3300
- Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, Boston, Massachusetts, (617) 222-3366
- Massachusetts Highway Department, Boston, Massachusetts, (617) 973-7000
- Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Planning Organization, (202) 962-3200

**Chapter 3. GETTING FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS**

## B. DESIGNING PROGRAMS TO BRING OUT COMMUNITY VIEWPOINTS AND RESOLVE DIFFERENCES

Standard meeting formats are not always successful in bringing out a full range of community viewpoints or resolving differences of opinion. Sometimes participants need other ways to make their views known and to build consensus. The use of special techniques, some of which are costly and must be conducted by professional consultants, may be warranted in such situations.

Agencies can use very specific means to obtain feedback from participants and weigh them along with other people's positions. New techniques such as customer-based analysis help agencies determine the community's needs and what might satisfy those needs. Reliability of results, in terms of substance and statistical validity, depends on the method used.

When people make their views known but are unable to reach consensus on the issues, alternative dispute resolution techniques can help resolve the conflicts. Whether disagreements are settled without outside assistance (for example, by negotiation) or require a third party to mediate depends upon the complexity of the issues, the extent of the stalemate, and the skills and spirit with which all parties enter into the resolution process.

Ways to get direct feedback and resolve differences include:

- Focus groups;
- Public opinion surveys;
- Facilitation; and
- Negotiation and mediation.

## FOCUS GROUPS

### What is a focus group?

**A focus group is a tool to gauge public opinion.** Borrowed from the marketing and advertising industry, it frankly regards transportation as a product that can be improved and the public as customers for that product. It is a way to identify customer concerns, needs, wants, and expectations. It can inform sponsors of the attitudes and values that customers hold and why. It can help drive development of policies, programs, and services and the allocation of resources. Focus groups have been used by transportation officials in New York and Illinois as a way to determine public opinions on high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane additions and rail transit alternatives.

**A focus group is a small group discussion** with professional leadership. A carefully-selected group of individuals convenes to discuss and give opinions on a single topic. Participants are selected in two ways: random selection is used to assure representation of all segments of society; non-random selection helps elicit a particular position or point of view. A combination of selection techniques can result in a focus group of people well-versed in transportation issues along with those who are solely consumers of transportation services.

**A focus group has these basic features:**

- A carefully-crafted agenda, with five or six major questions at most;
- Emphasis on gathering perspectives, insights, and opinions of participants through conversation and interaction;
- Identification of major points of agreement and divergence of opinion;
- Minimal presentation of material to set context and subject;
- Gleaning, not shaping, of opinions or perspectives;
- Eight to twelve participants; and
- Understanding that the participants' role is to give personal insights and perspectives.

### Why is it useful?

**A focus group leader explores attitudes in depth** through follow-up questions. It offers an opportunity to get behind people's expressed attitudes and assess policy directions and program objectives. It is a chance to review allocation of resources. It helps confirm or deny established goals or set new directions.

**Informality encourages full participation.** The small size of the group lowers barriers to speaking out. A focus group is a place for people to speak out without criticism of their comments. Spontaneity in responding produces fresh information. Participants are not required to prepare for the discussion. Many focus groups have found that participants readily volunteer ideas and comments that have not been recorded elsewhere. For example, focus groups were used in Los Angeles to find out why commuters were not taking advantage of free transit passes.

**A focus group supplements other forms of public involvement.** It serves the narrowly-defined need for direct and informal opinion on a specific topic. For broad participation from all community residents on the same or other topics, alternative forms of involvement are used.

### Does a focus group have special uses?

**A focus group provides community input from otherwise unrepresented individuals.** Residents from specific areas within an urban region can be heard. Geographically-based opinions and issues can be more readily defined and discerned. The Colorado Department of Transportation (DOT) used 20 regional focus groups for detailed discussion of issues following a statewide community survey

**A focus group can marshal expert opinion on a plan.** Project California used six focus groups of engineers, systems analysts, regulatory officials, and other specialists to evaluate guidelines for encouraging technological development, including electric vehicles, intelligent transportation systems (ITS), and the mass transit industry in the State.

**An agency can use focus groups to compare opinions.** In preparations for Chicago's Downtown Plan, opinions of Loop residents were compared with those of suburbanites; results suggested new directions in commuting and in aligning the proposed downtown light-rail line. Focus groups can also compare opinions that are internal and external to an organization.

### Who participates? And how?

**Focus group members are selected by the sponsor.** Depending on the goals to be achieved, a focus group is heterogeneous (with a variety of people from different backgrounds within a single geographic area) or homogeneous (with separate focus groups for residents, businesses, and institutions, as in, for example, Boston's Back Bay Transportation Strategies project). Members may be randomly selected or invited from previously identified, non-random groups.

**Community residents participate by stating opinions.** Individuals within the group may react to others' opinions or bring up their own ideas. The facilitator of the group guides discussion to cover all agenda items and assure that all individuals get a chance to speak.

### How do agencies use the output?

**A focus group produces opinions from local people.** For the Massachusetts Turnpike, focus groups helped identify user requests and needs for park-and-ride lots. The output of the group meeting is always recorded in written form for the sponsor's use. In addition to the written document, some agencies use videotapes of the proceedings. Some use mirrored one-way windows to observe the focus group in process.

**Focus group information supplements other community input.** A purpose for the group is clearly identified beforehand. Its agenda fits closely within the information needs of a larger project or program. Opinions derived from the group inform the larger effort. For Chicago's Downtown Plan, the City used four focus groups—from in-town and the suburbs—to find out what people liked and didn't like about downtown Chicago.

**A focus group is tailored to assess public reactions.** Because it typically deals with broad policy or program goals and impacts on the community, it does not dwell on technical issues. It helps agencies or organizations understand overall public reactions to programs or policies at a single point in time. For example, in the San Francisco area focus groups were used to obtain commuter perceptions about ridesharing.

### Who leads a focus group?

**A focus group needs a facilitator.** The facilitator is essential to hold the group to the agenda and elicit opinions from each participant. In some cases, the facilitator is essential to keep a single participant from dominating the proceedings. In other instances, opinions may be lost in a sea of anecdotes unless the facilitator firmly steers the group toward the agenda. (See **Facilitation**.)

**A facilitator needs guidance on the agenda and purpose** of the focus group. Sample questions for the group can be provided to the facilitator by the sponsor. The sponsor may be present at the group in a non-participatory function or as an outside observer. During a break in the discussion, the sponsor may confer with the facilitator to assure that all agenda topics are covered.

### What are the costs?

**A focus group is relatively inexpensive** compared with the costs and effort involved in administering a full opinion survey. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.) It consumes less time in both implementation and analysis. Extensive statistical analysis is not required, because a focus group provides only qualitative information. However, agencies often choose an outside firm to provide a paid, neutral facilitator. Public agencies tend not to pay participants, in contrast with private market research organizations.

**A focus group need not be time-consuming.** Meetings are seldom longer than two or three hours. For the participants' convenience, it may be held after work hours. Schedules can be tailored to fit needs of participants and the sponsoring agency. If required, a focus group can be organized within a matter of weeks following a decision to proceed. It takes a moderate to long amount of time to select, invite, and confirm participants. The time required to prepare focus group agendas and questions is not major if an experienced facilitator is available to work with the sponsor.

### How is a focus group organized?

**A focus group is integrated with a larger program.** It is used to inform executives and staff of public reactions to ongoing work. Thus, it grows from the needs of the larger work and provides supplemental input and information to it. For example, in Florida focus groups were used to define the preferences of commuters and travel-related businesses for community real-time traffic information.

**Policy direction within an agency is required.** A sponsoring agency selects the agenda, participants, and facilitator and may designate questions to be addressed by participants. A meeting site must be selected and may need to be on neutral ground if the sponsor is not to be identified.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**A focus group cannot replace other techniques** of public involvement, but it can provide input. It is used to identify concerns and issues prior to implementing a media strategy. (See **Media Strategies**.) It is used to refine requirements for transportation alternatives and can be repeated at intervals to gauge changes in public opinion. It provides a qualitative supplement to quantitative community surveys. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

### What are the drawbacks?

**A focus group provides solely qualitative responses.** It is not statistically representative of society at large. While it fits the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act's (ISTEA's) requirement of giving people an opportunity to comment on a project, a focus group includes only a sample of the community. As a one-time event, it does not meet Federal standards for continuing public involvement and cannot replace a more formal process that records each participant's comments and presents all of them to the appropriate authorities.

**A focus group brings no public consensus.** Potentially opposing groups do not deliberate important issues. The goal is to obtain opinions—not disseminate information. Specific viewpoints of individuals or the groups they represent are the principal product of a focus group meeting. Thus, the results are used as a guideline for further thinking and analysis.

**For further information:**

- Boston Transportation Department (Back Bay Transportation Strategies), (617) 635-3086
- Chicago City Planning Department (Downtown Plan), (312) 744-4142
- Chicago Regional Transportation Authority (South Corridor Transit Study), (312) 917-0700
- Colorado Department of Transportation Long-range Plan, (303) 757-9266
- New Jersey Department of Transportation Long-range Plan, (609) 530-2866
- New York Department of Transportation Region 10, (518) 360-6006

## PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS

### What are public opinion surveys?

**Public opinion surveys assess widespread public opinion.** An agency administers a survey to a sample group of people via a written questionnaire or through interviews in person, by phone, or by electronic media. The limited sample of people is considered representative of a larger group.

**Survey results show public positions or reactions to agency actions** and gather information for use in the process. Surveys can be formal (scientifically assembled and administered) or informal. For example, in a series of formal surveys, voters in the Puget Sound region (Seattle, Washington) were asked to say how they would vote on various possible elements in a regional transit system. In an informal survey, the Ohio Department of Transportation (DOT) attached a questionnaire to its draft statewide transportation plan, *Access Ohio,* to solicit comments from reviewers. During preparation of Oregon's transportation plan, public opinion surveys were made available in the policy element draft and at public meetings.

**Scientific surveys give broadly applicable results.** The Puget Sound surveys mentioned above, for example, were based on a random sample of voters carefully chosen to be statistically representative of all voters. Informal surveys tend to bring responses from a self-selected group of people—those who are more personally interested in specific transportation issues than the population at large. However, informal surveys can be designed to reach a broader group than those who attend public meetings.

### Why are they useful?

**Surveys portray community perceptions and preferences.** They can accurately report on what people know or want to know. They test whether a plan or plan element is acceptable to the public as it is being developed, or test an agency's perception of what people are thinking and reinforce decisions made through participatory programs. They can identify concerns before a public vote is scheduled, as was done in the Seattle area.

**Surveys can test whether opinions are changing,** if repeated after an interval of time. Results can be useful to the leaders of the process or to elected officials and community leaders. Results are used to guide efforts to meet public concerns and develop effective messages for public information and for a media strategy. They give meaningful clues to the likely level of public acceptance of a plan, program, or process. The Puget Sound surveys spanned a five-year period.

**Better information enhances an agency's understanding** not only of public concerns but also of the process of public involvement. An agency can respond to survey results by providing missing or inadequate information that did not get through to the public or was misinterpreted. This adds to the substantive discussion of issues deemed important by respondents.

### Do they have special uses?

**Surveys focus public thoughts about a service** and provide a context for an opinion. A public opinion survey in Chicago found that public attitudes about transit are not only a function of services received but are also strongly affected by people's feelings about crime, government in general, public civility, and the neighborhoods where a trip begins or ends. Public opinion surveys were distributed at the Delaware DOT's public "exhibits" of progress on a highway project. The surveys helped the DOT determine what attendees thought of ideas under discussion and present project issues in ways that engaged them.

**Surveys indicate preferences of segments of the population.** In Utah the Wasatch Front Regional Council and the Utah Transit Authority conducted a survey of more than 2,000 individuals to determine transportation preferences for disabled persons. Santa Barbara, California, used a public opinion survey in conjunction with the update of its general plan to identify issues of particular concern to Hispanic and African-American business people and community leaders. Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, used a visual preference survey to determine physical aspects and patterns that residents preferred and to show how those values could be reflected in an overall plan for the area.

### Who participates? And how?

**Surveys directly involve a relatively small population** of a State or region. In turn, that population is involved only in a one-way participatory effort, without the opportunity for give-and-take with the sponsoring agency. For surveys with a randomized sample of the population, chosen in a statistically-valid way, the sample can be stratified to include only people within a specific geographic area, income group, or other category of people from whom information is desired. Although it never replicates the overall population precisely, it remains statistically valid.

**Respondents provide a composite view of the larger population.** In a scientific, statistically-valid survey, answers are expanded to reflect what the population as a whole might have answered if they had all been asked the survey questions. Informal surveys can never be viewed as the basis for such an expansion. However, large informal surveys can generally indicate the predominant features of public opinion. In an informal survey in Atlanta, nearly 1,500,000 people were reached through an overall media strategy; more than 10,000 people responded by filling out questionnaires on the regional visioning program.

### Who leads public opinion surveys?

**Public opinion surveys can be led by trained agency staff people.** Often, particularly for statistically valid surveys, outside help is appropriate because of the survey's complexity. Professional survey takers also help an agency move expeditiously and achieve the necessary accuracy to assure the public that results are valid and unbiased.

### What are the costs?

**Informal public opinion surveys are relatively inexpensive.** They can be prepared by agency staff and administered at meetings or as part of a document. But they can be useful. The Albany, New York, Metropolitan Planning Organization took a survey to solicit comments on the structure of the public involvement program; the results showed that multiple techniques of public involvement in planning would be the most appropriate course of action.

**Scientific surveys are expensive** because of the complexity of drawing a sample population or structuring the questions asked. Time is also a significant factor because of survey preparation and administration. Collecting, transcribing, and summarizing data becomes increasingly expensive as the number of questions or size of the sample increases. A carefully-selected sample reflecting many types of interests within the larger population takes additional time and money. Also, a survey cannot stand alone; it must be accompanied by other public involvement techniques, each with its own cost.

### How are public opinion surveys organized?

**An agency ascertains the need for information** and then determines the most appropriate means of getting it. If an agency needs opinions about a planning effort or project that is getting underway, for instance, it needs to determine whether formal or informal comments are most appropriate. In part, this decision turns on whether the agency wants opinions relatively quickly from known participants (an informal questionnaire) or needs considered opinions from groups that are not ordinarily informed or involved in transportation processes (a more formal questionnaire and sample selection process).

**An agency determines the types of questions to be asked.** Opinions about the process can be elicited from those surveyed—its overall approach, its progress to date, the direction it is taking, and potential next steps. Also, opinions can be directed toward considering aspects of a project—the corridor characteristics, alternatives under investigation, etc. Whether the questions are asked of known participants or people unknown to the agency, it is important to frame them in a clear, unambiguous manner. Sometimes questions need to be in languages other than English or be accessible to persons with disabilities. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups; People with Disabilities**.)

**An agency establishes the survey questionnaire.** Public opinion surveys are taken in a variety of ways. A simple method is the telephone interview. More elaborate methods, involving printed questionnaires, need extensive preparation and testing to avoid ambiguities or misunderstandings when received by a community respondent.

### How are they used with other techniques?

**Public opinion surveys supplement other techniques.** For example, results of surveys can provide grist for discussion in civic advisory committees, charrettes, or brainstorming sessions. (See **Civic Advisory Committees; Charrettes; Brainstorming**.) Survey results can be a focus of a video production or a facilitated meeting. (See **Video Techniques; Facilitation**.) Surveys usually produce quantitative results that can be counterbalanced by the qualitative results obtainable from a focus group. (See **Focus Groups**.) Public opinion surveys should be conducted so as to be accessible and understandable to people with disabilities. (See **People with Disabilities**.)

**Informal surveys may be included in public information materials,** especially if distributed through local newspapers. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

### What are the drawbacks?

**Surveys are not interactive.** Used in isolation, surveys produce data, not a dialogue between the community and an agency or between groups of people. The information in a questionnaire should be neutral to allow respondents to make up their own minds about a question or concern. Surveys can spread misinformation if poorly or ambiguously drafted.

**A public opinion survey is sometimes difficult to undertake** for some stakeholder groups for certain topics. Some people prefer one-on-one discussions of issues that affect them, while others prefer surveys because they do not have time to go to meetings.

**Survey results may not reflect the entire community's views,** especially in the case of informal surveys.

### When are public opinion surveys most effective?

**Public opinion surveys can be taken at almost any time** during a process. Used carefully and repeated over time, they keep an agency well-informed of changes in public knowledge of a planning effort or project development and people's preferences within that knowledge. For example, the Seattle Regional Transit Project surveyed voters in two "waves" about 18 months apart to determine awareness of the project, overall support, and funding, phasing, and location preferences.

**For further information:**

- Albany, New York, Metropolitan Planning Organization, (518) 458-2161
- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1357
- Delaware Department of Transportation, (302) 739-4348
- Ohio Department of Transportation, (614) 466-7170
- Utah Department of Transportation, (801) 965-4359

## FACILITATION

### What is facilitation?

**Facilitation is guidance of a group** in a problem-solving process. The group leader—a facilitator—is neutral in regard to the issues or topics under discussion. The facilitator works with the group as a whole and provides procedural help in moving toward a conclusion. For example, facilitation of community meetings on the proposed Monongahela Valley Expressway between Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Morgantown, West Virginia, led to an agreement by the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission to divide the project into separate, more manageable segments.

**It is managed by the facilitator with the consent of the participants.** The goal of both the facilitator and the group is to arrive at a collective decision through substantive discussions.

**Facilitation leads toward empowerment and consensus.** To the extent that a group is representative of stakeholders, the conclusion is a position or a level of consensus it has jointly achieved.

**Facilitation has these basic features:**

- Group energies are focused on a task or a limited issue;
- Discussion is structured without controlling what is said;
- Discussion is kept to the topic, with new issues identified and reformulated as they arise;
- Participation in discussion is equalized; and
- The facilitator probes for consensus or agreement on issues.

### Why is it useful?

**Facilitation brings out all points of view** represented in the group. In a small group, a facilitator can encourage discussion from all participants. (See **Small Group Techniques**.) Sharing viewpoints stimulates discussion. Given a lack of full expression of views, a facilitator can ask hypothetical questions to get discussion moving. (See **Negotiation and Mediation**.)

**Time is often saved through facilitation.** Ongoing differences of opinion or stalemate challenge a neutral facilitator. The application of facilitation skills is useful to break a stalemate and allow a group to move toward consensus. In Washington State, completion of I–90 depended on facilitation of agreement between the Department of Transportation and a neighborhood group looking for mitigation of nighttime construction.

**Facilitators works for an open process.** They ensure that the group is fully aware of the issues prior to discussion of steps to be taken. Facilitators assures that education on technical issues takes place as appropriate and seek out the stances of participants on those issues. They ensure that points are clarified and elicit follow-up on questions. Opinions are respected by facilitators, who assure that all members of the group are respectful of each other's views.

### Does it have special uses?

**Facilitation indicates a commitment to action.** A facilitated meeting takes on an importance a regular meeting does not have. Its designation indicates an agency's commitment to offer a way of overcoming a specific obstacle. Its existence demonstrates a commitment to involving local people in the decision-making process. It demonstrates that the sponsor is open to taking public comment to heart.

**Facilitation is flexible.** It can be used at almost any time to assist a group in surmounting an obstacle to collaborative decision-making. It can be used to discuss either small or overarching issues. It can be used for comprehensive planning issues, project-level decision-making, policy review, or detailed design.

### Who participates? And how?

**Representatives of community groups or stakeholders** are invited to participate in a facilitated group. A widespread diversity in viewpoints is expected to exist on issues. This diversity must be represented to ensure full discussion. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups; People with Disabilities**.)

**No special training of participants is required.** Many individuals within a group may have a depth of interest in issues being discussed. This interest may range from a broad, long-term view of the issues within a geographic area to a specific and more short-term view of issues surrounding a project or program.

**People participate by examining and discussing issues with others in the group.** Discussions are in as much depth as available time permits. A facilitator helps a group work within the time available to it. Typically, major points of discussion are recorded by an individual assigned the task. The facilitator may not be able to take minutes; another individual can be assigned the task.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Facilitation is aimed toward a product,** which may be reactions to agency policies or proposals or a consensus on an action to be taken. For example, meetings to develop a regional transit plan for Seattle were facilitated with professional assistance hired by an agency.

**Group consensus is used as input to an agency's work.** A facilitator's goal is to bring a group together on an action or issue and find points of agreement. She or he may be able to craft a compromise position through give-and-take and over a relatively short period of time.

### Who facilitates?

**A neutral facilitator is selected by the sponsor** to lead the group. The facilitator must be accepted by the group as unbiased, constructive, and fair. She or he is an experienced professional familiar with assisting group discussions via group processes, communication, and conflict resolution skills. The facilitator elicits both facts and opinions and helps the group distinguish between them. It is helpful if the facilitator is also intimately familiar with the subject matter of the discussion.

**In this capacity, a facilitator does not express a personal opinion.** Neutrality is maintained at all times. If an opinion is requested, it can be given, but prior to offering the opinion the facilitator announces that she or he is stepping out of the neutral role. At no time should a facilitator make a decision for the group. The “what I'm hearing” technique brings discussion back to the agenda and checks on whether people are in agreement.

**A facilitator leads the meeting in an informal manner.** Humor is helpful in providing a relaxed atmosphere. A positive attitude is essential, as is uncritical recording of ideas from participants.

### What are the costs?

**Facilitation requires agency support staff.** Minutes must be taken. A site for the meeting must be selected. Agency representatives typically attend to provide responses to participants' questions. In some instances, an agency needs to carefully explain its position or analysis, requiring staff to be available.

**Material needs are minimal,** but a quiet meeting room is mandatory. A flip chart is essential to write down participants' comments. Background information must be prepared as appropriate so that participants can quickly grasp the issues. Written materials dealing with contextual issues may be needed at hand to supplement information provided to the participants at the meeting.

### How is facilitation organized?

**The sponsor determines the need for facilitation.** A divisive issue may call for facilitation. For example, the Virginia Department of Transportation (DOT) used a facilitator to work on resolving potential conflicts with neighborhood organizations. The sponsor selects a neutral person for the role, sometimes from within the agency but more usually from an outside source.

**The sponsor determines the meeting's agenda and schedule.** An agenda may cover one or more issues to be discussed. The sponsor meets with the facilitator to discuss the agenda and approach to be taken within the meeting. A site is selected, typically in a space that participants perceive to be neutral.

**The facilitator conducts the meeting.** The sponsor does not attempt to control the direction of the meeting once it is underway. The facilitator conducts the meeting toward its stated goals and may add questions to elicit responses from individuals. A facilitator records participants' comments on a flip chart or butcher paper without editorializing.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**Facilitation supplements other techniques.** A facilitator can assist an established civic advisory committee to progress toward its goals. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.) Facilitation is a requirement for a charrette or a focus group and can also be used in brainstorming or visioning sessions. (See **Charrettes; Focus Groups; Brainstorming; Visioning**.) It is typically used in a collaborative task force. (See Collaborative Task Forces.) Facilitation can be used in discussions associated with transportation fairs. (See **Transportation Fairs**.) Video can be used to record facilitated proceedings. (See **Video Techniques**.) In Idaho, facilitators helped with both focus groups and a civic advisory committee working on the initial efforts in a regional long-range plan.

### What are the drawbacks?

**Facilitation must be done by a neutral person.** When a group perceives that a facilitator is biased, it feels manipulated by an agency. In practice an impartial person may need to be sought from outside an agency—which raises the expense of conducting a meeting. A respected community member is often an appropriate choice.

**There is a limit on the number of interests that can be facilitated in a meeting.** The sponsor of the process must recognize these limits in establishing the group.

**Opponents may refuse to consider each other's ideas,** despite the presence of an experienced facilitator. People who feel they are being controlled or patronized are likely to withdraw from full participation. Agency staff who feel that the process is leading nowhere may not respond appropriately to questions from participants.

**Time constraints work against facilitation.** A short meeting may not provide enough time for a full discussion of the issue at hand. Participants feel short-changed if insufficient time is allotted to discussion of a controversial issue.

**For further information:**

- Idaho Department of Transportation, (208) 334-4444
- Maine Department of Transportation, (207) 287-3131
- Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission, (717) 939-9551
- Virginia Department of Transportation, (804) 786-2935
- Washington State Department of Transportation, (206) 440-4696

## NEGOTIATION AND MEDIATION

### What are negotiation and mediation?

**Negotiation and non-binding mediation are alternative dispute resolution (ADR) processes designed to resolve a conflict** between parties unable to reach agreement. ADR procedures aim to resolve conflict before it moves toward the courts. Agency staff can use some ADR procedures; others require outside experts, often called third-party neutrals. In some ADR procedures such as binding arbitration, third parties make decisions. Binding procedures, however, are not appropriate to transportation planning and project development. This report deals only with *non-binding* techniques.

**The major ADR procedures suited to transportation decision-making are negotiation, facilitation, and non-binding mediation.**

- ***Negotiation is the process of bargaining between two (or more) interests.*** It can be conducted directly by the concerned parties or can take place during the mediation process. In negotiation, the concerned parties meet to resolve a dispute. In Nevada and California, after a suit was filed against the Lake Tahoe-area Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), environmentalists, developers, and other participants negotiated in workshops and small meetings to develop mutually acceptable environmental standards and long-range plans. The city of Salamanca, New York, negotiated with representatives of the Seneca Indian Nation to reach consensus on steps to provide economic development opportunities for the tribe. (See **Small Group Techniques**.)

- ***Facilitation refers to skilled leadership focused on meeting process and organization.*** Agency staff or third parties can facilitate. Because it is broadly applicable to public involvement situations other than dispute resolution, facilitation is presented in this volume as a separate technique. (See **Facilitation**.)

- ***Mediation uses a trained, impartial third party to help reach consensus on substantive issues at disagreement*** among conflicting parties in public involvement. A mediator can be from within or outside an agency but must be neutral and perceived as such by all parties. While mediation can be binding or non-binding, only non-binding mediation is considered here. Non-binding mediation generally has the following characteristics:

    - A neutral third party, impartial and unaligned with any side of the conflict, is appointed to find consensus; the third party has no decision-making authority;
    - All interested parties are included, by agreement;
    - The parties are asked to participate voluntarily;
    - Opportunities are offered for local people, as well as officials or leaders, to be heard;
    - Community people receive responses to their suggestions or concerns;
    - The parties work toward reaching consensus; the third party makes suggestions for possible compromise positions and otherwise helps the parties negotiate;
    - If agreement is reached, it is usually considered a commitment on both sides;
    - Written agreements, memoranda, meeting minutes, or reports are usually included; and
    - Sessions are typically confidential and often protected by State statute as such.

**Mediation and facilitation have some similarities but are not the same.** Facilitation is similar to mediation in that participants work toward mutual understanding with the help of a leader. However, facilitation works toward building consensus within a meeting, right from the beginning of the process, while mediation is usually employed when an impasse is reached.

**Why are they useful?**

**Sometimes consensus-building efforts lead to an impasse.** This is especially true for controversial or complex projects. In such cases, both agencies and participants need another means to determine which way to go.

**Mediation and negotiation take a problem-solving approach rather than an adversarial one.** The process helps participants:

- Resolve differences without court suits;
- Facilitate agreement and address primary concerns of involved local residents, abutters, and/or interested groups;
- Work together to ease implementation of a plan or project;
- Obtain agreement without an agency imposing an unpopular or polarizing decision; and
- Deal directly with a project proponent or agency as an equal participant.

**Mediation helps reach consensus on controversial transportation plans and projects.** It is often used in construction disagreements with contractors. Outside the field of transportation, examples of how mediation has been used range from child custody disputes to conflicts over siting hazardous waste or energy facilities. In transportation, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (DOT) has used mediation for several years. As one example, for Philadelphia's new interstate Route I–476, an outside consultant worked to develop agreements between community people and the agency regarding environmental and mitigation issues that had stalled the project.

**Mediation and negotiation provide a structured, semi-formal, and orderly way for people to find agreement.** They require no one to commit to an outcome that may be unpredictable. The consensus reached through them is non-binding on participants.

**Alternatives to mediation and negotiation are more costly and time-consuming.** A dispute resolution process can avoid time wasted in unproductive or acrimonious debate at meetings, litigation, major redrafts of plans when they are nearly complete, or staff effort spent rebuilding agency credibility.

**Do they have special uses?**

**Negotiation is especially useful in informal situations**—to resolve differences among parties, avoid engaging a broader group with local disputes, or address several aspects of a dispute simultaneously. Negotiation can be brought into a process at any time but is most effective before polarization. In Hampton, Virginia, a negotiation process to find consensus on a new connector road was established. Participants were trained in the steps of the process. When the staff was further trained in facilitation and collaborative methods, consensus-building became a regular element in Hampton's planning efforts.

**Mediation, by contrast, has a special and distinctive use:** it is generally employed when a process has reached an impasse or major breakdown. Mediation has been employed in transportation projects and long-range planning studies where profound disagreement has occurred. In the Boston, Massachusetts, Central Artery/Tunnel Project, the process resolved an impasse over a critical river crossing design, leading to adoption of an alternate plan. In Fort Worth, Texas, a mediator was hired after local groups and residents filed suit over the findings of an environmental impact study for expansion of I–30. The process resulted in more highway options, which were broadly supported within the community and carried forward into further study.

**Who participates? And how?**

**It is essential to include all potential stakeholders** in establishing a dispute resolution process. Stakeholders may include neighborhood residents, local business people, abutters, regional interest groups, public officials, and agencies. Failure to include all pertinent interests undoes consensus. A person or group whose position has been ignored can challenge the legitimacy of the process. Parties need to be identifiable and willing to participate. All participants must feel some pressure to agree and must have concluded that they cannot do better by steam rolling each other or going outside the transportation process by, for example, appealing to the political process.

**Parties in a dispute resolution process can appoint or elect representatives** in order to avoid large, unwieldy meetings. This requires that groups be sufficiently well-organized to identify leaders who can speak for the group credibly. In Silver Spring, Maryland, representatives of project opponents and proponents, the county, and a developer came to the table to resolve a dispute involving a proposed downtown shopping and office development. The size of the small, representative group helped to resolve the issues quickly.

**The representative process requires a high degree of cooperation and trust** in selecting individuals to serve. A strong neighborhood group in Minneapolis, Minnesota, served as the focus of leadership meetings with police and other agencies to address drug and crime problems in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Churches represented many residents and created a focus for consensus building in the Binghamton, New York, downtown revitalization project, and in the Fredericksburg, Virginia, homeless shelter program.

**Mediation usually consists of a series of meetings. Negotiation can consist of one or more meetings among parties.** All participants are accorded equal status in the process and are encouraged to present their views on each issue. For maximum success and effective participation, the process must strive for:

- Regular and timely opportunities for participation;
- An on-going commitment from each participant to attend meetings;
- Full and honest expression of issues and concerns;
- Complete willingness to listen to other participants; and
- Agreement on the process and basic guidelines for managing it.

**An agency sponsors and/or participates in a mediation or negotiation process.** Agency staff members develop and use negotiation and consensus-building skills as a regular part of their public involvement practice. Agency staff people also are potential third-party mediators, although they should not serve in situations where their neutrality on the issues is in question. Effective professional negotiators focus on meeting the parties' underlying interests. By doing so, they open up many areas for creative resolution. Amateur negotiators commonly understand negotiation as the hard-nosed exchange of positions in which one party starts low, the other high, and each tries to give as little as possible in the process of reaching an agreeable middle ground. Professional negotiators avoid this win-lose approach and strive for win-win solutions. The Pennsylvania DOT has on-call mediation consultants who are called in as necessary. Its project engineers are aware that they can request assistance on an as-needed basis from agency headquarters when projects begin to encounter obstacles, and that expert consultants can be assigned to resolve conflicts, if approved by agency officials.

**How do agencies use the output?**

**The goal of all dispute resolution is to reach a publicly-supported decision** by addressing and resolving pertinent concerns. Thus, the result should be consensus on a course of action, including the possibility of not going ahead with a plan.

**Producing long-term results requires on-going leadership.** While many uses of dispute resolution center around a particular plan, sometimes mediation and negotiation are used as needed over a longer period of time to keep a process moving forward. For 23 years, a mayoral advisory board in Indianapolis, Indiana, has used negotiation and mediation by group leaders to resolve competing community objectives regarding allocation of resources and to foster economic growth and civic expansion.

**Mediation can resolve impasses over controversial projects.** In Chapel Hill, North Carolina, a third-party mediator (who was also a local architect versed in design concepts) worked with neighbors, city officials, and business people to develop a consensus design for a new McDonald's restaurant opposed by the community.

**Mediation or negotiation can be used in addressing priorities** for capital improvements. In New Jersey, mediation of a State Department of Transportation road widening project in Montgomery Township successfully resulted in a plan using staggered phases of implementation spread over several years.

**Mediation has helped in developing policies for new regulations** by bringing opposing sides together and avoiding obstacles and potential disputes. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency often uses a mediator to develop consensus over regulations among a range of public and private interests, for example in the areas of water and air quality.

**Who leads these techniques?**

**In mediation, an outside party or someone from within an agency serves as a third party,** provided she or he is neutral and is perceived as such by all parties. The individual should have the following qualifications:

- Training in dispute resolution;
- Experience from many possible fields—including public involvement, law, business management, planning, and training;
- No stake in the outcome;
- A relationship of trust with all parties to a dispute;
- Strict impartiality and fairness; and
- Ability to make suggestions and to find areas of agreement.

**A mediator frequently creates a draft working document** that is modified through discussions with all parties to reflect developing points of consensus.

**A skilled mediator should be able to work on a single issue** on a short-term basis, with the possible option to remain involved as a monitor of future activity or implementation. In Eugene, Oregon, the mayor hired an experienced mediator to assist in developing more positive relationships between city agency staff and minority community residents. After a two-day process filled with frank and open discussion, strong relationships were formed between previously unconnected staff and community people.

**Negotiation is led by agency staff or management.** The chief qualification is a good understanding of interest-based negotiations—whether from training or experience.

**Trained consensus-builders and mediators are available throughout the United States.** Agency staff can also be trained to develop their facilitation, negotiation, and consensus-building skills. The North Front Range Transportation and Air Quality Council—the MPO for Fort Collins, Colorado, area—hired a consultant to train the staff in mediation and consensus-building.

**How are these processes organized?**

**The first activity of any mediation or negotiation is conflict assessment.** The third party or agency staff needs to address such questions as: is the conflict resolvable? and what are possible resolution approaches?

**Further preparation is crucial.** In beginning a process it is essential to:

- Identify essential participants;
- Afford all participants an equal standing;
- Structure sessions to encourage participation;
- Find a neutral location for meetings, probably not in an agency's headquarters;
- Achieve consensus among participants on the agenda;
- Find convenient times for meetings; and
- Provide sufficient time between sessions to do follow-up work and analysis;

**A successful negotiation might be completed in a very short time**—as little as an hour for a very specific issue with a small number of stakeholders, where generally positive, trusting relationships are already in place.

**For a complex mediation, many months may be required,** and large complex transportation issues involving many stakeholders may take a year or two or more. A meeting every two to four weeks for two to four hours is a common scenario. Time between sessions is often needed for staff to modify plans or conduct additional analysis to respond to participants' concerns.

**In mediation, the work varies but usually includes the following steps:**

- Open the discussion and outline the process;
- Agree on the scope of effort and roles of participants;
- Reach consensus on the agenda among participants;
- Review the ground rules (one person speaks at a time, etc.);
- Ask all sides to present their viewpoints, perceptions of the issues, and reasons for the dispute;
- Help people express their concerns;
- State all the issues;
- Review any points of agreement that can be determined;
- Develop several alternative scenarios to bridge the gap between the disputing parties;
- Work with all sides to develop a solution to the dispute; and
- Document elements of project alternatives, funding priorities, or other decisions agreed upon by the various interest groups.

**In negotiation, the process is more flexible** but usually involves the following steps:

- Identify underlying interests, as contrasted to positions;
- Develop alternative scenarios to meet underlying interests;
- Combine or further refine scenarios to meet as many interests as possible; and
- Select a scenario via consensus.

**Sometimes participants do not feel comfortable meeting in the same room** with their opponents. In such cases, the third party meets individually with participants outside the group to work out an agreement step-by-step. The mediator carries proposals between nearby conference rooms until the issues are resolved. In a significant historic example, President Carter carried draft documents between Prime Minister Begin and President Sadat—in different cottages at Camp David—to obtain a formal Middle East peace agreement. In this less open method, strict confidentiality must be pledged by all participants at the outset and followed throughout the process. In some situations, use of a third party follows stringent confidentiality principles, although the resulting agreement becomes a public document or is available to anyone who is interested.

### What helps people change their positions?

**Guiding participants toward finding shared and compatible interests** is an effective method. Usually participants take strong positions assumed to be "the only answer" to addressing their needs or wants. Often, however, alternatives exist that still respond to the party's interests but are easier for other parties to accept or consider.

**Identifying interests begins with asking questions**. Asking participants why they feel a certain way clarifies basic needs and desires that have not yet been articulated. Breaking down general interests into specific elements helps focus the areas of disagreement. Suggesting alternative choices also works. Figuring out why people have made certain choices is a first step toward finding different ways of fulfilling their interests that may be more compatible with the other party's needs.

**Working toward consensus by identifying interests rather than establishing positions is a key skill** that leads to effective cooperative decision-making and consensus-building. Using professionals and seeking information and strategies from books and other resources helps make ADR processes successful.

### How are negotiation and mediation used with other public involvement techniques?

**Negotiation is part of an overall public involvement process** and of many individual techniques. Collaborative task forces have consensus-building as a major goal and often use negotiation as an integral element of their activities. (See **Collaborative Task Forces**.) Practitioners who have honed their dispute resolution skills use them informally in day-to-day work with participants and other planning team members to help foster coalitions and move toward consensus.

**Written materials are required to provide information about issues or plans under discussion** in mediation and negotiation, as in other public involvement techniques. Disputes are often overcome by providing adequate information or targeted materials that respond to the needs of individual participants or groups. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

### What are the drawbacks?

**A dispute resolution process such as mediation or long-term negotiation sometimes involves a large number of interests,** adds time to a process (particularly when it follows a failed previous effort), and requires significant management and organization. A think tank on welfare issues in Shelby County, Tennessee, consisted of representatives of 65 members of the clergy, businesses and business organizations, providers of social services, and community organizations. A one-year negotiation and consensus-building effort was required for the group leader to gain commitments and guiding principles from this large group of agencies and organizations.

**Hiring a mediator or a trained negotiator is usually much more expensive than using in-house personnel.** The advantage is a more skillful mediation and/or negotiation and an improved process, along with a clearer position of neutrality. Sometimes a participant serves as a third party if she or he is regarded as impartial by others.

**Mediation may require special preparation for participants.** Some groups may not be sufficiently well-organized to participate; for example, neighborhoods with no leadership. All participants, including less powerful interests, must have equal standing within the process. Consideration must be given to participants' range of knowledge and experience with the subject matter.  Special printed material and briefing sessions are often necessary to give all participants an equal level of basic knowledge and understanding so they can participate effectively in the dispute resolution process.

**Participants are not always pleased with the results of mediation.** Failure occurs when mediation is undertaken after people have dug in their heels and view compromise or any alteration in their position as "losing."  Sometimes conflicts occur among people's basic values, such as accepting certain environmental impacts.  If a large power imbalance among interests exists, mediation may raise expectations among the less powerful that cannot be fulfilled.

**For various reasons, consensus may unravel.** Poor attendance suggests a lack of trust or "buy-in" to the process.  If participants drift away over a long dispute resolution process, consensus may be weak and difficult to sustain in action.  Even strong consensus unravels if agreements are broken, priorities are not followed, or principles are forgotten.

**Agencies often fear the challenges and sparks that arise** with many competing interests.  Residents, local officials, interest groups, and agency staff may have long histories of hostility.  Finding ways of defusing such antipathy and developing a fruitful mediation process is a challenge.  A skilled third party's role is to effectively deal with hostility and make the outcome a success.  Agency staff with strong negotiation skills also help to create a more positive working relationship.

### Are mediation and negotiation flexible?

**Mediation and negotiation have considerable flexibility.** The processes:

- Are useful in long-range planning and project development;
- Resolve either major or minor conflicts;
- Are effective with either small or large groups;
- Take place in different-size municipalities or regions;
- Apply in a variety of settings—between groups or within groups;
- Work in homes, offices, or specially-designed facilities or conference settings; and
- Take place over a range of time frames—short- or long-term.

Choosing the most appropriate dispute resolution technique depends on the circumstances and characteristics of the dispute, the participants, and the dispute resolution strategy.

### When are they used most effectively?

**Mediation is most effective when other less formal consensus-building fails** and an impasse has been reached.  Negotiation is most effective before an impasse is reached.

**Mediation and negotiation must be part of a participatory process** that includes such regular activities as working group meetings, hands-on discussion sessions, and timely responses to comments and concerns.  Attempts to reach consensus by addressing concerns early helps prevent an impasse.  Consensus-building generates trust that agencies will cooperate to reach a mutually satisfactory solution or agreement.  Through mediation, agencies find help in reaching agreements, but they are still ultimately responsible for making final decisions.

**For further information:**

- American Arbitration Association Headquarters, (212) 484-4000
- City Manager's Office, Fort Worth, Texas, (817) 871-6111
- Community Mediation Centers—American Bar Association, (202) 331-2661
- Greater Indianapolis Progress Committee, Indianapolis, Indiana, (317) 286-3160
- Harvard Law School, Program on Negotiation, (617) 495-3100
- National Institute for Dispute Resolution, (202) 466-4764
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, (717) 772-2563
- Program for Community Problem Solving, (202) 626-3183
- Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution, (202) 783-7277
- University of Virginia Institute for Environmental Mediation, (804) 924-1970

## C. TAKING INITIAL ACTION STEPS

Agencies need specific ways to solicit feedback from community people, resolve differences, and integrate the results into a process of planning or project development. Some initial steps include the following:

✓ **Determine how and when feedback information will be used.**
Be receptive to feedback and prepare to use it during ongoing staff work in planning and project development. Determine when feedback on specific issues is needed and by whom.

✓ **Establish clear channels for feedback to affect agency decision-making.**
Provide a well-defined avenue for information, testimony, and opinions from the public to reach agency decision-makers and policy-setters.

✓ **Set up ways to give further information and get comments and questions.**
Establish telephone connections that people routinely can use to obtain information and give feedback, comments, or support. However, because many people prefer methods that are instantaneous and hassle-free, supplement telephone connections with other methods, such as on-line services, that make it easier to give and get information.

✓ **Sponsor brief surveys or small groups to preview community viewpoints.**
Investigate a small but representative sample of the community to pinpoint people's preferences quickly. Design the form of the survey to objectively test preferences.

✓ **Sponsor focus groups to ascertain community concerns in detail.**
Hold focus groups of representative people to get a broad outline of what people want to see and what concerns agencies might encounter in specific situations. Repeat the technique in more than one location to help determine geographic-based differences in opinion. Use the results to help set up an overall public involvement strategy and specific procedures.

✓ **If an impasse is reached, try negotiation or third-party intervention.**
Assess the complexity of the conflict to be resolved and how intently participants are holding to their own positions without compromise. Use a skilled, in-house person to work informally with the parties to reach consensus. If the stalemate holds fast, bring in a mediator or other third-party neutral to assist the group in approaching the issues from other angles, improving their conflict resolution skills, and coming to agreement.

✓ **Evaluate the approach with participant advisors.**
Ask participant advisors if a technique is appropriate or rewarding. Meet with community advisors to get a sense of the best methods of getting feedback and comments and resolving conflicts.

# Chapter 4. USING SPECIAL TECHNIQUES TO ENHANCE PARTICIPATION

Public involvement programs aim to involve the largest possible segment of the population. Yet traditional methods such as meetings and hearings frequently interest only a small group of people. Capturing the attention of a larger, more representative group requires careful planning and often substantial effort. Maintaining that attention level is even more of a challenge.

**How does an agency know when its public involvement program needs enhancement?**

Gradually declining attendance or static membership among participants is a major signal that a program is not engaging. Another signal is a dearth of questions from participants or expressions of concern that progress is not being made.

**Why are special techniques useful?**

An enjoyable and productive public involvement experience gets people talking and enhances an agency's image in their minds. If agency efforts are unique and stimulating, people more readily spread the word about them. Agencies themselves renew their enthusiasm and take more pride in their efforts to involve the public. Communication often improves. And the best result is a more effective and extensive collaboration between an agency and the public in transportation planning and project development.

**How does an agency attract people who do not usually participate?**

Special techniques are available to attract both new and existing participants or give a jump-start to a lackluster public participation program. These techniques, best used occasionally rather than regularly, may not guarantee continued interest, but they do hold promise for more interesting and varied participation and feedback. Several options are described on the following pages:

**A. Holding special events;**
**B. Changing a meeting approach;**
**C. Finding new ways to communicate; and**
**D. Taking initial action steps.**

# Chapter 4. USING SPECIAL TECHNIQUES TO ENHANCE PARTICIPATION

## A. HOLDING SPECIAL EVENTS

People like special events now and then. These unique occasions are light-hearted and intended to be fun for participants. They have a holiday-like feeling clearly different from day-to-day meetings and hearings. They give community people opportunities to meet others in a friendly, non-threatening setting and share their ideas. People like the freedom and openness of pleasurable events that do not demand immediate action or response.

Nearly any public involvement program benefits by incorporating special, one-time events. They complement many techniques by providing exhilarating breaks during a larger and longer process. A special event does not require a commitment to hold another such occasion, unless evaluation determines it is likely to be useful and appropriate.

Special events reach new participants. Individuals who have not participated in transportation planning or project development become interested because of exposure to agency work at a special event. Special events help current participants recruit neighbors to the process and demonstrate why it can be fun. With the help of participant advisors, an agency can determine if a special event is appropriate and if its timing can be integrated with other community events.

During special events in a public involvement program, messages about transportation—while clearly a motivating force—should be understated to keep the occasion light and friendly.

Special events take many forms. Two techniques have potentially significant use for transportation planning and project development:

- Transportation fairs; and
- Games and contests.

## TRANSPORTATION FAIRS

### What is a transportation fair?

**A transportation fair is an event** used to interest community members in transportation and in specific projects or programs. It is typically a one-day event, heavily promoted to encourage people to attend. Attractions such as futuristic vehicles can be used to bring people to the fair, and noted personalities also draw participants. New Jersey Transit holds an annual fair in a transit terminal with a festival aimed toward children—including participatory and educational exhibits.

**A transportation fair focuses on visual elements,** such as exhibits, videos, and maps or models of projects. A speaker or presenter is not required but can help focus the attention of viewers on the purposes of the fair. A fair gears individual displays toward a desired message. Once prepared, exhibits can be used again at another location and date.

**A transportation fair has these basic features:**

- Visual interest and excitement;
- Variety in exhibits: maps, photos, models, slide shows, videos, full-size vehicles, give-away items;
- Accessibility in a central location for the target audience;
- Extensive publicity to attract participants;
- Attraction for a wide variety of people;
- Ability to elicit comments and points of view of participants—always on a voluntary basis; and
- Impermanence.

### Why is it useful?

**A transportation fair presents information to the public.** Participants are encouraged to view exhibits, ask questions, consider information, and give comments. In San Francisco, a commuter mobile van travels from show to show to promote alternative means of commuting.

**A transportation fair creates interest and dramatizes a project or program.** Graphics present goals and messages in a comprehensible and visually interesting way. Interactive audiovisual and computer-based displays make programs come alive and encourage public comment. (See **Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks**.)

**A fair is a one-time event.** With good publicity, it becomes a known opportunity for people to participate in transportation planning. The date and place can be chosen to fit within an agency schedule. It can be held annually, as in Boston's World-Class Commuting Day. A fair helps agencies or organizations understand public reactions at a specific point in time.

**A fair keeps participants informed, interested, and up-to-date.** Sharing information and discussing issues gives participants a status report on projects and programs. At a fair, people become educated on technical issues and gain a better understanding of the effort involved and milestones achieved.

### Does it have special uses?

**A fair provides an opportunity for casual community input.** As an informal short-term event, it can be held in central locations where many people pass by, such as a store downtown or a shopping mall. (See **Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events**.) A fair asks participants to focus on a project's or program's components and details and offer advice and comment. For example, in Idaho twelve transportation fairs were held in urban and rural regions to talk about statewide transportation improvements.

**A fair emphasizes specific, positive points about a subject.** It can include exhibits of all types to highlight the wide variety of people, organizations, and effort involved in a project or program. It allows an agency or organization to point up salient, desirable points about a project, while responding to potential drawbacks.

#### Who participates? And how?

**Fair attendees are self-selected.** Responding to publicity, individuals decide whether or not to attend—often based on the location and date of the fair. Because a fair is not an invitational event, a representative sample of community groups or stakeholders cannot be expected to attend. Despite this self-selection, a diversity in viewpoints is usually represented.

**People participate through taking part in activities.** Attendees examine the presentations and ask questions about the exhibits. At a typical fair, before attendees leave they are encouraged to fill out questionnaires or response forms with written comments, which are collected and analyzed for input. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

#### How do agencies use the output?

**The principal output is improved community awareness.** Written and oral comments by community residents are collected at the fair and used as input to a project or program. This information may be anecdotal but, with analysis, may be of use within the sponsoring organization. As a special example, fairs were held in the Phoenix, Arizona, area to help employers present alternative commuting ideas and programs to employees and get their feedback.

**Comments should be used in association with other community input.** Comments assist agencies in becoming aware of opinions and stances of participants, often before they become solidified or difficult to modify. Because they are made in a casual atmosphere, the comments are sometimes more conciliatory than would be the case in a different setting.

#### Who leads a transportation fair?

**Agencies or private groups sponsor fairs.** Public agencies hold fairs to detail a specific project and its impacts and to demonstrate support for it. Private transportation management groups hold fairs to attract new members or explain new programs. Representation of public officials at a transportation fair can be productive, depending on the fair's purpose. For example, in the San Francisco area, employers sponsor fairs, with assistance from public agencies.

**A transportation fair requires no leader on the day of the event.** However, a fair can be scheduled with specific times for presentations or brief talks or to introduce featured attractions such as celebrities. At such times, a moderator or other person is needed to make introductions.

#### What are the costs?

**A fair requires support staff within an agency,** and the work required can be substantial. Finding a site—usually on land or in buildings that are privately-owned—takes advance preparation. Agency representatives must be alerted to attend if needed to respond to inquiries or explain technical issues.

**Material needs are extensive.** Graphics should be sufficiently large and well-prepared to address principal issues. Photographs may be required for orientation. Slide presentations are often desirable.

Substantial exhibition room is essential. Written materials can supplement graphic presentations. Take-away souvenirs, including buttons, maps, brochures, or imaginative graphics, are useful reminders of the fair's subject. For example, an annual transportation fair for an employer in the Washington, D.C., region includes table-top exhibits by employers, give-away items with emblazoned information, and contests or drawings for seed money to start a vanpool. (See **Public Information Materials; Games and Contests**.)

### How is a transportation fair organized?

**A fair is managed by an existing organization.** It may have a chairperson or director, depending on the extent or importance of the event. A fair needs staff to manage the exhibitors, oversee production of graphic or written materials, and make the physical arrangements on the day of the event. In the Los Angeles area, for example, fairs are sponsored by private firms and managed by their employer transportation coordinators.

**Organizational meetings are necessary** to set the policy and goals for the fair, select a date and place, solicit exhibitors, and develop publicity for wide public distribution. Specific assignments and delegation of responsibilities help assure on-time production of exhibits.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**Not a stand-alone approach, a transportation fair pairs well** with other techniques and shows the products of public involvement, such as the results of a brainstorming session. (See **Brainstorming**.) It can be sponsored by a civic advisory committee to show work in progress. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.) With videos or fixed exhibitions, fairs can display goals or accomplishments of a public agency. (See **Video Techniques; Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks**.)

**A fair helps interest community residents in transportation** or sets the stage for upcoming events, such as a complex, large-scale project. It is used to elicit candidates for membership in a civic advisory committee. It also is used to present awards to individuals who have contributed to improvement of transportation services.

### What are the drawbacks?

**A fair cannot replace other techniques.** As a one-time event with self-selected participants, it is not usually representative of all interests. It is temporary in intent and thus does not meet Federal standards for continuing public involvement. It cannot replace a public process that records statements in a more formal manner, where local people are certain they are being heard by appropriate authorities. (See **Public Meetings/Hearings**.)

**A transportation fair does not bring public consensus.** There is no deliberation between potentially opposing groups. The principal intent in a fair is to disseminate information, not to receive ideas. Attempts by the sponsor to derive consensus from a fair may cause problems; the sponsor becomes vulnerable to charges of not taking public involvement seriously.

**Representative comments cannot be expected** because a fair is not likely to include all potential participants. In fact, comments from participants are appreciated because they are to some extent unexpected. In certain instances, little or no feedback will be directly useful to an agency. However, unarticulated comments do not mean that the fair was a failure; many participants do not view writing comments as an essential element of their enjoyment of the exhibits at the fair.

**For further information:**

- Caravan for Commuters, Boston, Massachusetts, (617) 973-7189
- Commuter Transportation Services, Los Angeles, California, (213) 380-7750
- New Jersey Transit, (201) 491-7079
- Regional Public Transportation Authority, Phoenix, Arizona, (602) 262-7242
- Rides (Commuter Services), San Francisco, California, (415) 861-7665
- Washington, D.C., Council of Governments Ride-finders Network, (202) 962-3327

## GAMES AND CONTESTS

### What are games and contests?

**Games and contests are special ways to attract and engage people** who might not otherwise participate. They often vividly demonstrate issues and the consequences of decisions. They are unusual, lively, and more stimulating than formal meetings or reports. People play games and enter contests for diversion or entertainment, a prize or an objective, or for the possibility of winning.

**Games entice people to think about different alternatives, alignments, modes, densities, heights, land uses, and other transportation issues.** They engage people interactively and are more effective than a matrix or other written description to show the consequences of actions. They enhance participation by giving people tangible, interesting, easy-to-relate-to activities rather than reams of reading material or meetings to attend in the middle of winter.

**Contests and games are unique methods for getting peoples' attention** in subtle yet comprehensive ways that reach more people and increase awareness, overall understanding, and sophistication about specific issues.

**Games and contests help generate publicity** about planning and project development. Publicity about a planning process is sometimes hard to generate, but involving people in a game or contest often results in significant coverage because people think they are fun. The fun factor is important to acknowledge, because it breaks down barriers between technicians and community people, generates good will for an agency, and gives people something interesting to look forward to.

**Games and contests typically include:**

- Board games—for the table-top or the computer;
- Card games;
- Computer simulation games or contests;
- Crossword puzzles or other word games;
- Games of chance, such as raffles; and
- Essay, design, or poster contests.

### Why are they useful?

**Games alert people to a broad range of issues, give them information, and pinpoint their transportation priorities by asking them to make decisions and tradeoffs.** Games that involve choices—for instance, placing game pieces to indicate acceptable development densities or spending play money for industry or environmental protection—help clarify priorities, identify the range of positions, and aid agency decision-making. In a game used by Triangle Transit Authority in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, participants decided on development densities at certain growth and transportation nodes in the region. By making choices about where to put development in relation to transportation, participants were able to see land use/transportation relationships, others' perspectives, and the implications of decisions. As part of long-term planning for light-rail extensions, the San Francisco County Transit Authority developed a game in which focus groups expressed preferences by placing colored tape (red for surface lines and green for subway sections) on a city map. The length of tape was determined by the amount of money available for the projects. Given the substantial difference in cost between subway and surface lines, participants—representing different points of view and different areas of the city—discussed alternatives, made tradeoffs, and finally agreed on mutually acceptable solutions that could be accomplished within budget. The game encouraged participants to expand their thinking from a local to a city-wide perspective and helped them understand the complex transportation decision-making process.

**Contests encourage participants to bring in new and fresh ideas.** The Boston, Massachusetts, Visions Contest, sponsored by a partnership of private industry, government agencies, and public utilities, was designed as a national contest to interest people in the future of the City. With substantial prizes to be awarded to several categories of winners, the contest attracted many people who wanted to express their visions of the future. The results led the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) to investigate in depth the feasibility of specific suggestions for its Washington Street Corridor.

**Games and contests involve a broad variety of people who might not otherwise participate** in planning and project development processes. No one is likely to be an expert at a custom-made game, so everyone starts at an equal level of skill; people who are neophytes in transportation planning play together with those more knowledgeable about planning and project development. For example, games that elicit value tradeoffs are much more effective than the "indifference trade-off method," a complex, abstract process involving measuring preferences, assigning weights, and mathematically determining priorities. Few other participation techniques match games and contests for light-heartedness, playfulness, and liveliness.

**Games and contests are interactive,** requiring players to make conscious efforts to participate. In every game or contest, a player or contestant must understand instructions and then interact with other people playing the game or engaging in the contest. This interaction is rewarding and fruitful and makes participation a pleasure.

**Playing a game or entering a contest is often educational.** Participants may explore history or transportation issues or learn about regulations, transportation construction techniques, or geography. The MBTA used a crossword puzzle in a newsletter to explain transit planning and the concurrent land development process. This newsletter was sent to thousands of transit corridor residents, most of whom were not traditional participants in project development studies.

**Games and contests generate publicity,** because they grab the attention of people in a busy world, then provide a useful way for them to focus on an issue. They engage people quickly and involve their thoughts during the time it takes to play. They give a sense of accomplishment, leading beyond simple advertising. A major utility company used contests to promote its health plan options and health club programs by giving cash prizes to winners with the best T-shirt design.

**Games are used in training agency public involvement staff** to help them better understand the issues from a lay point of view. A number of computer games give players a chance to create new towns, complete with transportation lines, budgets, and impending natural and fiscal disasters. An urban planning computer game shows the interrelationships between urban growth and city management and investment.

### Do they have special uses?

**Games and contests sometimes change an agency's image in the community.** Agencies that have been thought of in the past as outsiders uninvolved in the community are seen in a different light when they sponsor a game or contest. The MBTA sponsored a children's game for designs to be incorporated into the ceramic tiles of a new transit station in their neighborhood. Displaying community artwork permanently on the walls of the new station provided very conspicuous evidence that the MBTA was interested in involving the neighborhood in the transit-line extension.

**Contests generate ideas for implementable projects.** In St. Louis, Missouri, the Sierra Club sponsored a contest involving high school students to develop projects for which enhancement funds could be applied.

**Games and contests are exploratory,** stressing possibilities for change in the environment, transportation, and the places we live. They get participants to understand different perspectives and concerns by opening up opportunities. The annual contest called "Tour de Sol" is a showcase for improving public understanding of the design and technology of electric vehicles. Major auto makers, colleges, specialty manufacturers, and the U.S. Department of Energy sponsor the rally and give prizes to entrants based on evaluations of vehicle range and efficiency.

**Games are risk-free for participants.** People are often willing to play a game in which they encounter the potential impacts, because there are no real-life consequences. Yet, by being involved, they see an issue from a different perspective—one that may be completely foreign to them.

**Games and contests get parents involved through their children.** Many children are interested in games and become engaged easily. Oregon Metro ran a transportation fair that provided child care and activities especially for children. The children's activity room offered a variety of toys and computer games for kids to engage in while parents walked around the fair. Creating a family event at which kids were welcome made it easier for parents to attend. In Boston, the MBTA developed a picture guide book for children, *Anna Discovers the T,* designed to teach children how to use the transit system—with the hope that children would help their parents learn as well. The MBTA also sponsored a contest for children to design a car card for transit vehicles promoting the children's guidebook. The contest was publicized through elementary schools and reached a broad audience.

### Who participates? And how?

**Games are played by interested community people, officials, or other stakeholders.** Games and contests are distributed as widely as necessary to engage people who need to be aware of issues or themes and to open up communication lines. A game of chance, such as a raffle, reaches a large group of people and makes them aware of an issue. A group of merchants in Cambridge, Massachusetts, reached thousands of people during a transit construction project by giving away bicycles, roller skates, rides on an antique fire engine, free transit passes, a month of free parking, and a trip for two to Montreal. A suburban transportation management organization held a raffle to publicize ridesharing by giving away dinners for two, gift certificates, and bicycle tune-ups. These contests help increase communication between the agency and communities and make it easier to engage them in the future for input and help in making decisions.

**Certain games are easily played at regular community meetings.** Simple board games or charades are easy to play with any group. Role-playing board games can provide a central focus for a special meeting. The U.S. Department of Energy used a board game with the neighbors of its Fernald plant in Ohio to seek help in locating a site for atomic waste disposal. The board game was based on participants playing roles of managers of the site. (See **Role Playing**.)

**Computer games appeal to a limited group of participants.** Computer simulation games should be geared to a wider audience than just the computer literate. Exciting, colorful graphics, icons, and simple instructions that walk users through the steps are key. They should entice play by people who may be unfamiliar with computer capabilities and are distrustful of computers. Computer games focused on role playing are helpful for people who would particularly benefit from seeing other perspectives. These include, for example, using a computer to illustrate what different floor area ratios would mean in terms of development density or to show how close various transit alignments would come to neighborhoods. (See **Computer Presentations and Simulations**.)

**Contests are often designed for special audiences.** Participants who have considerable knowledge of technical issues are reached through specially designed contests. Contests that require abilities in art or poetry attract people with these special skills. The Neponset Greenway project in Massachusetts sponsored a logo design contest for its signage and maps that was judged by a professional jury.

**Children enjoy tactile games and toys.** To teach the various roles of people working for the railroad, Amtrak hands out paper engineer's caps describing people who make the railroad work. Printed on the back is a scene for children to color. Several railroad employees are hidden among the crowd, with a challenge for children to find all the people before the train leaves.

**People participate as individuals** by playing a game or figuring out a crossword puzzle. They also design posters or submit ideas for contests.

**For meetings, small group board games with visual implements foster interaction.** A board game used by the Santa Barbara, California, Community Development Department asked players to place blocks on development parcels following the allowable zoning. In a risk-free, non-threatening way, players were able to state preferences for development based on their own reasons. No judgments about positions were allowed, but, through evaluating the game, it became relatively easy for participants to see that the development allowed by the existing zoning would be very dense. In Dane County, Wisconsin, a similar game used a computer model to develop alternative comprehensive plans. Participants paint future land uses at a meeting, and the model estimates the future impacts. In a few seconds, numbers are produced showing the impacts of land uses on transportation, schools, and other infrastructure. A facilitated discussion to explore game results is often essential to enable participants to get the most out of a game.

**Involving children requires outreach,** since children do not generally attend meetings. Schools offer one of the best ways to reach children—through classes, extracurricular activities, or field trips. A school class won a contest sponsored by a major supermarket chain and developed a board game full of environmental tips. Such groups as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, or Camp Fire Girls are another good resource.

**How do agencies use the output?**

**Agencies use games to learn people's priorities** by incorporating ranking games at meetings. Canada's Saskatchewan Power used a game to explore what people wanted to see happen in the Saskatchewan River Delta. Participants used play money to invest in economic development or wildlife projects, helping the power company set priorities. Simple ranking of priorities using adhesive dots placed next to issues of concern is another way an agency learns about community priorities.

**Agencies use games and contests to stimulate interest** in planning issues or publicize project development. Contests are effective in reaching those not traditionally involved. As part of a school curriculum, the Missouri Highway and Transportation Department ran a contest that asked school children to describe verbally or illustrate what transportation means to them. About 900 students in 160 teams submitted contest entries. Contests help agencies increase the visibility of a process or project. They get people involved and interested in learning about the details of a project incorporated into the contest.

**Games facilitate effective communication** between an agency and a community. The U.S. Department of Energy uses a manual board game similar to Monopoly® at community meetings to help people understand the Department's fiscal constraints. For example, if a player lands on the first available place, Congress reduces the agency budget by $11 million. Another example is a contest with a prize or a raffle to show an agency in a different, non-technical light.

**Agencies use games for training, which helps staff understand their potential for public involvement processes.** The MBTA created a board game called "On Track" to train its operators. Questions tested operators' customer-service skills and knowledge of the MBTA system and its history. They ranged from how to go the Children's Museum to what a bus driver should do if someone tries to board with a gorilla. Each question had three answers, ranked (using a dollar value) by degree of "correctness." Trainees got play money worth $10,000 if they said the gorilla should ride in the back of the bus and be restrained by its owner; they were docked $10,000 if they told the gorilla and its owner to get off the bus. Similarly, Pennsylvania DOT created "Citizen Lane," a board game used to train DOT employees on public involvement in project development, from preliminary design through construction. The one-hour game uses six sets of color-coded question cards for the phase of project development. The cards cover "incidents"—for example, what to do when 400 people show up at a room capable of holding 50—and "issues"—questions that challenge players to deal with potential major problems in a public involvement process. The "issues" cards require the six players to brainstorm together for an answer.  The questions cover material included in the DOT's handbook on public involvement.  Agency personnel have been extremely enthusiastic about participating in workshops using "Citizen Lane."  Such training efforts help staff understand what tools are useful and how games and contests that are engaging, fun, and easy to learn can contribute significantly to a public involvement process.

**Names of contestants and game players can form the basis of a mailing list** for agencies to contact interested parties and supply further information.  Permission should be obtained prior to placing anyone's name on a list.  (See **Mailing Lists**.)

### Who leads games and contests?

**Contests are designed, promoted, and led by people who have a clear vision about the goals**—whether the contest is for publicity, education, or more specific transportation planning options.  An organizational leader is needed to support the contest through publicity; distribution, receipt, and tabulation of forms; and awarding of prizes.

**Games require trained leaders who understand the game's goals.**  A leader must be enthusiastic and fully understand the process.  Either agency staff members or outside consultants lead games.  Guidance through a game may be required, even if the game is extremely well-developed.  After the game, the leader must skillfully guide people through discussion and evaluation.

**Games or contests are often designed to be played by individuals or in groups,** sometimes with help or kibitzing from a friend or relative.

### What are the costs?

**Significant time and skills are required** in developing the concept for a board game, creating the physical board itself, and manufacturing the game for multiple users.  Outlining a concept takes as little as a week, but a single, hand-produced board game can take six weeks or more from concept through final production.  Outside consultants are helpful in designing particularly complicated board games.

**Creating a computer game takes even more resources.**  Computer models as a basis for games tend to be very complex.  Computer games often require thousands of hours to develop and test.

**Preparing simpler games takes significantly less time.**  Crossword puzzles, simple word games, or word search contests do not take long to develop.  Brainstorming the approach to be taken or the questions to be included involves several staff people for several hours each.  The MBTA prepared a crossword puzzle using clues from drawings that appeared in previous editions of the project newsletter.

**Creating a contest usually involves less staff time than conceiving a board game.**  Staff develops a concept, define rules and parameters, decide if there will be a prize, and figures out how to publicize it.  Depending on the complexity of the contest and how many entries are desired, the time commitment for staff is probably in hours or days, rather than weeks.

**Larger-scale contests are much more structured and expensive.**  For example, a six-month-long planning and design contest called *The Electric Vehicle and the American Community* required participants to have considerable research and design skills.  A consortium of private and governmental agencies challenged contestants to envision a new infrastructure for electric and hybrid vehicles.  With over $100,000 in cash prizes as an attraction, the contest drew hundreds of participants.  Preparing entrance requirements, books, posters, and other materials for official entrants was a major effort.  Agencies can join forces with other agencies or private-sector firms to sponsor such a contest; in such cases, preparation and evaluation efforts are distributed among all of the sponsors rather than falling heavily on the shoulders of already overworked internal staff.

### How are games and contests organized?

**Goals for a game or contest must be clearly established.** As each concept for a game is put forth, it should be tested to see if it meets the game's overall goals.

**Board or computer games require staff or consultant time** for design, illustration, rule-making, printing, and distribution. Target audiences for distribution should be outlined prior to design and production of a game. Simplicity for players is key; the game should be easy to understand and play.

**Contests require staff or consultant time** to prepare, implement, and follow up the entries. Contests are introduced at any time in a process and are successful ways to keep interest sustained over the long haul. Follow–up is particularly important if the agency aims to generate interest and gather names for mailing lists.

**Board games involving role play are often most effective early in a process,** because they immediately allow participants to see issues from other points of view. This helps establish an atmosphere of open-mindedness and sets the tone for the entire process. However, games that illustrate conflicts that arise out of budget constraints or community development issues are often used to move away from a stalemate in the middle or at the end of a process.

**Most games do not require players to prepare** before participating, but preparation by staff and leaders is essential. Making several dry runs of a game intended for public use helps agencies anticipate problems and questions. For games designed to be played at community meetings, agencies often announce the rules and send instructions to participants in advance.

### How are they used with other techniques?

**Games and contests are used to broaden the thinking** and understanding of people involved in the study or exploration of an issue. Board games or computer games simulate situations and urge people to view a transportation plan or project from many different vantage points. In Jefferson County, Colorado, a visioning exercise for development of the Route 285 Corridor used food and candy as elements placed on a base map to indicate participants' preferences. Licorice sticks were used for roadways, and food not used was eaten. The project was known as *Eat Your Way to the Future.*

**Agencies use games and contests as ice-breakers at meetings.** They supplement other techniques and enliven staid processes that rely on passive meetings. They are useful when people from different walks of life are working on a common project. The Town of Orleans, Massachusetts, used a quiz-show game format to present the results of a town-wide survey.

**Games are used in mediation.** In Amherst, Massachusetts, the National Association of Mediation in Education collects a variety of mediation games to deal with environmental conflicts, which are closely related to transportation situations. These games include instructions for training, leading, and playing. (See **Negotiation and Mediation**.)

**Games are included in special events** such as transportation fairs. In Portland, the Oregon Metro transportation fair offered board games and computer games for children, some in a separate room with supervision so parents could participate in the fair and allow the children to play and learn. (See **Transportation Fairs**.)

**Contests are incorporated into newsletters,** handouts, and other written materials. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

**What are the drawbacks?**

**Poorly designed games are not likely to generate usable public input.** Some games do not appeal to the bulk of the desired audience. Overly complicated or detailed contests draw only those already involved or interested in the issues. If games or contests are not linked to other involvement activities or if their goals are not clear, participants are likely to feel let-down and frustrated. Games are viewed as frivolous if they are not integrated well into a total process for meaningful public involvement in planning.

**If not well-designed, games fall flat.** Without skillful design, the basic point of an exercise is obscured. Leaders of game sessions need to be prepared to mitigate the effects of boring games through lively discussion and follow-up.

**Games and contests do not interest everyone.** Certain members of the community are likely to resent their use or interpret playing games as trivializing the issues and talking down to them. This perception is avoided by making sure the game relates clearly to the situation at hand and the goals of using it are explained up front.

**Games and contests are expensive** in terms of staff or consultant time, because design techniques are not yet in widespread use. They take time to develop if they are to be easily understood or to generate widespread interest. Games are sometimes quite elaborate or expensive and require fancy hardware, software, or other equipment not normally available for community meetings.

**Are games and contests flexible?**

**Games and contests are flexible** in terms of type, where and when they can be used, staff time, and cost.

**Games are developed for varying levels of sophistication.** Most staff people are capable of developing or working with simple games, but complicated computer games or contests require specialized skills. Contests vary widely in complexity, depending on the nature of the project or plan and the issues to be addressed.

**When are they used most effectively?**

**Used at the beginning of a process, games and contests attract attention and participation.** A computer simulation modeling game was used in Hawaii to test different assumptions about energy use, the economy, and various policy decisions. The public advisory group gave input on the policy scenarios fed into the model. Games and contests help enliven or sustain interest in a plan or project. To maximize initial effort and subsequent follow-through, the MBTA publicized its new cross-town bus service and announced a six-month design contest for logos. Contest entries were displayed later on car cards in buses and trains.

**For further information:**

- Amtrak, Washington, D.C., (202) 906-2108
- Hawaii Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism, Honolulu, Hawaii, (808) 587-3837
- Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, Boston, Massachusetts, (617) 222-4487
- Missouri Highway and Transportation Department, Jefferson City, Missouri, (314) 526-3851
- National Association for Mediation in Education, Amherst, Massachusetts, (413) 545-2462
- Oregon Metro, Portland, Oregon, (503) 797-1743
- Santa Barbara Community Development, Santa Barbara, California, (510) 845-7549
- San Francisco County Transit Authority, (415) 557-6850
- Triangle Transit Authority, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, (919) 406-1710

## Chapter 4. USING SPECIAL TECHNIQUES TO ENHANCE PARTICIPATION

### B. CHANGING A MEETING APPROACH

People are almost always “too busy” to attend meetings. Low attendance occurs even when agencies have made heroic efforts to get people involved in regularly scheduled meetings or well-publicized special events. Practitioners feel like Sisyphus, endlessly rolling the stone uphill. When people do turn out, the meetings themselves may seem stale or lifeless and their discussions unfocused or of little use. Repeated discussions of narrow issues often frustrate participants, especially if they do not lead to progress. Yet meetings remain a basic, low-cost way for people to get involved in transportation planning and project development. In one room, during one limited time period, participants represent many viewpoints and interests, including those that have been traditionally underrepresented.

A modest shake-up can inject new life into a dying public involvement program. For instance, a change in meeting place often changes people’s perspectives as well—and may attract new participants because the new setting is more convenient or interesting. Changing the dynamics of the way people interact at meetings allows different viewpoints to emerge. Alternating group leadership or assuming different roles also helps spark new enthusiasm and fresh thinking. Novelty, however, becomes routine if repeated, and change for the sake of change is seldom effective. Diverse meeting approaches should be purposeful elements of an overall plan or respond to identified problems.

Before changing a meeting approach, an agency can work with participant advisors to shape a more effective program and give them greater ownership and pride in the process. If they do not like a new approach, participants may offer alternatives more suitable to the community’s needs.

Rather than giving in to discouragement over low turnout, then, agencies can take special measures to boost attendance and improve the quality and productivity of meetings. The following techniques—some tried-and-true, others more innovative—offer several options for changing a meeting approach and getting more people involved in meaningful ways:

- Improving meeting attendance;
- Role playing;
- Site visits; and
- Non-traditional meeting places and events.

## IMPROVING MEETING ATTENDANCE

### What does this mean?

**For many agencies, getting people to attend meetings is challenging, if not daunting.** Often, despite an agency's concerted efforts, people simply do not come, and the level of effort seems unjustified by the results. Low attendance is especially common for State and Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) planning activities that do not focus on specific project details. How can agencies summon their resources to get more people meaningfully involved in the process of transportation planning and project development?

**A first step is to understand why people do not participate.** They offer numerous reasons for not attending transportation meetings:

- They are not aware a meeting is taking place;
- They receive inadequate notice;
- They have other commitments;
- They have a negative perception of the sponsoring agency;
- Public comments are not taken seriously;
- Decisions have already been made behind closed doors;
- Meetings are too time-consuming or boring; and
- Meeting sites are too far away, inconvenient, or inaccessible.

Underneath these very real and very valid reasons lies a deep-seated cynicism: generally, people today do not believe their input makes a difference.

**An agency's fundamental weapon in countering such cynicism is to make public input count in decision-making**—to "walk the talk," as popular wisdom has it—and to let people know that expressing their opinions has a real, tangible effect. People participate if an agency offers meaningful opportunities, plans strategies and logistics carefully, and has a history of using the output to make better plans and projects. According to a telephone survey of 2,000 households in Colorado, people want to provide more input into the "transportation decision-making process, *if they will be listened to...by officials."*

**Good meeting attendance, then, is closely linked to an agency's responsiveness and receptivity,** commitment to the process of public involvement, careful advance planning, and good communication strategies. High turnout with productive results is possible. A Wisconsin Department of Transportation (DOT) survey indicated that several States were able to attract large numbers of participants in their last round of long-range plan updates. These included Wisconsin (7,500) and Florida and New Jersey (6,000 each).

### Why is improved meeting attendance desirable?

**High meeting attendance helps ensure a broader range of input.** This, in turn, enables staff to identify additional issues and see new perspectives. The more inclusive a process, the greater its credibility—and the more likely it is to produce usable input.

**Widespread participation enhances public awareness about a plan or project.** When people get involved in a meaningful exchange of ideas on transportation issues, they are likely to spread the word to friends and neighbors. It is also crucial when an elected body such as a legislature or MPO board must ratify a plan.

**Broad participation from the beginning of a process aids consensus-building at its end.** When people are instrumental in shaping the vision for a project or plan and have been involved in working through issues and alternatives, they are more likely to be supportive of the final results. In Portland, Oregon, a recent 64-percent vote in favor of a bond to support extensions to the light rail system demonstrates the value of highly-inclusive planning. Several years prior to the election, a broad-based public involvement program began with the MPO's 50-year plan for the region, including numerous community meetings, focus groups, surveys of preferences, and speakers' bureaus. Information provided by participants was integrated by proponents and culminated in an extensive public information and meeting program immediately prior to the election.

**All community segments benefit from increased meeting attendance** because their interests and viewpoints have a greater probability of being voiced. These include elected officials; agencies; organizations; residents; businesses; minority, ethnic, low-income, and disabled constituents; and special interest groups that focus on specific issues such as freight; bikeways and trails; pedestrian safety; taxes; clean air; growth and development; and quality of life. Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) invited key groups to an important meeting, prepared an agenda with specific time slots for each group to present its position, and sent the agenda to participants in advance.

**What are the main keys to success?**

**A positive and responsive agency attitude is essential.** This is reflected in the level of care, attention, clarity, sincerity, and honesty its staff displays in contacts with the public. Outreach efforts before, during, and after meetings are opportunities to assert a positive attitude and improve rapport with the public. The Environmental Defense Fund trains staff members who regularly deal with the public in the importance of a positive attitude. The Spokane, Washington, MPO makes special efforts to explain why its meetings are important and that the organization cares about what people have to say.

**It is important to stress that an agency involves people because their input is valued and useful.** New Jersey Transit, for instance, states, "It's not something we have to do, but rather something we want to do—to ensure that our services and products meet the public's expectations, to serve as a quality check on our performance, and to help us find answers and set priorities." The public quickly detects when an agency is engaging in public involvement simply because it is required to do so—and they will stay away.

**Equally important is an agency's record on translating community input into real decisions.** The National Resource and Defense Council advises that people will not attend meetings if they perceive that their views will not be heard. Many agencies confirm this. When the Portland, Oregon, MPO attracted more than 300 participants to a series of outreach meetings, it attributed the success to a "track record of credibility." The transit agency in Houston, Texas, believes the most important factor is "developing and nurturing a trusting relationship" between the agency and the public.

**Careful advance planning is crucial.** Good organization assures people that their time is not wasted and that the agency has a strong handle on what needs to be accomplished.

- ***An agency clearly determines the meeting's purpose,*** what needs it will fill, how it relates to the overall public involvement program and the larger transportation planning or project development effort, and how the results will be used. The more specific an agency's vision for the meeting, the more likely it will generate feedback that staff people can use.

- ***The type of meeting, as well as its style, is based on this strategic assessment.*** Agencies decide whether a meeting will emphasize information or interaction and explore the menu of options within these approaches. They also need to estimate the number of participants and consider break-out groups if a large audience is expected.

- ***Agency staff identifies desired participants and their special needs.*** Factors such as familiarity with the plan or project, the degree of sophistication, and the ability to understand

English all affect meeting planning. The agency also needs to determine which staff members and resource people need to take part, when, and in what roles.

- ***Successful meetings have clear agendas,*** including the purpose, discussion topics, types of activities, names of speakers, and overall schedule. For meetings on a corridor study in East Los Angeles, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) based its agenda on questions such as "What's the project about?" "What's its current status?" "What's the time line?" "What are the criteria?" and "How can I give comments?"

- ***Meeting times and locations optimize people's ability to participate***—for instance, after work hours, in convenient neighborhood locations and comfortable settings conducive to interaction. Participants can be consulted beforehand about what times or dates are preferable. The Pennsylvania DOT holds meetings both during working hours and in the evening. The Wisconsin DOT finds that a 4:00–7:00 P.M. meeting time accommodates most people. The Cleveland, Ohio, MPO and the Minnesota DOT schedule their meetings from 5:00–7:00 P.M. The Ohio DOT has found that people in urban areas prefer night meetings, while rural residents prefer daytime. (See **Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events**.)

- ***Thoughtfully prepared and coordinated meeting materials convey the appropriate level and kind of information.*** An agency must allow ample time for writing, editing, printing, and collating. Presentation materials are particularly important. Good visuals convey principal points, aid audience understanding of a plan or project, and encourage people to ask questions. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

- ***Sufficient notice well in advance of a meeting helps constituents set aside time in their schedule for preparation and attendance.*** Mailed invitations can take the form of a "save-the-date" card or flier. The Kansas DOT sent out more than 5,000 fliers to invite people to 10 informational meetings on its statewide long-range plan. The Montana DOT sent 5,500 fliers that attracted 3,000 participants to its long-range planning meetings. Phoning and in some cases FAXing meeting notices are other possible approaches.

**Involving the community in planning a meeting enhances its chances for success.** Agencies can ask community groups about what issues to raise and what meeting dates and places are likely to draw people to participate. This consultation also helps determine an appropriate format, depending on the community's traditions or preferences. This is particularly crucial when the community involves minorities and ethnic groups whose cultural attitudes strongly influence how they see and participate in a public process.

**Offering a variety of formats increases the chances of attracting participants** and demonstrates an agency's intent to make it easy for the community to take part. States use a blend of topics and formats to attract broad involvement. The Montana DOT enlisted 3,000 participants in its long-range transportation plan through 6 open forums, 5 thematic forums, 9 open houses, and 7 forums with tribal governments. Over 7,500 people attended Wisconsin DOT meetings on its long-range plan: 16 forums, 9 informational meetings, 7 topical review meetings, 1 meeting with 40 statewide organizations, peer review meetings on subjects such as freight, 10 statewide groups, and 15 town meetings.

### What else helps?

**Agencies are experimenting with a broad range of strategies and approaches to attract more participants** and make the public involvement process more meaningful and productive. Some of their most successful ideas are discussed below.

- ***Follow up a meeting notice by mail, phone, or FAX*** to make sure it has been received and to stress the importance of attendance and input. The Los Angeles County MTA makes friendly reminder phone calls to key leaders. The Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) in San Francisco sends FAXes to between 500 and 600 businesses.

- ***Survey communication preferences*** to find out what works best for the community. One “size” does not fit all. The Missouri DOT conducted a statewide survey asking, “How can we best communicate with you?” Results indicated that newsletters worked best for this audience and that electronic meetings were not preferred. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

- ***Focus each meeting on a special issue.*** If community members clearly see how the specific issue affects their lives, they more readily attend meetings. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation in Maryland organized a meeting around the relationship between transportation, affordable housing, and minority groups.

- ***Do the legwork.*** There’s no getting around it. The Houston transit agency’s community relations people know constituents and work the phones before meetings. They also place fliers on doorknobs. New Jersey Transit hired drug rehabilitation participants to distribute meeting announcements to downtown Newark shoppers.

- ***Use other groups’ publications to announce meetings.*** Sharing resources helps agencies reach a variety of potential participants cost-effectively. The Johnson County–Iowa City, Iowa, MPO has reached larger audiences this way. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation develops partnerships by interesting leaders from other organizations in its meetings and by publicizing them collaboratively.

- ***List meetings in a calendar of events.*** A little research can uncover numerous places where people look for information on what’s happening—for instance, in local newspaper weekly calendars or on public access television channels that offer community bulletin boards. MPOs in Seattle and San Francisco issue regular newsletters with a calendar of upcoming meetings and events for several months ahead. The Alaska DOT gets local clerks to list public involvement meetings on government calendars. (See **Media Strategies**.)

- ***Engage support through local schools.*** Most parents give thoughtful consideration to materials they receive through their children’s school. The Portland, Maine, MPO and Los Angeles MTA send fliers home with school children. The Florida DOT created a special program for students to learn about its East–West Corridor Study by riding the Metro rail system and writing essays to express their views on the project.

- ***Stir interest through name recognition tactics.*** The more people see an attractive logo, easily-identifiable symbol or slogan, or “teaser,” the more likely they are to be curious about what’s behind it. To promote project name recognition for Miami’s East–West Corridor Study major investment study, the Florida DOT developed a sophisticated logo placed on widely-distributed calendars and business cards.

- ***Establish information networks.*** Word of mouth is a powerful tool. Houston’s transit agency uses “leadership groups” of residents and businesses that take direct responsibility for informing other people about transportation issues and meetings.

- ***Offer low-cost meeting perks,*** ranging from food and transportation to day care and entertainment for children. The Missoula, Montana, and Spokane, Washington, MPOs offer light food and beverages. The Pittsburgh MPO receives FAXed requests for the kinds of cookies it should serve. The San Diego MPO offers certain meetings in a luncheon setting. The Minnesota DOT provides box lunches for day-long meetings. New Jersey Transit offers entertainment and babysitters for children during selected meetings. The Alaska DOT offers transportation to some meeting sites.

- ***Offer alternative modes of participating for individuals constrained by time or distance.*** The Portland Metro, the Los Angeles MTA, and the Savannah MPO give the public opportunities to phone in comments regarding meeting topics. Technological advances increase the opportunities for participating via teleconferences or computer communication. Agencies sometimes use other techniques such as community surveys to assure input and yet conserve people's energy and time, then target meetings for a stage in the process when they will be particularly crucial.

- ***Spark interest by featuring well-known experts or political candidates.*** If well-publicized, the presence of prominent people enhances attendance. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation featured elected officials as key attractions. The Missouri DOT survey results indicated preferences for public meetings with elected officials as guests. The Kansas DOT achieved a high level of participation when it featured Alan Pisarski, author of *Commuting in America,* at a statewide workshop. The Alaska DOT holds meetings in the weeks before an election; when the candidates are scheduled to appear, the agency gets good turnout.

- ***Feature agency board or staff members as guest speakers.*** The active interest of high-level staff demonstrates the value an agency places on public input. Senior managers at the Oregon and Pennsylvania DOTs appear at meetings to enhance attendance. Los Angeles County MTA's chief executive officer frequently speaks at the agency's meetings. The Houston Transit Agency brings board meetings into the community every three months for a project and program status report. The Central Puget Sound RTA's board is directly involved in meetings to show residents their voices have value and their comments are not being "filtered" through staffers.

- ***Evaluate outreach efforts after a meeting.*** Determining what worked and what didn't helps assure that future meetings will be more effective. When participants see that the agency has improved its process, their enthusiasm is renewed. Reviewing attendance lists can help track individual interests. The Portland Metro, with attendance of over 300 people at meetings, evaluates its outreach program every three years.

- ***Maintain interest through follow-up***. When people know their presence has been appreciated, they feel more inclined to continue with the process. Follow-up includes thank-you letters, reports, phone calls, surveys, and distribution of new information. For invited participants, courtesy dictates a thank-you note. Written responses are also appropriate to follow up unanswered questions or unresolved issues.

- ***Target key individuals for special invitation to the next meeting.*** Participants who are active in the community should be encouraged to attend and bring neighbors. This not only generates good will by showing respect for their role in the community, it also has a rippling effect within their sphere of influence.

- ***Court press coverage and establish good media relations.*** Agency community relations staff usually knows which reporters have transportation issues as their "beat." Feeding them choice bits of news and keeping them up-to-date helps assure they will cover the story well and in a timely fashion. On the other hand, agencies should avoid blanketing them with material. Timing is all. The Wisconsin DOT maintains relations with 600–800 media outlets and gets stories in the press prior to meetings. The Portland Metro takes out eye-catching ads, and the Cape Cod Commission gets a newspaper article "almost every day." In Minnesota, the Twin Cities MPO has a two-pronged media strategy: one focused on its region's editorial boards, another on reporters.

- ***Employ radio coverage as a cost-effective alternative*** to reach broad segments of the public. Paid ads, public service announcements (PSAs), and spot interviews can make more people aware of a transportation effort and call attention to upcoming meetings. The Montana DOT arranged interviews at local radio stations before its long-range plan meetings. The Minnesota

DOT developed call-in shows and later distributed tapes to cable stations. The tapes were played repeatedly, thus reaching a wider audience, and a comment number was listed at the end of the tape.

**Who leads the effort?**

**In-house staff usually initiates these measures,** developing strategies and techniques for improving attendance and tailoring the approach to meet community needs as well as the project's particular demands. The Roanoke, Virginia, MPO assigns a staff person to devote the necessary time and energy to improving attendance. The Denver Transit Agency looks outside its engineering staff for meeting leaders who are skilled in describing technical issues in non-technical language.

**Community leaders or elected officials can suggest what works best in their communities,** advising an agency on key strategies and putting it in touch with others who are able to improve outreach. Agency credibility is often improved when a community leader conducts a meeting or introduces agency staff.

**Professional facilitators help create a fair, neutral atmosphere.** For complex or controversial issues, they help attract people who doubt they will otherwise be heard. They also contribute innovative ideas on how to increase subsequent participation. (See **Facilitation**.)

**What are the costs?**

**Costs depend on the number of people to be reached and the community's past involvement** with agency programs. Direct expenses include ads, graphics, visuals, mailings, translators if necessary, facility rental, and equipment. Staff costs are incurred to plan and implement a program, monitor progress, and make required adjustments. The level of time and energy staff must commit to a public involvement effort is closely linked to factors such as the complexity of the issues and the community's cultural heritage as well as its history of response to the agency. Costs may be significantly less for outreach to a community that has a well-established relationship with the agency.

**What are the drawbacks?**

**Establishing credibility is difficult.** Agencies lacking a track record in participatory planning sometimes have difficulty establishing a process and convincing the public that efforts are sincere. Agencies that previously made "token" efforts without using the input to improve the plan or project may find it doubly hard to engage the community. A reputation for an honest commitment to involving the public is only built over time.

**Preparations to increase meeting attendance are time-consuming.** Personnel who are savvy about engaging the community in public involvement may be scarce. A trial-and-error period is sometimes needed to determine what works. Agency inaction, errors, and poor planning compound the difficulties of establishing credibility.

**Groups not traditionally involved in meetings are often hard to reach.** Ethnic, minority, and low-income communities may need extra contact and encouragement to keep them involved, since they often have more barriers to overcome. People who have been put off by an agency's insensitivity to their cultural heritage may be reluctant to participate again. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.)

**A larger number of participants increases the challenge of building consensus.** Success in attracting more people places extra demands on staff, because more information must be prepared and transmitted. A wider array of opinion sometimes creates polarization or prolongs the process of narrowing down alternatives to reach consensus. Agency staff needs to research potential issues and prepare focused agendas for meeting discussions.

**For further information:**

- Alaska Department of Transportation, Juneau, Alaska, (907) 465-2171
- Capital District Metropolitan Planning Organization, Albany, New York, (518) 458-2161
- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1357
- Florida Department of Transportation, Tallahassee, Florida, (904) 488-8006
- Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, Houston, Texas, (713) 739-4000
- Lawrence–Douglas County Metropolitan Planning Organization, Lawrence, Kansas, (913) 832-3153
- Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Los Angeles, California, (213) 922-2000
- Wisconsin Department of Transportation, Madison, Wisconsin, (608) 266-7744

## ROLE PLAYING

### What is role playing?

**In role playing, participants act out characters in a predefined "situation"** dealing with controversial aspects of transportation planning or project development. A role playing session is followed by an evaluation of the interaction and the statements made. At a recent conference of Federal agencies and private groups, participants took roles as members of groups competing for funds from the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). The range of groups included one arguing for a larger share for highways, another representing air quality environmentalists, and one speaking as a national cycling lobby seeking more money for bike paths.

**Role playing allows people to take risk-free positions** by acting out characters in hypothetical situations. It helps participants understand the range of concerns, values, and positions held by other people. It is sometimes called game simulation, simulations, simulated discussion, simulation games, and gaming. (See **Games and Contests**.)

**Role playing has these components:**

- A clearly defined and simple "situation" applicable to the problem or issue at hand;
- Written descriptions of the "roles" (characters) for participants to play;
- Goals to be accomplished during the session;
- A trained small-group leader/facilitator;
- Sufficient time for each participant to speak;
- An overall time limit for the session; and
- An evaluation period.

**Role playing encourages *active* participation** in confronting a situation. There is no script. Participants improvise how their characters might respond in the given situation and interact with the other characters.

**Role playing is also used to dramatize proposed changes.** In Hawaii, skits were used at an electronic town meeting to compare State funding for traditional industries with State help for new high-tech industries. Instead of the participants themselves assuming roles, a local improvisational acting company acted out several scenes, and viewers were then asked to react to issues raised by the role playing.

### Why is it useful?

**Role playing is an enlightening and interesting way to help people see a problem from another perspective.** It builds bridges between people, so they can appreciate the pressures and constraints faced by others. Rather than simply listening to speeches, people actively address the impacts of their decisions, actions, and positions on other people. Since statements made while playing a character are not binding on any participant, role playing facilitates involvement by engaging participants in a non-threatening process.

**In role playing, players become interactive.** They step out of their normal roles and into another role—often one that opposes their own goals and values. In this way, for example, an environmental activist and an industrial representative might change roles for purposes of the exercise. By presenting their own interpretation of how their characters would react, participants are often enlightened about the attitudes and behavior of others.

**Role playing shows how people stereotype others** and make judgments based on those stereotypes. The British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority used role playing to help measure attitudes toward exportation of power.  Participants opposed to exporting power assumed the role of an energy exporter and discussed the benefits of exportation.  Then, each drew a picture of what he or she thought an energy exporter looked like.  By being forced to show biases through role playing and graphic representations, participants could see how stereotypes cloud people's ability to be open to others' ideas.

**Does it have special uses?**

**A common application of role playing is employee training.** As part of its Neighborhood Transit Services Workshops program, the Boston Transportation Department used role playing and other techniques to train staff in facilitation skills and responding to questions and comments.  This enabled city staff to continue a program initially developed and conducted by consultants.

**Role playing helps when interaction among participants is needed** to break down barriers or reduce conflict or tension.  Role playing jump-starts a lifeless group or helps people get to know each other at meetings or conferences.  Role-playing exercises are particularly useful when groups have clearly defined positions that draw battle lines and limit communication.

**Role playing is also used to bring expert opinion to bear on a problem.** At a recent conference, a group of public involvement specialists participated in a role play that examined the needs of a power authority preparing a sustainable energy strategy.  Through the role play—in which a wide range of interest groups, elected officials, and residents were portrayed—the expert group helped the power authority outline appropriate responses and involve the public better.

**Who participates? And how?**

**A full range of representatives of community groups, interest groups, or key stakeholders can participate.** A broad array of positions should be represented.  If groups are large, some participants may be teamed with others to allow greater participation.  Participants who have difficulty acknowledging other interests, are unable to see the problem in context, or appear to be wedded to a particular position need particular encouragement to become engaged in the process.

**Role playing is usually best with informed participants,** since they already have some knowledge of the issues and the positions of the various parties.  In any case, characters' positions and interests should be reasonably clear and well-defined.  The Dallas Area Rapid Transit Authority (DART) used role playing with the general public during its bus planning efforts and with its advisory group for the South Oak Cliff Alternatives Analysis.  DART found that the role-playing exercises were most productive when participants were informed community members and not simply "persons on the street."

**Agency staff also participate,** provided they do so on equal footing with community members.  This helps staff to better understand the positions of participants and break down barriers between them and the community members with whom they need to interact.

**A trained leader describes the process orally.** Participants receive a written description of the situation, setting, and characters involved.  The leader reads it aloud, sets time limits, gives examples of how responses might be presented, assigns roles, and begins the exercise.  Each person speaks with the "voice" or viewpoint of his/her assigned character.  As role playing progresses, time checks are helpful to keep participants focused and directed toward presenting their characters' full positions and reaching closure.

**Face-to-face contact is essential in role playing,** so chairs should be arranged around a table or in a circle.  Props, such as hats or clothes, sometimes help people get into their roles.  A newsprint pad and markers are useful to record comments during the evaluation period.  Index cards or pads of paper encourage participants to make notes.

**Evaluation is essential** to the outcome. The trained leader initiates an engaging discussion with participants—one that focuses not only on the outcome but also on issues raised by participants, probing why various stands were taken and decisions made. Acting ability is irrelevant and may be discussed only in genial and friendly terms!

**Role playing is sometimes done spontaneously,** without a scripted situation or roles. In Santa Rosa, California, the city worked with community members on the impacts of discharging treated wastewater into the river. Through spontaneous role playing, with participants arguing on behalf of other people's preferences, the administration was able to understand better the public perception of wastewater discharge.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Agencies create stronger participation by building on the increased understanding of issues and positions** that result from role play. Role playing helps flesh out or clarify participants' opinions. They gain a clearer understanding of the planning or project development process, the multiple issues and interests that are involved, and the links between transportation and other areas like land use. Some alter their own perspectives on issues and potential solutions. Role playing also assists in negotiation and coalition building, where participants test potential consensus points.

### Who leads role playing?

**Role playing requires a trained leader** from within or outside the agency who is clear about the goals. This leader must be skilled at designing representative situations and scenarios that are applicable to the real-life situation. The leader should also be knowledgeable about areas of conflict and able to guide the group toward resolution. Finally, she or he must be able to lead the evaluation and engage participants in discussing the process, the lessons learned, and their relevance to real-world transportation issues.

### What are the costs?

**Costs tend to be high in terms of staffing.** If a trained leader is not available within the agency, a consultant knowledgeable about the issues needs to be hired for one or more days. Preparation time for developing the roles and the situation is extensive, depending on the complexity of the real-life problems. Even skilled consultants or staff require several dry runs and revision cycles to get the role play right. Agency staff sometimes finds that oversight of consultants is demanding in terms of time and energy to assure that they fully understand the issues to be covered. However, compared to other interactive processes—such as charrettes or workshops—that work on these different perspectives, role playing requires fewer staff resources, funds, and materials.

### How is role playing organized?

**Role playing is part of an ongoing process to develop cooperation among participants.** Trust among group members is essential: people are unlikely to fully participate if they do not know each other and have not developed a sense of mutual trust.

**Preparation includes developing a situation and roles,** inviting participants, determining the length of time for role playing, and making the setting conducive to the event. Effective role-playing games are relatively small, involving between 7 and 15 people.

**Community representatives can be consulted** to sound out the idea, work on characters, and help determine whose participation might bring out specific issues. Such consultation helps assure that role playing is well-integrated with the larger process. Advance notice and consultation mitigate distrust and questioning of motives.

**Establishing clear and achievable goals is critical.** Goals might include resolving a conflict, increasing awareness of various perspectives, looking at familiar issues in different ways, and bridging gaps among participants and with the agency.

**A time limit is usually imposed,** but the atmosphere should be light and friendly.

**Observers or non-players may be invited to follow the action** and participate in the evaluation period. Agencies may observe the proceedings first-hand for information to help an overall process of planning or developing a project. However, observers dampen enthusiastic participation or cause resentment if they are viewed as having unexpressed or reserved opinions that are not addressed during the role playing.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**Role playing is part of a more extensive involvement process.** It is used to broaden understanding of an issue early in the process. It is used with board or computer games that simulate situations and require people to step into another "pair of shoes." (See **Games and Contests; Computer Presentations and Simulations**.) It is used when people from different walks of life are all working on a common project.

**Role playing is used as an ice-breaker** at regular committee meetings. If participants' thinking is changed through role playing, they are more likely to accept opinions about a variety of issues. As a result, later public involvement efforts are easier and more productive. Participants come to see that their opponents' views can also change. Role playing also spices up an otherwise dull topic by creating characters with humorous names that allude to their roles (for example, "Douglas Fir," representing the Forest Service).

### What are the drawbacks?

**Role playing requires significant time and skills,** primarily for preparing scenarios and roles, taking dry runs, and conducting the exercise. A consultant can be expensive, particularly when briefing is needed. This expense, however, is offset by time savings in reaching an understanding of the problems and constraints. A consultant may also train agency staff people to plan and conduct future role playing sessions on their own.

**Participants may be uncomfortable** playing roles that negate their true feelings. The leader must provide reassurance, support, and suggestions.

**The outcome is unpredictable,** even with a strong leader. Although the action can go in an unplanned direction, a trained leader can step in and refocus the session. In addition, an unpredicted outcome may bring up new issues that have not yet been considered.

**Lack of enthusiasm or minimal participation occurs if the motive or sincerity of the agency is questioned.** Agencies enhance the chances of success by involving participants in planning the role play, conducting the session early in the process, and providing clear direction and strong leadership. Agencies need to show the links between the role playing and participation in the real issues and decisions at stake.

**For further information:**

- British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority, (604) 623-3629
- Dallas Area Rapid Transit District, (214) 749-2543
- Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, (617) 222-5000
- Surface Transportation Policy Project, (202) 939-3470

## SITE VISITS

### What are site visits?

**Site visits are trips taken by community residents, officials, agencies, and consultants** to proposed or actual project areas, corridors, impacted areas, or affected properties. They are also known as field visits or site tours.

**Site visits are made in a variety of ways**—by bus, train, taxi, private car, or on foot. Some involve long-distance trips by air.

### Why are they useful?

**Site visits show the physical environment of a proposal.** They are used by local people to show engineers, agency personnel, and planners details and conditions they might have missed. Frequently, site visits are the best way to demonstrate a physical fact to either the community or agency personnel.

**Site visits give participants a common frame of reference.** They see conditions at the same time and under the same circumstances. The Connecticut Department of Transportation (DOT) organized a bus tour of New Haven's Q Bridge area so the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) could see the existing bridge, potential new rights-of-way, and sensitive neighboring areas. The tour included agency staff, community people, and consultants.

**Site visits help people understand each other's point-of-view.** Residents, officials, and agency staff stand on the street, observe where a proposed project would be, and locate it on a plan. This helps people understand how agency plans translate into reality. Site visits are valuable as a basis for repeated discussions and as details are developed.

**Site visits help get people to participate who normally would not be involved** or may be uncomfortable working with agencies. The field office personnel for Denver's light rail transit project conducted walking tours of the corridor for neighborhood residents, many of whom had never been involved in a planning or construction project.

**A site visit is a chance for agency staff to better understand a proposal** and hear the perspective of others. Engineers and other staff find an informal, risk-free opportunity for communication with the community.

**Site visits improve media coverage and accuracy of reporting,** on occasions when the media are involved. A reporter who devotes several hours to a site visit is more likely to understand and write clearly about complex, subtle issues and planning details. (See **Media Strategies**.)

**Site visits help gain credibility for the agency by going into the community.** They help dispel the notion that agencies do not understand the area or people they will affect. They show that an agency is willing to listen to community concerns.

### Do they have special uses?

**Site visits help people understand a particular technology.** Visits are made on buses, transit lines, roads, or other forms of transportation to illustrate the operations, problems, and advantages of a specific mode. In Denver, the transit agency put a light rail transit vehicle on display to let people see what it was like and walk through it.

**Trips to the site are useful to address new questions as they arise.** Participants helping to develop the Central Artery North Area project in Boston's Charlestown neighborhood had difficulty understanding the dimensions of a park proposed for the top of the depressed highway. Going to the site on a low-traffic morning, agency staff outlined the proposed new parcel on the ground with lime. With a rooftop view of the outlined space, participants were able to appreciate the new park's size. The community newspaper carried a feature on the visit to help local people grasp the enormity of the parcel.

**Site visits are sometimes tours to locations similar to the proposed site.** Cities contemplating new rail systems have sent delegations to cities where such systems already exist. During these visits, meetings were arranged between the delegation and agency officials, community people, and the business community. For Denver's light rail transit project, community groups visited light rail transit systems in Portland and Vancouver.

### Who participates? And how?

**Anyone can participate (as long as the site is accessible).** Site visits are sometimes targeted to advisory committee representatives, elected officials, neighborhood activists and local residents, environmentalists, or the business community. People from the disability community may have difficulty visiting a site with rough topography. (See **People with Disabilities**.)

**Site visits help local people make a particular point about a proposal,** especially if they feel the agency does not understand the point. In Sioux City, Iowa, planning for Vision 2020 planning started with a citywide bus tour for its Task Force to provide an overview of the physical attributes of the city. Task Force members were able as a group to view issues in all parts of the city. Agency staff thought the trip was invaluable as an overview of local concerns.

**Information about the site visit is distributed widely to potentially participants.** Information is sent out in meeting notices or as fliers. Notices are mailed to active participants in the process and placed in local newspapers or on signs in local stores or activity centers. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

**A special invitation helps draw specific participants.** An agency may target certain people because of their concerns or issues. In these instances, a special written invitation or phone call helps. A follow-up letter or notice also helps draw special participants.

**Tours can be organized.** For Boston's Central Artery/Tunnel, the project offered a series of walking tours. Notices were sent to a variety of organizations, and the public was invited. Bus or train tours may be an appropriate way to include a large group. In special instances, air tours are useful. For people unable to attend, a video tour is a good alternative. Videos are also used in meetings to help participants remember site details. (See **Video Techniques**.)

**Community residents request a site visit** so they can point out specific issues and make sure the agency understands their concerns. A community coalition asked the Massachusetts Secretary of Transportation, the transit authority's General Manager, and project planners to tour a corridor being studied for transit improvements.

### How do agencies use site visits?

**Site visits are useful to show how a facility or plan would operate** or fit into its surroundings. In preparation for a major investment study, the Maryland Transit Authority used tours to show how its existing light rail line operates. Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) took neighborhood associations on site visits to show that proposed technologies and operations were being used elsewhere. Inviting media representatives on site visits results in better-informed reporting and editorializing. (See **Media Strategies**.)

**Agencies use site visits to better understand the physical environment,** make better-informed decisions, and clarify conflicting positions on particular physical points, such as sources of background noise levels or distances between buildings and proposed tracks.

### Who leads site visits?

**A site visit must be led by experienced, knowledgeable staff** who know the area and the issues. The staff must communicate the issues in a non-judgmental and open-minded way, so that participants feel the trip is a worthwhile learning experience.

**A community representative can lead a site visit.** The leader should not be biased or present only one side of the story. Since other community groups have different perspectives, such bias could be divisive.

**A high agency official or an elected official may lead a site visit,** particularly for high-profile, controversial projects. Community members may feel that top officials are the most appropriate leaders for such projects.

### What are the costs?

**Costs vary**. Transportation costs are high for long-distance visits requiring extensive arrangements. Costs were a significant factor when community representatives from Burlington, Vermont, along with agency staff, considered traveling by air to see the Portland, Oregon, light rail installation.

**The costs of staff time vary.** Staff time costs relatively little for local site visits but could involve several days for more distant trips.

**Agencies can provide food,** especially if the visit is lengthy or if extended discussion is planned. Light snacks and beverages convey an informal message and encourage people to stay and ask questions. In Dallas, DART always feeds participants during site visits.

**Site visits can be photographed or taped.** A camera records information such as how close a building is to the street. Photos or videos of the gathering are informative for other people, the staff, or the media. A video camera helps record the details raised by local people, as well as interchanges between community members and agency personnel.

### How are site visits organized?

**Agency staff contacts community group leaders** to see if there is interest in a site visit. If there is, staff should ask for names of potential invitees and compile an invitation list. If the list is short, the agency can ask invitees if they feel comfortable opening the visit to a wider audience by listing it in local newspapers, posting notices in public places, or sending a notice to an entire mailing list.

**Community people can ask an agency to conduct a site visit.** Agency staff inquires about the goals of the visit, the agency personnel who should be present, and others who should attend. It is important to work together in setting an appropriate date, time, and other logistics to demonstrate cooperation and assure participation.

**Site visits are held at convenient times,** such as evenings or weekends. These times should be selected in conjunction with the community. They should also be selected so that site conditions are not obscured by equipment or bad lighting. It is preferable to hold a site visit during the time the site is most active or when the site represents a condition that people are concerned about.

**A meeting can be added to a site visit if the logistics are feasible.** It is helpful to discuss what people saw while impressions are fresh. A formal meeting on-site requires distinctive planning. Details such as chairs, lights, and weather must be considered. If an agency wants an on-site meeting, it should get agreement from the community.

**The agency supplies transportation,** if required. It is important that the vehicle be comfortable. People should be able to hear the leader or any discussions clearly.

**Descriptive materials are provided before the visit,** including a summary of the proposal, the purpose of the visit, specific characteristics to look for, etc. Maps and materials may be needed to explain major elements of the proposal. In Dallas, DART shows a site video beforehand and provides written materials in advance.

**Generally, participants gather in one location and leave together for the site.** Occasionally, participants gather at the site itself. A definite arrival time is set, since an opening explanation is crucial and helps the group work together; the informality of learning together helps break down factions within the group.

**The organizer of the visit may lead it.** It can be conducted as a walk or drive around the site. The visit should be narrated, so that participants are aware of where the proposal affects the land. Time should be allowed for discussion of each area and for a question-and-answer period as the group goes along and at the end of the site visit.

**Viewpoints from all participants are heard during the visit.** The agency makes sure each participant can view and react to the site and the proposal. Direct input is solicited.

**Summing-up should be done promptly.** Participants may gather and discuss what they experienced. A written record should be prepared, including a list of participants, items to investigate further, and areas in which there was agreement and disagreement.

### How are they used with other techniques?

**CACs are good candidates for site visits.** CAC members can be selected from visit participants. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.) The San Francisco Citizens' Planning Committee took site visits to joint developments in other communities. During the Hudson waterfront transit alternatives analysis in New Jersey, CAC members toured potential air quality monitoring sites.

**A site visit can be a first step in another technique** such as a charrette. (See **Charrettes**.) Computer simulations are more accurate and credible if site visits are incorporated. (See **Computer Presentations and Simulations**.)

**Site visits with media involved are important parts of media strategies.** Newsletter articles highlighting site visits and incorporating photos and diagrams demonstrate agency efforts in public involvement by reporting the trip to many people. (See **Media Strategies; Public Information Materials**.)

### What are the drawbacks?

**Organizing a visit and getting appropriate people there is a challenge.** Coordinating schedules, weather, and transportation requires considerable effort and staff time.

**Site visits may need to be repeated several times** for a large project. Despite careful planning, they may fall flat due to weather or other conditions over which the staff has no control. A trip to a proposed site may cause later problems in recollection if viewed on a day when weather is an aberration or if part of the site is inaccessible.

**A site visit fails if staff cannot answer questions** or are poorly prepared. The community may feel its time is wasted if it seems the agency is not listening or is defensive.

**The costs of a visit to a distant location are often prohibitive.** Airplane, train, or bus group travel to other cities may be beyond an agency's budget.

**For further information:**

- Bay Area Rapid Transit District, San Francisco, California, (510) 464-6172
- Burlington, Vermont, (801) 658-3004
- Central Artery North Area Project, Massachusetts Highway Department, (617) 973-7000
- Connecticut DOT, Newington, Connecticut, (860) 594-2000
- Dallas Area Regional Transit, Dallas, Texas, (214) 749-2581
- Denver Regional Transit District, Denver, Colorado, (303) 299-2401
- Siouxland Interstate Metropolitan Planning Committee, Sioux City, Iowa, (712) 279-6344

## NON-TRADITIONAL MEETING PLACES AND EVENTS

### What are non-traditional meeting places and events?

**These are locations that are not the usual meeting hall or public building** where many participation events are traditionally held. These non-traditional options include shopping centers, elderly drop-in centers, county fairs, neighborhood fairs and block parties, and sporting events. Traditional places such as schools, town halls, board rooms, and libraries do have benefits. Space in these buildings is readily available and inexpensive to operate. They are usually central to the community and the neighborhoods and can be perceived as neutral in a socially polarized area. However, to reach people who don't typically participate, an agency needs to go to where they congregate and feel comfortable—in other words, to their own turf.

**Many non-traditional meeting places are within the local community** and enable an agency to achieve a wider range of public contact. When these meeting site options are used, community access is easier and people's interest is heightened. By choosing non-traditional community locations and events, an agency shows its sincere interest in involving community people and tailoring participation opportunities to their needs.

### Why are they useful?

**Unusual locations help agencies increase attendance.** Sites may be physical locations or events open to the public. Transportation agencies have used the following non-traditional locations and events to attract new and different participants to the transportation planning process:

- **Shopping malls attract large numbers of people.** The New Jersey Department of Transportation (DOT) used suburban shopping malls for events and meetings during development of its statewide long-range transportation plan. Activities included videos, mini-focus groups, children's activities, and staff assistance at presentations. (See **Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks; Games and Contests**.)

- **Agricultural fairs are good locations for exhibits.** The Vancouver Intergovernmental Resource Center had a booth for 10 days at the Washington State Fair. Using interactive video games, the transit authority took an educational approach to issues of air quality, congestion, and alternative modes. Video games were a hit with all age groups, especially children. The Los Angeles, California, Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) staffed a mock-up transit car at a booth at the county fair for 28 days. The Idaho DOT staffed a booth at the East Idaho Fair with 2 people on 2 shifts per day for 9 days.

- **Neighborhood fairs and events help in distributing information.** The Sioux City, Iowa, Siouxland Interstate Metropolitan Planning Committee had an information booth at a local festival. The Houston–Galveston Area Council staffed several information booths each week to provide information on-site at community events.

- **Local buildings and events are good locations for agency contact.** New Jersey Transit has sponsored meetings at a Portuguese social club, a State museum oriented to children, a suburban senior citizen center, and a work site at Port Elizabeth.

- **Community sports events are good places to meet and talk with people.** As part of a major investment study, the Missouri Highway and Transportation Agency set up displays in a tent inside the gate at a community football game. People were encouraged to stop by, ask questions, and fill out a survey form.

- **Special neighborhood events help agencies reach people.** Displays or mini-meetings may be held in conjunction with career days, block parties, house meetings, bus trips, or local community festivities.

- **Centrally-located, convenient places may be used to distribute agency information.** Local libraries are a good place for viewing community displays and are often used to make project environmental documents available locally. Public parks have been used for large meetings and for events where transportation agencies can participate.

**Agencies reach individuals who usually do not participate.** At new sites and places commonly visited by the public, an agency distributes information to a large population it ordinarily would not reach. People may be directly contacted who do not ordinarily come to public buildings or participate in agency meetings.

**Agencies receive a wider array of comments from more people.** With greater community awareness about a new process, more people are encouraged to participate in meetings associated with it. Georgia DOT uses “greeters” to welcome participants at its open houses and instructs staff to help.

**An agency’s credibility is enhanced by new approaches.** By bringing a meeting into a community, an agency shows its concern and desire to obtain local comments. Highway public hearings are traditionally held near the site proposed for improvement—for instance, in high school auditoriums. But many planning and project development meetings can also benefit participants by using local sites at convenient times, since many members of the public are not free to attend during business hours. For its statewide plan, the Massachusetts Highway Department held open houses in numerous community facilities around the State.

**Do they have special uses?**

**Specific sites in a community can be targeted.** Instead of requiring people to travel to agency offices, sites can be chosen that are central to neighborhoods. This is particularly important if neighborhoods are defined by specific ethnic, minority, or other underrepresented groups. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.)

**Using project sites for meetings helps the public understand technical issues.** As one non-traditional way to hold meetings, a visit to a project location or a tour of an alignment provides first-hand experience to help people envision a plan or project. (See **Site Visits**.) To obtain public input, the Ada Planning Association in Boise, Idaho, set up an outdoor task force meeting in a public park, where a pedestrian crossing bridge was proposed. A direct viewing of the physical site, along with displays and maps, helped people understand the technical design of the proposed improvement.

**Non-traditional sites help an agency reach specific target groups.** The Kansas DOT met at local sites for regional meetings with business and industry in developing its long-range plan. The Maricopa Association of Governments in Phoenix, Arizona, developed two types of meetings at local sites, one for business leaders and key community leaders and the other for the general public.

**Specific modes can be used as a focus for meetings.** The Denver, Colorado, Regional Transit District (RTD) invited people to one major investment study meeting held on a trolley. During Miami’s East–West Major Investment Study (MIS), the Florida DOT invited elementary and middle-school students to tour the existing system and encourage their parents to participate in the decision-making by attending meetings. During its rail transit alternatives analysis/draft environmental impact statement/draft environmental impact report process, the Los Angeles MTA offered a walking tour or a ride on a passenger rail car inside the proposed construction area to explain the operation and construction process and gain input on proposed mitigation measures.

**Sites or events that attract large numbers of people are especially useful.** There is increasing interest in taking agency work to "where the people are." By going to where people congregate in large numbers, an agency takes advantage of a pre-existing audience. Non-traditional sites draw crowds a public meeting rarely does. Shopping centers attract people in such numbers that an agency may not need to publicize its presence.

### Who participates? And how?

**People are usually invited to participate informally.** In unusual locations, agencies often must get the attention of passers-by through attractive displays that compete with other activities at the site. The displays encourage people to visit, get information, and give an agency their views and comments. However, a meeting in a special place can also be directed beyond individuals through notices and invitations to a general audience or a mixture of representatives from community groups.

**Participants usually visit the site for a meeting or for browsing** through an exhibit. At a booth or display, they view exhibits or talk to a staff person. At a project site, people get information from the surroundings as well as from agency displays, brochures, and presentations. Depending on the location and the type of meeting or display, they give comments on agency work.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Agencies need to consider how to document comments for use as input to decisions.** Comments recorded in writing by participants or staff bring new insights or considerations to a plan or project. But the informality of the situation may make it difficult for passers-by to write their comments, particularly if they have children with them or if there is no convenient place to sit and write. In such cases, recording oral comments on tape for later transcription is one option. Another is providing comment forms that can be filled out at home and mailed to the agency.

### Who leads?

**Agency staff people are most likely to lead non-traditional events.** If informal presentations are required, agency staff or consultants may handle them. Project management staff led a trolley tour for the Denver, Colorado, Regional Transportation District and the Houston, Texas, Transit Alternatives Analysis/ Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

**Non-traditional meetings are also led by community residents.** The Boise, Idaho, MPO asks members of its civic advisory committee (CAC) to host and lead non-traditional meetings. CAC members meet with civic organizations and attend neighborhood events to speak on the long-range plan and how people can become actively involved in it. The community perspective helps participants understand an agency's work. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.)

**Community residents can assist agency participation in non-traditional events.** Familiar neighborhood faces encourage other neighbors to ask questions and participate. Community members can work jointly with agency personnel in staffing exhibits. (See **Speakers' Bureaus and Public Involvement Volunteers**.)

### What do they cost?

**Costs vary.** If only the place is changed, costs are likely to be reasonably low. Labor-intensive events are expensive. One-day events may require two agency representatives to staff a booth and field questions from community residents.

**Staff people are not always required at special exhibits.** Although it is useful for them to be on hand, they are necessary only if large crowds or many questions are anticipated. If an issue is especially controversial or complex, it is best to have staff accompany the exhibit. Otherwise, the display can include telephone numbers to contact for further information.

**Costs climb for lengthy events** such as State fairs. The Los Angeles MTA needed 25 people to staff a county fair booth that operated from 10:00 A.M. to midnight for 28 days.

**Operational costs are incurred.** Staff time, space rentals, equipment, event scheduling, graphics, advertising in newspapers, videos, and VCRs are possible cost elements. For bus tours, there may be rental fees. The local transit authority donated the use of the bus for the Boise, Idaho, MPO bus tour.

### How are they organized?

**An agency defines the objectives for the event.** The agency's public involvement goals guide in selecting the site and format. Staff may brainstorm ideas to flesh out the format. Community leaders and groups with experience at sites such as fairs are good sources of advice.

**Sites that are open at convenient hours raise attendance.** Non-traditional times for meetings may help people schedule time to attend. Special evening or weekend hours are frequently used to appeal to people who are unable to attend meetings or exhibits during regular working hours or weekdays. The Metropolitan Council of the Twin Cities area of Minnesota is transforming certain meetings into open houses where people can come and go according to their own schedules. (See **Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses**.)

**Agencies increase participation by informing the local media** of an event and its schedule. For certain events, it is appropriate to work with others who are in charge of publicity.

**Exhibits, format, and coordination of staff are instrumental** in a successful event at an unusual site. Participation in seasonal events such as State or county fairs sometimes requires reservations months in advance. Securing the availability of a facility ahead of schedule ensures better preparation and organization.

**Agencies choose the most appropriate method of providing information.** A wide variety of methods are available to use in unconventional sites:

- **Booths or tables are used to give and get information.** These booths are staffed, if possible, so people can talk with agency representatives. These conversations can explain agency goals and elicit community comments.

- **Kiosks also offer a method of both giving and getting information.** Interactive displays can provide information people may find useful. Displays can also be set up to record comments or survey customer attitudes. The Colorado DOT has used interactive touch screens in shopping centers. (See **Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks**.)

- **Props help stimulate dialogue in non-traditional meeting places.** In preparing its long-range transportation plan, the East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission used props such as renderings, photos, engineering designs, and videos to help participants visualize scenarios of managed growth, maximized density, and minimized infrastructure development. Videos and slides were used at local sites in the process of preparing a long-range transportation plan for the Little Rock, Arkansas, Metroplan. For the Eastside Corridor Alternatives Analysis/Draft Environmental Impact Statement/Draft Environmental Impact Report process, the Los Angeles MTA placed the alternatives in color and on small (11″ x 17″) boards, which were easy to carry and pass around at meetings. Participants could hold the boards at close range and discuss them at length.

- **Videos may be shown at special sites** or lent for wide distribution. They outline issues, define the need for participation, and set the stage for a meeting. They can be re-run at meetings as a basis for discussions. The Wisconsin DOT uses videos at meetings to explain a project's goals for the coming years, along with materials or resource people who are available for questions. (See **Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks**.)

- **Portable exhibits can take the place of staff** and still enhance the distribution of agency information. An agency prepares stand-alone visuals for displays to bring information to new groups of people to broaden participation. These visuals include boards, photographs, renderings, kiosks, interactive displays, videos, or maps. Portable exhibits are set up in public buildings, malls, or other locations where they can be read by passers-by. It is important to find locations where a display can be monitored by security officials, so that it will not be defaced or destroyed.

- **Mobile exhibits can be mounted inside a vehicle** used to travel around a State or region. With permission, it can be stationed at nearly any location, including malls, universities, or local public buildings. The Arizona DOT uses a mobile facility to inform the public in sparsely-populated areas. The Washington, D.C., MPO used a "vision van" to publicize its visioning effort and gather survey information.

**Informality aids in attracting people to agency events or displays in any setting** and is particularly important at non-traditional sites. Displays or events that allow one-on-one interaction are less intimidating for people who tend to shy away from meetings in traditional locations. Informality also helps a transportation agency's message and materials become "part of the landscape" rather than an intrusion into community territory.

**Technical descriptions are not usually required.** Unconventional sites fit with non-technical explanations. Discussing engineering concepts or environmental impacts in ordinary terms is challenging to staff but rewarding in terms of improved public understanding of agency goals.

**Evaluation of the success of unusual events aids future outreach efforts.** Agencies need to carefully assess how variable factors such as time of day, location, access by public transportation, or nature of the event affected its impact, so that future planning can capitalize on those that contributed to its success and avoid those that detracted from it.

### How are they used with other techniques?

**Non-traditional meetings and exhibits supplement other public involvement programs.** Different locations with special props spark new interest in active community people or attract new participants into an outreach meeting. At new sites, charrettes, focus groups, or visioning may be used as lead-ins to discussing complex issues. (See **Charrettes; Focus Groups; Visioning**.) CACs may want to travel to new sites for their meetings. (See **Civic Advisory Committees**.)

### What are the drawbacks?

**Staffing can be expensive.** Staff and equipment costs climb for long events, such as State fairs that last 10 days or more. Props, videos, and interactive computers require on-site technical assistance to set up equipment.

**Unusual meeting sites and approaches may be intimidating to potential participants,** especially groups not traditionally involved in the decision-making process. An agency needs special effort to gain their confidence and participation.

**Weather conditions are a factor in selecting an unusual meeting site.** A rain date may need to be scheduled for outdoor meetings. The East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission avoids outdoor meetings during the summer when air conditioning is more comfortable.

**The number of exhibits to be displayed may be restricted at a new site** because of space limitations. Agencies may not have all the exhibits necessary to answer a specific question thoroughly. The Denver, Colorado, RTD experienced exhibit limitations because it could not bring all the visuals and boards to a meeting on the trolley.

**People may not be interested in interactive displays.** The Florida DOT turned proposed interactive mall and turnpike plaza events into "exhibits only" when they realized passengers were, in general, not interested in getting detailed information while stopping at commercial centers on the turnpike. Another State DOT reports that while many people passed by and casually looked at its displays at a State fair, the staff doubted that many viewers were really engaged or gleaned much from the experience. An agency needs to carefully define its objectives in choosing unusual venues and design its presence to accomplish worthwhile aims that justify the costs and the effort.

**Popular exhibits often require extra preparation.** Los Angeles MTA's Metro Red Line display cars have been an attractive feature at many community events. Preparations to display the cars required months of advanced notice to responsible MTA departments.

**Varying meeting locations makes it difficult to maintain continuity** and build on previous meetings. Interested stakeholders may lose interest if special efforts replace a known meeting pattern.

### Are non-traditional meetings and events flexible?

**Meetings sites vary, and events are tailored to specific sites.** Agencies can determine whether to staff a booth or exhibit throughout an exhibition period, which varies from one day to more than a week. Flexibility is required if events are rescheduled due to weather conditions.

**Traveling workshops offer the flexibility of a "pick up and go" presentation.** Moving from one location to another on short notice is sometimes an advantage and makes materials more accessible to the general public.

### When are they used most effectively?

**Non-traditional meetings are effective when they coincide with pre-existing events.**

**Non-traditional meeting places help remote populations.** People from rural areas are able to attend meetings that are not otherwise easily accessible. If meeting access for rural people is difficult or time-consuming, it is preferable to offer a multi-purpose stop such as an annual State or county fair.

**Non-traditional events are important prior to major milestones.** A series of events or exhibits before major decisions on projects or plans garners input from people who may not attend regular community meetings.

### For further information:

- Ada Planning Association (APA), Boise, Idaho, (208) 345-5274
- Dallas Area Rapid Transit, Dallas, Texas, (214) 658-6112
- Denver Regional Transit District, Denver, Colorado, (303) 299-2401
- East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, (414) 751-4770

- Florida State Department of Transportation, Miami East–West Field Office, Miami, Florida, (305) 262-7033
- Kentuckiana Regional Planning and Development Agency, Kentucky, (502) 266-6084
- Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Los Angeles, California, (213) 244-6891
- Maricopa Association of Governments, Phoenix, Arizona, (602) 254-6308
- Missouri Highway and Transportation Department, Jefferson City, Missouri, (314) 751-1685

## Chapter 4. USING SPECIAL TECHNIQUES TO ENHANCE PARTICIPATION

### C. FINDING NEW WAYS TO COMMUNICATE

Communication—especially interactive communication—is a major goal of public involvement. Face-to-face meetings are a traditional method of providing such contact, but changing technologies offer many new options for people to get information and provide input, comment, or support. New technologies—largely based on electronics—are accelerating and enhancing the communication process. They offer real-time methods of communication without relay, distribution, or recording delays. Often, they can better illustrate complex information, and can give people a stronger, more immediate sense of connection to the overall transportation planning and project development process.

Interactive technology does not replace traditional direct contact techniques. Rather, it needs to be well integrated with them in an overall public involvement program. A majority of people still prefer to talk on the phone to a live voice or present their views in their own handwriting or face-to-face. People feel excluded or unable to participate if they have no ready access, and many find computers or televisions more impersonal and distancing than traditional means of communication. Some minority, ethnic, low-income, or poorly educated individuals feel particularly uncomfortable with new technology.

Yet, as new communication technologies become more and more prevalent, their potential for public involvement blossoms. People can participate in large meetings without leaving their living rooms—via phone, special modem connections, the Internet, or satellite transmissions. They save travel time and cost because electronic communications are able to span long distances. Participants with access to computers, wireless devices (cellular phones or Personal Digital Assistants -- PDAs), telephone lines with special equipment, facsimile devices, or telecommunication devices can request transmission of documents or information or send comments to an agency. Specialized telephone and Internet services deliver pre-recorded answers or responses to common inquiries. Interactive techniques can also be used in conjunction with traditional meetings—by incorporating interactive displays, for instance, that show the steps in a process or describe a project. Or a computer technician at a public meeting can render concepts visually as public participants discuss them.

Several techniques can help improve communication in public involvement, as follows:

- Interactive television;
- Teleconferencing;
- Interactive displays and kiosks;
- Computer presentations and simulations;
- Mapping through Geographic Information Systems;
- 3D Visualization;
- Visual Preference Surveys;
- Handheld Instant Voting;
- Plan or Text Markup Software; and
- Remote Sensing Applications

## INTERACTIVE TELEVISION

### What is interactive television?

**Interactive television is a person-to-person technique** that allows two-way communication. Unlike conventional one-way television (TV) or radio broadcasts, most interactive TV enables viewers to respond by voice telephone or computer connected to an appropriate hosting service (Internet Service Provider, special on-line bulletin board, chat room, etc.). A further refinement of the technology uses sophisticated equipment, TV cameras, and special connections at both ends so that participants can see and hear one another. This kind of interactive TV is usually limited to small groups for long-distance conferences.

**Interactive television is characterized as follows:**

- A television broadcast includes telephone numbers or computer addresses to use in responding;
- Participants use telephones or computers to comment or ask questions; and
- Staff is available to record comments or respond to questions.

**Electronic town meetings are a good example,** because large numbers of people participate directly from their homes or other designated locations. A meeting, presentation, or panel discussion is held in a central location with an audience, while a TV crew records and broadcasts the proceedings over local cable. Home viewers phone in questions for discussion leaders to answer—a format similar to a talk-radio call-in program. The Southern California Association of Governments uses interactive television to reduce the distance the public has to travel to participate in meetings. Conferencing equipment is placed at central locations in each of the six counties it serves.

### Why is it useful?

**"A picture is worth a thousand words."** Interactive TV provides direct or immediate knowledge of what transpired at a public meeting, which is useful for some people compared with a written summary document. Interactive TV helps people grasp a planning concept, understand complex programs, and absorb large amounts of information quickly. Television is an integral part of many people's lives. It attracts broader participation in a public involvement program. Electronic town meetings, for instance, may actively engage "couch potatoes" who would otherwise not participate in civic affairs.

**Electronic town meetings increase awareness** about a project or program. They are very useful for developing consensus across a broad range of participants. They provide a large segment of the population with direct, timely access to key decision-makers.

**Interactive TV offers the immediacy of a "live" broadcast.** During a broadcast, participants at home respond or participate via telephone. They then see and hear that their concerns are being addressed, and possibly respond further.

**Town meeting audiences can convene in several locations.** With interactive TV, large groups may take part at a central location while numerous individuals or small groups participate from homes or satellite meeting halls. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) in Seattle held a Satellite Summit prior to adopting a proposed ballot measure on a major new transit system. From a central studio, the RTA board addressed audiences at five remote locations as well as home viewers via cable TV. Audience members at remote sites were able to pose questions and offer suggestions directly to the board. A videotape of the event was sent to local libraries for reference by those people unable to participate at broadcast time. (See **Video Techniques**.)

**Informal surveys can be a central element in interactive TV.** Viewers use telephones to register approval or disapproval on a specific project or issue under discussion. Results are tabulated and shown on the program, perhaps generating additional responses. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

**Does it have special uses?**

**Interactive TV is especially useful for public presentations.** Information can be disseminated at regular intervals to the audience at their homes.

**Interactive television can target a specific audience.** Broadcasts can reach specialized audiences through non-English language or other special media channels or shows. Berks Community Television in Reading, Pennsylvania, is a two-way cable television program designed to reach seniors, a special use of the technology for a targeted audience.

**A broadcast helps an agency reach a wider audience** than it might otherwise find. It increases both awareness and inclusiveness. Traditional broadcast technology is used for limited educational and outreach purposes, but the incorporation of two-way communication through interactive technology expands the participatory aspect of the medium. To increase public participation in regional transportation planning, Orange County replaced a public hearing with a “Community Dialogue,” sponsored by the Huntington Beach City Council Chamber. A talk-show format was used to interview transportation and land use planners about the impact of growth on the future of Southern California. Questions from an in-studio audience and call-in viewers were answered live on television. The show was run from 7:00-9:00 PM on a weeknight and simultaneously cablecast in nine different cities close to Huntington Beach. In addition, the cable company aired the program two more times during the day. The cable company estimated that more than 7,500 people watched the show.

**A broadcast allows instant feedback that can be shared** with the entire community. Because people participate from their own homes, they do not need to arrange for childcare or worry about transportation or proper appearance.

**Who participates? And how?**

**An interactive TV program involves many people**—particularly if the program is well publicized. Broadcasts on a major local or regional channel stand the best chance of reaching many viewers for a program on transportation planning or project development.

**Cable TV subscribers are major users.** Many public agencies have access to cable TV channels over which electronic town meetings may be carried. Any local person with access to such cable services and a telephone line may participate. Participation is limited in areas without cable access or if people do not subscribe to the service.

**Viewers call the TV station during a broadcast** to register an opinion or comment. Viewers may call repeatedly if they do not receive a response or if they feel that the response is inadequate.

**Viewer responses are recorded** on the voice track of a videotape of a program. As a program is being taped, a viewer calls in and converses with an agency person at the TV studio. The video equipment picks up both ends of the conversation. Responses may also be recorded, either automatically by an answering device or in person by agency staff answering telephone calls and recording responses in writing or on computer.

**Viewer input may provide immediate feedback.** Calls from viewers inform the studio and home audiences of preference responses, survey results, or participant concerns.

**How do agencies use the output?**

**Viewer comments help an agency gauge the level of community interest and concern** about transportation issues. Heated, lively debate and strongly worded comments signal a controversial topic and indicate that the agency needs to reach out in other ways to the full array of concerned parties.

**Viewer feedback also helps an agency identify community perceptions** about critical issues, impacts that are most sensitive, alternatives that are preferred or proposed, and ways to improve plans and make responsive decisions. In metropolitan planning, an agency can use viewers' comments to identify differences of opinion and needs in subareas of a region or among types of interest groups. To get a clear sense of how public opinion is changing over the course of a project, a record of comments serves as a benchmark that can be compared with past or future responses. Such reference points assist an agency in evaluating long-term program goals or objectives and reassessing meeting techniques.

**Viewer input may be used to expand mailing lists.** To increase the availability of transportation information, for instance, names and addresses of respondents are registered along with their questions and concerns. (See **Mailing Lists**.)

**Who leads?**

**Skilled professionals are required.** Interactive TV demands the special technical skills of studio crews and facilitators who coordinate feedback through a telephone company. Although conventional presentation needs and requirements of a public meeting come into play, a skilled moderator for the program is also required.

**Agencies sponsor regular programs.** Vermont Interactive Television shows live, two-way programs on subjects such as early childhood and family support meetings, technical mathematics, and Vermont history and government. It combines education with participatory technologies to bring together thousands of participants throughout a largely rural State.

**What are the costs?**

**Interactive TV such as an electronic town meeting is expensive.** The sophisticated equipment and skilled operator requirements raise costs. Contracting services are necessary for high-speed digital telephone lines to accommodate incoming calls and instantly tabulate data. An agency with access to a public TV channel may be able to reduce costs. For example, community access cable channels and/or schools with broadcast media facilities, both of which have public service missions, may be able to be used.

**How is interactive television organized?**

**Cooperation from a local TV station is essential.** A local station such as a local access cable channel or a local government or college station reaches most, if not all, homes in a broad area. A broadcast or town meeting event must be publicized on the station as well as in other print and electronic media so that people know when to tune in. A local TV station may also recommend a prominent media personality to moderate the program, keep discussion moving, and enliven the program. University stations might include student production of public meetings on interactive TV as part of the curriculum.

**Technical assistance on broadcasting is essential.** Local stations are likely to be conversant with interactive techniques or can help find the right contacts.

**Comparison with a public meeting or hearing is useful** as a starting point. Many public agencies are versed in the logistical requirements and strategic use of such meetings. (See **Public**

**Meetings/Hearings**.) A presentation of essential facts about the project or program provides a spring-board from which discussion takes place. However, incorporation of interaction affects the program format and shapes the agenda to reach out to a larger audience.

**How is it used with other techniques?**

**Interactive TV supplements a broader outreach program.** It cannot be an agency's sole means of communication with the public. Due to costs and time constraints, interactive TV may accent or bring to culmination a larger effort to inform the public. However, it also can be useful as a survey of public reactions to an issue. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.) It can function as a large-scale public meeting. (See **Public Meetings/Hearings**.) Savannah, Georgia, broadcasts several meetings on the same topic from different locations with trained facilitators and programmers. Home viewers call in to respond, adding a sense of dynamic energy to the process.

**What are the drawbacks?**

**Perceptions of the meaningfulness of participation via TV vary.** Participants may doubt that a TV program has lasting impact. As is true with any new technology, people sometimes resent its use, because they perceive it as a replacement for personal communication.

**Imbalance is magnified by live TV.** With any project or program, the danger arises that only one or a few interests will participate and that the dialogue will not accurately reflect the full array or relative strength of community opinions. Callers may want to grandstand a particular issue. Agencies can limit speaking times but cannot deny a determined individual the opportunity to speak. This emphasizes the importance of agency outreach to the full array of community interests.

**Broadcast adds pressure for quick decisions.** Television events often put decision-makers in direct contact with members of the community, and the community may want immediate decisions. One transit agency held an open house for a major investment study that was heavily attended by a community that opposed one alternative. The community group arranged for the meeting with agency and legislative leaders to be broadcast in a hearing format over a local TV channel. During the meeting, a speaker (with vocal support from the crowd) demanded a satisfactory decision from the agency and the legislators in two weeks, rather than the several months scheduled in the study plan.

**Input from interactive TV, like that from informal surveys, is not statistically representative.** Only interested people participate, and cable viewership in many areas is minimal. Broadcast responses supplement but do not substitute for more formal survey data as an accurate way to gauge public reaction. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

**Is interactive television flexible?**

**Interactive television is inherently flexible for verbal presentations.** An agency spokesperson agency can update the community on a project or a planning process. Adding graphics to a presentation, however, requires additional time and effort.

**Interactive TV is as flexible as other public meeting formats.** However, the sponsoring agency is limited to times available on a station's program schedule.

**When is it used most effectively?**

**Electronic town meetings are most effective at an important juncture** when focused, relevant public input is needed. The Central Puget Sound RTA, in partnership with a local commercial station, presented a two-hour, prime time program on its proposed rapid transit system. Moderated by a local media personality, the program showed features of transit systems from other cities. A 100-person audience was able to show approval or disapproval for various options via hand-held opinion meters that scored opinions on a scale of one to ten. A panel of experts and critics kept the discussion balanced.

**Interactive television can continually update transportation information.** A cable TV program can offer a telephone number to call for further information. Its use is especially valuable for conveying images or visual representations of ideas, including renderings and animations of existing and potential conditions.

**Interactive television can build momentum** for or against an improvement. This is particularly important when funding sources are in question. However, project opponents can also "hijack" that momentum. Political leaders who make budget decisions pay attention to high-profile events that reach a broad segment of their constituencies.

**For further information:**

- Southern California Association of Governments, www.scag.org
- Southern California Association of Governments Case Study, http://www.cerrell.com/casestudies/SCAG.html
- Alaska Department of Transportation, (907) 465-2171
- Berks Community Television, (610) 374-3065
- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1357
- Chatham Urban Transportation Study, Chatham County–Savannah, GA, (912) 236-9523
- Georgia Department of Transportation, (404) 656-5269

## TELECONFERENCING

### What is a teleconference?

**A teleconference is a telephone or video meeting between participants in two or more locations.** Teleconferences are similar to telephone calls, but they can expand discussion to more than two people. Using teleconferencing in a planning process, members of a group can all participate in a conference with agency staff people.

**Teleconferencing uses communications network technology to connect participants' voices.** In many cases, speaker telephones are used for conference calls among the participants. A two-way radio system can also be used. In some remote areas, satellite enhancement of connections is desirable.

**Radio can also be a component of teleconferencing**, especially in areas where there may be impediments to other methods of public involvement. For example, to address the need to involve the largest number of citizens possible when updating the STIP, the Alaska Department of Transportation often uses radio call-ins. This method helps gather input from areas in which no public meeting is held and from people in remote areas of the state that may not even have electricity.

**Video conferencing can transmit pictures as well as voices** through video cameras and computer modems. Video conferencing technology is developing rapidly, capitalizing on the increasingly powerful capabilities of computers and telecommunications networks. Video conferencing centers and equipment are available for rent in many locations.

### Why is it useful?

**Teleconferencing reaches large or sparsely populated areas.** It offers opportunities for people in outlying regions to participate. People participate either from home or from a local teleconferencing center. In Alaska, where winter weather and long distances between municipalities serve as roadblocks to public meetings, the State legislature has developed the Legislative Telecommunication Network (LTN). As an audio teleconference system, LTN can receive legislative testimony from residents or hold meetings with constituents during "electronic office hours." Although its main center is in the capitol building, it has 28 full-time conference centers and 26 voluntary conference centers in homes or offices of people who store and operate equipment for other local people. The system averages three teleconferences per day when the legislature is in session.

**Teleconferencing provides broader access to public meetings,** as well as widening the reach of public involvement. It gives additional opportunities for participants to relate to agency staff and to each other while discussing issues and concerns from physically separate locations. It enables people in many different locations to receive information first-hand and simultaneously. (See **Public Meetings/Hearings**.)

**A wider group of participants means a broader range of ideas and points of view.** Audio interaction makes dialogue more lively, personal, and interesting. Teleconferencing provides an immediate response to concerns or issues. It enables people with disabilities parents with child care conflicts, the elderly, and others to participate without having to travel. (See **People with Disabilities**.) In response to requests from residents in remote rural areas, the Oregon Department of Transportation (DOT) held two-way video teleconferences for its statewide Transportation Improvement Plan update. Two special meetings were broadcast by a private non-profit organization that operates ED-NET, a two-way teleconferencing system. ED-NET provided a teleconference among staff members in one of the DOT's five regional offices and participants at central transmission facilities in a hospital and a community college in eastern Oregon.

**Teleconferencing can save an agency resources.** Without leaving their home office, staff members can have effective meetings that reach several people who might not otherwise be able to come together. Teleconferencing often enables senior officials to interact with local residents when such an opportunity would not exist otherwise, due to distance and schedule concerns. A teleconference may reach more people in one session than in several sessions held in the field over several weeks. It can be difficult to schedule more than two or three public meetings in the field within one week, due to staff commitments and other considerations. Teleconferencing can connect several remote locations saving several days or weeks of agency resources.

**Teleconferencing should not take away from the value of face-to-face contact.** While teleconferencing allows for multiple meetings in a short timeframe and can provide access when distances or other conditions limit the ability to travel, they should not be used as a substitute for in-person public contact.

**Does it have special uses?**

**Teleconferencing is useful when an issue is State- or region-wide.** The World Bank uses moderated electronic conferences to identify best public involvement practices from front-line staff. The discussion focuses around fleshing out and sharing ideas so that practitioners in different locations can learn from the experiences of others around the world.

**Teleconferencing helps increase the number of participants.** People may be reluctant to travel to a meeting because of weather conditions, poor highway or transit access, neighborhood safety concerns, or other problems. Teleconferencing offers equal opportunity for people to participate, thus allowing more points of view to emerge, revealing areas of disagreement, and enabling people to exchange views and ask questions freely.

**Teleconferencing is used for training.** It opens up training hours and availability of courses for people unable to take specialized classes because of time constraints and travel costs. The National Transit Institute held a nationally broadcast session answering questions about requirements for Federal major investment studies (MIS). Over 1,700 people met at 89 teleconferencing sites to participate in the meeting. Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly in favor of the usefulness and practicality of the session.

**Teleconferencing is used for networking among transportation professionals on public involvement and other topics.** North Carolina State University sponsored a national teleconference on technologies for transportation describing applications of three- and four-dimensional computer graphics technologies. They have been found helpful in facilitating public involvement and environmental analysis.

**Who participates? And how?**

**Anyone can participate.** Teleconferencing broadens participation with its wide geographical coverage. People living in remote areas can join in conversations. Participation becomes available even for the mobility-restricted, those without easy access to transportation, and the elderly. Those with limited English proficiency may not participate without assistance. (See **People with Disabilities; Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.)

**Participants gather at two or more locations** and communicate via phone or video. The event requires planning, so that participants are present at the appointed time at their divergent locations.

**Participants should know what to expect during the session.** A well-publicized agenda is required. It is helpful to brief participants so they understand the basic process and maximize the use of time for their participation. For example, basic concerns like speaking clearly or waiting to speak in turn are both elements of a successful teleconference-based meeting.

**How do agencies use teleconferencing?**

**Teleconferencing elicits comments and opinions from the public.** These comments and opinions become part of a record of public involvement. Agencies should plan to record and provide access to public comments, as well as to respond to comments and community input and to address specific concerns.

**Teleconferencing offers immediate feedback from agency staff to the community.** This feedback is a special benefit for participants in both time savings and satisfaction with agency actions. To assure immediacy, agencies must have staff available to respond to questions at the teleconference.

**An agency can tailor its efforts to respond to a range of needs or circumstances,** with broad input from diverse geographical and often underserved populations. The Montana DOT will use a teleconferencing network in the state as it updates its statewide plan.

**Agencies use teleconferencing with individuals or with multiple groups.** The range of participants varies from simple meetings between two or three people to meetings involving several people at many locations. Simple meetings can be somewhat informal, with participants free to discuss points and ask questions within a limited time.

**Who leads a teleconference?**

**A trained facilitator, moderator, or group leader runs the meeting.** A moderator needs to orchestrate the orderly flow of conversation by identifying the sequence of speakers. A staff person can be trained to open and lead the teleconference. (See **Facilitation**.)

**Community people can lead the conversation.** The moderator need not be an agency staff person. If the teleconference is taking place at the request of community people, it is appropriate that a community resident lead the session. Agency staff members should feel free to ask questions of community people to obtain a complete understanding of their point of view.

**Each individual meeting site must have a person in charge** to prevent the conversation from becoming chaotic. A teleconferencing facility coordinator can train agency staff or community people to lead the process. Appointment of an individual to guide conversation from a specific site should be informally carried out. Community groups may want to have a role in this appointment.

**What are the costs?**

**Teleconferencing costs vary, depending on the application.** The costs of installing a two-way telephone network are modest. For complex installations, including television, radio, or satellite connections, costs are significantly higher. Hiring outside help to coordinate equipment purchases or design an event adds to the expense.

**For modest teleconferencing efforts, equipment and facilities are the principal costs.** Higher costs are associated with higher performance levels of equipment, more transmission facilities, or more locations. Agencies may be able to rent a facility or set one up in-house. The San Diego Association of Governments is building its own central teleconferencing facility to provide increased opportunities for the agency to use this technique.

**It is possible to share teleconferencing costs among organizations.** Many States have teleconferencing capabilities in State colleges. States may have non-profit organizations with teleconferencing capabilities. Outside resources include cable television stations or donated use of private company facilities. Agency staff time devoted to the event may be a significant expense.

**How is teleconferencing organized?**

**One person should be in charge of setting up a teleconference.** That individual makes preparatory calls to each participant, establishes a specific time for the teleconference, and makes the calls to assemble the group. The same person should be in charge of setting an agenda based on issues brought up by individual participants.

**Equipment for a telephone conference is minimal.** Speakerphones allow several people to use one phone to listen to and speak with others, but they are not required. Individuals can be contacted on their extensions and participate fully in the conversations. While the basic equipment does not require an audiovisual specialist to operate, a technician may be required to set up equipment and establish telecommunications or satellite connections, particularly in more sophisticated applications.

**Video conferencing needs are more complex.** Basic equipment can involve:

- Personal computers;
- A main computer control system;
- One or more dedicated telephone lines or a satellite hook-up;
- A television or computer monitor for each participant or group of participants; and
- A video camera for each participant or group of participants.

More sophisticated facilities and equipment are required if a number of locations are interconnected.

**An individual or group rents a private or public videoconference room** in many cities. Private companies often have in-house videoconference rooms and systems. The Arizona DOT is considering establishing a mobile teleconferencing facility that can travel throughout the State. Many public facilities, particularly State institutions such as community colleges, have set up teleconference facilities.

**Teleconferencing can kick off a project or planning effort** and continue throughout the process. Teleconferences are targeted to a particular topic or address many areas, depending on the need for public input and participation.

**Adequate preparation is critical to success and optimum effectiveness** of a teleconference. The funding source for the teleconference must be identified and a moderator designated. The time and length of the teleconference must be established and an agenda prepared to organize the meeting's content and times for speakers to present their views. Participants should be invited and attendance confirmed. This is a critical step, since there is little flexibility in canceling or postponing the event—there just are no second chances. Also, less than full participation means that important voices are not heard.

**It is important to provide materials in advance.** These include plans of alternatives, reports, evaluation matrices, cross-sections, or other visuals. (See **Public Information Materials**.) For videoconferences, these materials may be on-screen but are usually difficult to read unless a participant has a printed document for reference. A moderator must be prepared to address all concerns covered by the written materials. Preparation smoothes the way for all to participate in the teleconference. Without adequate preparation, teleconferences may need to be repeated, especially if all questions are not addressed thoroughly.

**The technical set-up is crucial.** Teleconferencing equipment and its several locations are key to the event's success. Equipment must be chosen for maximum effect and efficiency in conducting a meeting between a central location and outlying stations.

**Equipment must be distributed well.** Because equipment is needed at each site, housing facilities for equipment must be identified. If multiple parties will be attending a teleconference or videoconference from one location. seating may need to be arranged to maximize participation. A test-run of the equipment and the set-up for participants is important. The moderator may want to arrive early and practice using the equipment. Organizations can also subscribe to teleconferencing services. These services have the ability to host numerous lines and allow participants to join in from any telephone with a correct dial-in number and passcode.

**The moderator sets ground rules for orderly presentation of ideas.** The moderator introduces participants in each location and reviews the objectives and time allotted for the meeting. Participants are urged to follow the moderator's guidance for etiquette in speaking. They should follow basic rules: speak clearly, avoid jargon, and make no extraneous sounds, such as coughing, drumming fingers, or side conversations.

**The meeting must follow the agenda.** It is the moderator's responsibility to keep the teleconference focused. In doing so, she or he must be organized, fair, objective, and open. The conference must be inclusive, providing an opportunity for all to register their views. The moderator must keep track of time to assure that the agenda is covered and time constraints are observed. It may be appropriate to have a staff person on hand to record action items, priorities, and the results of the teleconference.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**Teleconferencing is part of a comprehensive public involvement strategy.** It can complement public information materials, smaller group meetings, open houses, and drop-in centers. (See **Public Information Materials; Small Group Techniques; Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses; Drop-in Centers, Public Opinion Surveys**.)

**Teleconferencing participants can serve as a community advisory committee or task force meeting.** It can cover simple items quickly, avoiding the need for a face-to-face meeting. For major issues, it is a way to prepare participants for an upcoming face-to-face discussion by outlining agendas, listing potential attendees, or describing preparatory work that is needed. (See **Civic Advisory Committees; Collaborative Task Forces**.)

**Teleconferencing is a method for taking surveys** of neighborhood organizations. It helps demonstrate the array of views within an organization and helps local organizations meet and determine positions prior to a survey of their views. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

**Teleconferencing is used in both planning and project development.** It is useful during visioning processes, workshops, public information meetings, and roundtables. (See **Visioning; Conferences, Workshops, and Retreats**.)

### What are the drawbacks?

**Teleconferences are somewhat formal events** that need prior planning for maximum usefulness. Although they require pre-planning and careful timing, teleconferences are conducted informally to encourage participation and the exchange of ideas.

**A large number of people is difficult to manage in a single teleconference,** with individuals attempting to interact and present their points of view. One-on-one dialogue with a few people is usually preferable. Widely divergent topics are also difficult to handle with a large number of people participating in a teleconference.

**Costs can be high.** Costs are incurred in equipment, varying sites for connections, transmission, and moderator training. Substantial agency staff time to coordinate and lead is likely.

**Teleconferences take time to organize.** Establishing technical links, identifying sites and constituencies, and coordinating meetings can be time-consuming. Materials need to be prepared and disseminated. However, teleconferencing saves time by being more efficient than in-person meetings, and the savings may offset staff efforts and other costs.

**Staffing needs can be significant.** Personnel such as technicians and agency staff to set up and coordinate meetings are required. Training to conduct a conference is necessary. However, staff time and resources may be significantly less than if personnel have to travel to several meetings at distant locations.

**Agencies need to consider the difficulties in accommodating people** with hearing impairments or with limited English proficiency with real time translation. Teleconferencing should supplement, not replace, direct contact with community members.

**Community people are alienated if a meeting is poorly implemented** or if anticipated goals are not met. People need to be assured that the project and planning staff is mindful of their concerns. Technical and management difficulties, such as poor coordination between speakers or people being misunderstood or not heard, result in bad feelings.

**Teleconferencing reduces opportunities for face-to-face contact** between participants and proponents of plans or projects. It cannot replace a desirable contact at individual meetings between stakeholders and agency staff in local sites. Effective public involvement includes meetings in the community to obtain a feel for the local population and issues. (See **Public Meetings/Hearings; Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events**.) A teleconference supplements rather than replaces direct contact with local residents and neighborhoods. Video conferencing, by contrast, enhances opportunities for face-to-face exchange.

**The goals of a teleconference must be clear and manageable** to avoid a potential perception of wasted time or frivolous expenditures.

### Is teleconferencing flexible?

**Teleconferencing lacks flexibility of location and timing.** A teleconference among several people must have a well-established location, time, and schedule, publicized prior to the event. An agenda must be set well in advance of the meeting, with specific times set aside to cover all topics, so that people at different sites can follow the format of the meeting. The New York State DOT held a teleconference/public hearing for the draft State Transportation Plan. The well-defined agenda scheduled registration and a start time that coincided with a one-hour live telecast from the State capital, which included a roundtable discussion with the DOT Commissioner.

**Videoconferencing can be flexible** if it is a talk arranged between two locations. With few people, it may be as simple to arrange as a telephone call. With additional participants, it becomes less flexible.

**Teleconferencing offers opportunities for participants who can't travel** to become involved. Enabling people to stay home or drive to a regional site offers flexibility in childcare, transportation, and other factors that affect meeting attendance.

### When is it used most effectively?

**Teleconferencing is effective when participants have difficulty attending a meeting.** This occurs when people are widely dispersed geographically and cannot readily meet with agency staff. Teleconferencing also serves people with disabilities, the elderly, and others who may have difficulties with mobility. (See **People with Disabilities**.)

**Teleconferencing is effective when it focuses on specific action items** that deserve comment. Teleconferences aid in prioritizing issues and discussing immediate action items. Detailed, wide-ranging discussions may be more properly handled with written materials and in-person interaction.

**Teleconferencing helps give all participants an equal footing** in planning and project development. Teleconferences overcome geographic dispersal and weather problems to aid contact with agency staff.

**For further information:**

- Alaska Department of Transportation, Division of Statewide Planning, 907-465-6988, http://www.dot.state.ak.us/index.html?stwdplng/stip/need_stip.html~mainFrame
- Alaska Legislative Telecommunications Network (907) 465-4648
- Iowa Department of Transportation, (515) 239-1101
- Metropolitan Council, Minnesota, Jody Hoffman, (612) 291-6423
- Montana Department of Transportation, (406) 444-7692
- New York State Department of Transportation, (518) 457-5672
- North Carolina State University Institute for Transportation Research and Education, (919) 878-8080
- Oregon Department of Transportation, (503) 378-6526
- Savannah/Chatham County Metropolitan Planning Organization, (912) 236-9523

## INTERACTIVE VIDEO DISPLAYS AND KIOSKS

### What are interactive video displays and kiosks?

**Interactive video displays and kiosks are similar to automatic teller machines,** offering menus for interaction between a person and a computer. Information is provided through a presentation that invites viewers to ask questions or direct the flow of information. Viewers activate programs by using a touch-screen, keys, a mouse, or a trackball. Software used in interactive video displays and kiosks is highly specialized, storing information on hardware that allows retrieval of specific information based on directions from the viewer.

**Interactive displays and kiosks:**

- Deliver information to the user;
- Offer a variety of issues to explore, images to view, and topics to consider;
- Elicit specific responses, acting as a survey instrument;
- Enable the user to enter a special request to the sponsoring agency or join a mailing list;
- Are used in a variety of locations and may be either stationary or mobile; and
- Receive and store user input.

**Interactive displays take advantage of evolving video and communications technologies.** The Massachusetts Turnpike Authority has installed interactive tourist information kiosks at each of its ten rest areas. The kiosks have a constantly-running video designed to attract passers-by. During the loop presentation, viewers touch the screen to activate certain modules of information such as museums or other attractions by region or for any part of the Commonwealth.

### Why are they useful?

**If well-sited, interactive programs reach people who do not normally attend hearings or meetings.** Visual communication is very powerful, delivering large amounts of information in a relatively short period of time. Interactive displays help people understand plans and complex programs. They raise public awareness about projects or programs and reassure people that their government is listening. A public involvement technique using interactive video may be very successful in attracting broader participation.

**Strategic siting of interactive programs is imperative.** They should be located where large numbers of people gather—for instance, in shopping malls, community colleges, and government buildings. They are placed where people naturally congregate to talk, shop, or socialize, or—in airline terminals—where they wait for arriving or departing planes. Displays are also set up at non-transportation special events. The Colorado Governor’s Office initiated a program of touch-screen informational displays in shopping centers.

**Interactive displays can supplement other methods of obtaining public input**. If an interactive display is part of an open house, participants may be able to provide written comments based on the interactive display program. Kiosks in a shopping mall or other similar setting may be equipped with comment cards in a pocket or tray and a mailbox type container in which to deposit the cards. Project staff would collect these comment cards periodically. Agencies use feedback from interactive video displays just as they use public input obtained by more conventional means.

**Interactive displays are useful in explaining a project and its implications.** The New York State Urban Development Corporation developed an interactive video for public distribution to help explain the Miller Highway Relocation Project in New York City. The video offers highly-developed video images and animations to explain various project alternatives and their environmental implications. Users see the different alternatives from a variety of perspectives and enter their reactions. (See **Computer Presentations and Simulations; Visual Preference Surveys; 3-D Visualization**.)

**Do they have special uses?**

**Interactive displays provide the public with access to areas that are distant or dangerous to visit.** The Tennessee Valley Authority and the Florida Power and Light Company use video displays to illustrate the workings of nuclear power facilities.

**Interactive displays elicit preferences from people who do not otherwise participate.** Displays are used to collect comments and public input. They are useful for disseminating detailed information or generating interest in transportation planning. They are used to expand mailing list databases. (See **Mailing Lists**.)

**Interactive displays complement staff availability.** As agency resources become more scarce, the City of New York Human Resources Administration is expanding its use of interactive terminals to assist social service clients. Interactive terminals are appropriate as a primary or initial contact and cost-effective for answering requests for general information. For specific responses or more detailed information delivery, other public involvement techniques are probably required. Video displays should not be used to avoid face-to-face contact with the public.

**Interactive displays can provide printed messages**. Supporting machines record the information requested by a user from the screen and dispense it in printed form. Automatic teller machines are common examples. Rental car agencies provide driving directions to local destinations on video terminals with full-color maps of selected destination areas. The Texas Employment Commission now has 44 easy-to-use kiosks in public locations around the State with interactive displays that print out hundreds of job openings. The kiosks are already tapped an average of 60,000 times a month.

**Who participates? And how?**

**People of all ages participate.** Children, adults, and the elderly are encouraged to use displays, ask questions, and retrieve available information. Interactive displays in public places allow an agency to reach people who otherwise would not participate in transportation processes.

**Interactive displays reach people at a variety of education or computer-literacy levels.** Physical and program designs should encourage broad use, since children and some disabled people may not be able to reach or use equipment. Designs should facilitate ease of operation to encourage people without computer experience to interact with the program. The Arizona Supreme Court has developed interactive displays, called Quickcourt terminals, to assist people in understanding how to navigate through the judicial system. On-screen text is written at a fourth-grade reading level, and a narrator gives audio direction. Key words and numbers flash in synchronization with the narration to assist users with poor reading skills. In the first year of operation, almost 24,000 Quickcourt transactions were conducted, and only a handful of users had to seek further help.

**Interactive displays are often multi-lingual.** New York City installed 62 bilingual (English and Spanish) kiosks throughout the city to inform people about city services.

**Interactive displays and kiosks provide an opportunity to search for information of specific interest to an individual user.** Users interact by touching the screen. Software programs allow computers and video monitors to react to touch and respond with information or questions relevant to the user's request. These programs can lead a user through a great deal of available information to find a specific answer. The display and kiosk may also display a point of contact for further information.

**Users find interactive displays in a variety of public places.** The Arizona Quickcourt system has used locations such as shopping malls, schools, and government offices. Orange County, California, uses a movable kiosk display to show transit project information on a touch screen.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Interactive displays provide information from an agency to the public.** This method of displaying information supplements other methods of dissemination, thus conserving staff resources. (See **Public Information Materials**.) The Smithsonian Institution added an interactive kiosk about transportation to an exhibit at the Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. The kiosk allows visitors to ask questions about public transit, commercial vehicle operations, traffic management, traveler information, and accident prevention. It gives information about transportation and, in doing so, exhibits the use of technology for a larger exhibit, "The Information Age."

**Interactive displays collect information from the public for agency analysis.** Output from an interactive display can be used to record preferences or to recognize and respond to specific participant concerns. It is also used to expand mailing list databases. (See **Mailing Lists**.)

**Displays offer agencies flexibility in controlling and directing where a message goes.** As with commercial video productions, specific audiences can be targeted. A program can be designed to appeal principally to adults who seldom go to public meetings or to parents of children who delight in observing different modes of transportation. When presentation information is developed to appeal to that audience, the interactive feature of a touch screen adds a means of collecting reactions from the audience. Targeted marketing by local governments, according to *Indiana Business Magazine,* has the potential to increase an audience's retention of information by 50 percent.

### Who leads?

**Software experts design and develop interactive displays.** These sophisticated computer programs are usually produced by special contractors. Preparation, distribution, and maintenance of interactive displays, collection of stored data, and reprogramming of machines require special technical and logistical skills. One company is developing an electronic panning camera system that allows people in separate locations to view a scene from an infinite number of perspectives. These sophisticated techniques require special equipment and contact with vendors that market these tools.

### What are the costs?

**Costs associated with kiosks and interactive displays can be broken down into hardware, software, updates, and maintenance.** Purchasing the hardware (e.g., enclosure, CPU, touch screen, keyboard, laser printer) and installing a kiosk (e.g., site negotiation, electrical and telecommunication connections) may cost an agency between $12,000 and $20,000 per unit. In most cases, agencies purchase kiosks, rather than lease them. They may however reprogram kiosks after a project is complete to fit a new information need.

**The cost of software for kiosks is highly variable.** It often depends on the complexity of the graphics and interaction screens and on whether or not information and photographs to be used are readily available. For a relatively simple interface and with pre-existing information and photos, software development could cost an agency approximately $40,000. More extensive graphics and sound, graphics that must be designed by the vendor, and original video footage would add significantly to the cost.

**Costs to update the content of the video display or kiosk could range from a few hundred dollars for simple text-based changes to thousands of dollars for new, motion-based video screens.** These costs could be avoided or reduced by having an agency manage the updates. If the kiosk design involves a central computer controlling the display and software created in a common development language like HTML, agency personnel may be easily able to make updates to the kiosk information.

**Kiosks and interactive video displays also need regular maintenance including cleaning, refilling paper, and stocking extra parts for quick repairs.** Agencies can reduce the cost of maintenance by assigning on-site staff to be responsible for maintenance. Alternatively, the kiosk vendor may charge several hundred dollars per month for maintenance services. An agency also may have professional staff accompany interactive displays to assist users. The State of Vermont has an advanced computer-based survey instrument with full-color graphics, photographs, and video segments, accompanied by two to four survey attendants to guide respondents through a questionnaire. Such additional staffing requirements should be considered in the cost equation.

### How are interactive video displays and kiosks organized?

**Interactive displays are usually independent, free-standing installations.** A television monitor is required, operated by either touching the screen or using a keyboard. Depending on the anticipated level of use, a touch screen is sturdier than most peripherals. Interactive displays are best situated in places where they will attract users. A minimal need is connection to a reliable power source for the electricity required by the monitor, the driver, and the computer. Displays are frequently linked to terminals in a central location that monitor their continued performance and reliability.

**Interactive displays may be operated as a network of terminals,** like automatic teller machines (ATMs) or the Arizona Quickcourt system. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA), in Seattle, has developed a fiber-optic based “Interpretive Display” formatted around a map of the region. The RTA uses it, without staff, to reach people in shopping malls and other high-traffic areas and get them involved.

**The decision to use kiosks is highly dependent on the nature of the project, other public involvement techniques being used, community norms, and available resources.** In the mid-1990s because of a confluence of computer technologies and public outreach needs, a number of projects employed kiosks as one of many outreach techniques. However, since that time, alternative forms of disseminating information have emerged (e.g., Internet, community-access television, etc.). In addition, because of the visual sophistication of the public, given the pervasiveness and societal influence of mass media and advertising, there may be expectations on the part of the public for high quality and completeness. The public may dismiss the visual content because the renderings or presentation are not developed to a comparable level of detail and quality they are used to viewing in the print and visual mass media.

**Consequently, it is not possible to offer reasonable “rules of thumb” on key issues of number of kiosks, location, message content, etc.** Because of the cost individual kiosks, if an agency is going to seriously consider kiosks or interactive video displays as part of a public involvement program, a separate study should be conducted to confirm expected use, types of information perceived to be valued by the public, candidate locations, message content and format.

### How are they used with other techniques?

**Interactive displays are stationary components of a larger outreach program.** They cannot be an agency’s sole means of public communication. Instead, they offer a dynamic and potentially absorbing method for expanding public involvement. Innovative use of this technology offers a new way to meet an old goal: sharing information with the public.

### What are the drawbacks?

**Any new technology involving machines may cause unease.** People resent the use of machines as a perceived replacement for personal communication. Interactive displays, like ATMs, offer people added convenience and the appearance of one-on-one interaction. However, frustration with menu-driven machines and the tedium of struggling through pre-programmed displays alienate some people.

**Software purchase is a high up-front cost.** Moreover, the software package needs to be updated regularly to keep it fresh.

**Maintenance costs are incurred.** Screens get dirty, especially touch-screens, and may need daily cleaning if usage is high.

**Potential vandalism is a factor in site selection,** the type of equipment selected, and the location of the power source. The installation should be designed and sited to help its maintenance crew cope with defacement and abuse.

**Liability issues may be associated with location of displays.** Movable displays, in particular, should be insured to relieve property owners of responsibilities for incidents that occur where they are parked. Stationary displays should also be insured.

**For further information:**

- Bellcore, (201) 740-4762
- City of New York, Department of Information, Technology, and Telecommunications, (718) 403-8011
- New York State Urban Development Corporation, (212) 930-0431
- Portland Metro, Public Involvement Office, Portland, Oregon, (503) 797-1746
- Quickcourt, Arizona Supreme Court, Phoenix, Arizona, (602) 542-9300

## COMPUTER PRESENTATIONS AND SIMULATIONS

### What are computer presentations and simulations?

**Computer presentations and simulations are electronic displays of information.** Their power derives from a computer's ability to provide quick access to enormous stores of data and its capacity to display and rearrange images on demand.

**A variety of computer media and methods are available** for use in interacting with the public with computer-based information:

- **Computer graphics** aid public understanding through simplification of data or alteration of images. Computer-generated graphics show tables, graphs, diagrams, or charts in dramatic and understandable ways. They become part of printed reports and are shown on computer screens or television monitors. They can incorporate videos or video simulations of proposals, programs, or projects.

- **Digitized photographic stills** are photos that have been converted into computer data so they can be readily modified. They can portray the "before-and-after" of a proposed project from a single vantage point. This enables agencies or community members to consider a number of alternatives or fine nuances of detail when discussing a particular site and how a transportation project or program affects it.

- **Photo mosaics** use a computer to combine photographs. Individual photos of a site are scanned into a computer, then digitized and assembled into a single image as a basis for portraying existing or potential sites. As digitized photographs, mosaics are used in preparing video simulations.

- **Geographic information systems (GIS)** store data about sites at many different levels of detail. The data can be combined and presented in a great variety of maps, tables, or graphs to aid in understanding a proposal or project. (See **Mapping Though Geographic Information Systems**.)

- **Video brochures** are videotapes that explain specific projects or outline long-range plans. Tables, charts, and images are often incorporated into video brochures. They are designed and distributed to community members, and agencies deposit copies in local libraries for people to borrow and view at home on television.

- **Video simulations** are animations or moving images that convey a computerized view of real or potential changes. Generally displayed on either a computer or a television monitor, simulations can depict transportation projects both before and after construction or simulate a trip through a site. They allow a viewer to see a site as though standing in one location and making a 360-degree turn. They show the components of an agency's broad responsibilities, programs, or capabilities.

- **Visualizations** are applications of three- and four-dimensional computer graphics technologies. A number of agencies use this relatively new technology to facilitate public involvement and environmental analysis. Usage is expected to grow rapidly as transportation departments seek more effective ways to design and communicate information about transportation to the public. (See **3-D Visualization**.)

**Why are they useful?**

**Computer-generated images provide information in a stimulating, visual way.** Images are more effective, immediate, and powerful than words in conveying a message. Visual images are universally understood and help surmount language barriers. Whether people are computer-literate or not, they readily respond to the visual images of computer presentations. With an image at hand, discussion among members of the community and relevant public agencies moves beyond conjecture to more substantial issues and concerns. (See **People with Disabilities; Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.)

**Computer presentations and simulations enhance interactive communication.** Images are used to accommodate and incorporate community suggestions over a series of meetings. Community leaders explore "what if" scenarios and investigate the potential for change. Geographers at the University of Illinois have developed GIS systems for use by county planners. The system employs an interactive planning system that coordinates related information. On a computerized county map, users gain access to detailed maps or photographic images of a site. They sketch in suggestions and make copies of images, attaching text, audio, or graphic annotations. Users' suggestions are then compared directly to the original image.

**Computer images convey complex information in easily-digested segments.** Individualized pieces of data on demographics or economic impacts can be turned into graphics for participants to discuss. They can present environmental and esthetic impacts. Simulations can give a bird's-eye, pedestrian's, or passenger's view, standing still or in motion.

**Showing a potential facility in a familiar context enhances understanding.** Digitized photographic images help overcome misconceptions and serve as a check against distortion or misrepresentation by either promoters or critics. Digitized before-and-after photos have been used by the Connecticut Department of Transportation (DOT), the New York State DOT, and the Massachusetts Highway Department to demonstrate how high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes would look if applied in specific corridors. The Finnish National Road Administration has used this technique in developing its master plan for Helsinki.

**Do they have special uses?**

**Computer-generated visual aids can be a useful aid in resolving conflicts.** New York's New School for Social Research used simulations to resolve a dispute between the Newark Water Commission and several New Jersey towns about growth in the city's watershed. The Commission, State, city, and town representatives and local civic and conservation groups reviewed computer models of various scenarios for preserving the watershed lands.

**Computer graphics convey complicated information simply and attractively.** Graphics are projected onto walls or screens, using a portable computer and projection equipment. Data, charts, and graphs from computer-based systems can illustrate data or survey results. The Lexington–Fayette Urban County Government (Kentucky) has used lap-top computers at public meetings to project tables, diagrams, and charts to explain travel demand models, level-of-service issues, and highway capacity.

**Video simulations illustrate details of future projects.** New York's Urban Development Corporation used video simulations to show community members that the Riverside South residential and park project could be enhanced by altering the elevated Miller Highway between 57th and 72nd Streets in Manhattan. A video kiosk with multiple choices showed the project from a variety of perspectives. Its use helped the agency and the community move the discussion beyond conjecture and toward concrete issues. (See **Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks**.)

**Computer illustrations facilitate discussion of details.** Computer images are used to illustrate specific impacts and visual characteristics. Video animations or photo mosaics facilitate discussions concerning:

- Light and shadow issues;
- Perceptions of motion and movement;
- Architectural integrity; and
- Contextual suitability.

**Computer images improve upon traditional scale models.** Architectural scale models are limited in scope and context. They show one project alternative and cannot easily be used to portray a variety of alternatives. Scale models are delicate, do not travel well, and cannot be modified or rearranged without incurring large costs. Computer images, by contrast, have few of these difficulties.

**Computer simulations reach a variety of audiences.** The Portland, Oregon, Metro holds an annual Winter Transportation Fair with speakers, booths, and computer-generated exhibits and simulations about transportation. Child-care services for small children are available and include a popular computer simulation game about city planning.

### Who participates? And how?

**Technical committees, elected officials, community groups, and others use computer-generated illustrations** as a presentation technique or work tool for public meetings, agency reports, or public documents. No computer skills are required to view a computer operator's products.

**Computer-generated data and images communicate effectively to special groups.** Community members with hearing disabilities are reached through annotated visual images with text. People with limited reading skills easily understand a videotape filled with images and an explanatory voice track. (See **People with Disabilities; Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.)

**People view computer-generated materials either at meetings or at home.** They see them on a wall or on large video monitors at public meetings. They use interactive compact disks or video cassettes at home or at places such as public libraries and schools. People also receive computer-generated information through electronic on-line services or via cable or public television.

**People review proposals and projects at their convenience;** for instance, by viewing reports that incorporate computer-generated graphics or showing video animations on home monitor screens. Dallas, Texas, Area Rapid Transit (DART) produced a bi-monthly video news magazine with computer graphics for local cable television that reached people in 14 cities within its service area.

**People discuss projects or plans based on computer-created images**—for instance, long-range plans, special studies, and state transportation improvement plans. The University of Miami, Florida, Center for Urban and Community Design used a simulation model to help a community task force generate recommendations for a new residential design code. Concerned that a hurricane protection policy requiring new buildings to be raised six to eight feet above street level would result in the replacement of traditional bungalows with larger houses, the task force viewed a simulation to understand how changes in building height and setback would shape the character of new development.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Computers involve people in a public process,** helping them understand the details and context of a specific transportation issue, an infrastructure project, or a transportation program. The use of computer imaging gets people energized, heightens a public meeting's activity level, and adds excitement. Most people react strongly to images, and images are often cited as the most memorable part of a presentation or report.

**Images and graphics convey a great deal of information efficiently,** so that agencies do not dominate a discussion in a public meeting. Computers can enhance information used in a planning process or explain the scope of a project. Use of photographs, drawings, diagrams, or graphs makes a point effectively and drives home its most important components. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) in Los Angeles County, California used photographic images for the Wilshire/Vermont station on its Red Line. The MTA worked with University of California at Los Angeles design staff to show potential station designs and illustrate design concepts for public reaction and comment.

**An agency can communicate quickly and receive rapid responses from participants.** Presentations of data or study findings can be sent between departments, between agencies, and to participants in a process. Transmissions take place by exchange of floppy or CD-ROM disks or by modem via national and international networks. (See **On-line Services**.) Through such speedy transmission, agencies send out up-to-date information and keep themselves informed of quickly-developing issues or participants' concerns.

**Who leads?**

**Agency staff often initiate and manage computer images for presentation graphics.** Simple graphics prepared with common software packages are placed in documents or projected onto screens using either overhead projectors or a computer projection machine. The process uses now-familiar technologies, including computer-aided drawing and design (CADD), geographic information systems (GIS), and transfer of information to video tapes.

**Sophisticated computer simulation graphics need specialized staff.** Computer simulations are complex to create and may require the expertise of computer specialists, along with special equipment. Agencies may need to hire professional consultants who specialize in environmental simulation, computer graphics, computer animation, or digitized photographs. Environmental simulation labs at research institutions offer not only video simulations but also three-dimensional, virtual-reality presentations. These techniques can link changes in physical form to traffic, utility demand, and fiscal impacts.

**What are the costs?**

**Computer costs are based on hardware, software, and staff time.** Many agencies now have computer hardware available and assign staff to operate the machines. With computers on hand, agencies are able to take advantage of various appropriate software programs at nominal cost.

**Staff time is required for learning software programs.** While prices for software packages are relatively low, time for staff to learn and operate programs is often substantial.

**Costs of computer materials for presentations depend on the complexity and sophistication of the presentation.** A lap-top computer and a projection machine facilitate effective presentations but drive their cost up substantially. Agencies with limited budgets for presentations often transfer computer-generated images or text to printed materials or video.

**Data costs dictate the usefulness of some applications.** Sophisticated computer applications such as simulations are expensive, and their use may be limited to large, complex projects or issues. Simulations are relatively new and still costly, and the process of loading and manipulating appropriate data, formatting it, integrating it with other data, and meeting other programming requirements is labor-intensive.

**How are computer presentations and simulations used with other techniques?**

**Computer graphics are integrated with other elements of a public involvement program.** As with any presentation materials, the content of a presentation must be determined well before production of the graphics or simulation model. Materials are designed in formats that accommodate additions and changes due to public comment or suggestions. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

**Computer graphics are used with many other public involvement techniques.** GIS products, computer simulations, and travel demand forecasting models are used directly with community people. The products of these analysis tools—data or maps portraying population and employment information or transportation usage forecasts—provide useful information to the public.

**Computer applications are used in surveys.** University of California researchers used computer simulations to study the market potential of transit-oriented land development. Four development scenarios were simulated, with variations on transit access, commercial and retail services within walking distance, and community open space. They were shown to survey preferences of 170 residents of the San Francisco Bay Area. (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.)

**Computer images can be part of an interactive display,** whether stationary or mobile. Interactive displays for presentations and open houses use touch screens to get or give information. Computer images are central to messages or data agencies deliver on-line for inquiring participants. (See **Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks**.)

**Media campaigns utilize computer-generated images and data.** Public service announcements incorporating computer images are broadcast on television as part of an information campaign. (See **Media Strategies**.)

**What are the drawbacks?**

**Illustration techniques should be used judiciously,** since they are not appropriate for all projects or programs. Using such relatively new and impressive technology subjects an agency to criticism about spending limited public funds on expensive and flashy "toys." The Twin Cities, Minnesota, Metropolitan Council used GIS images in presentations, only to find that people were more interested in the data than the overall concepts illustrated. The Pennsylvania DOT found that the technologies may not be cost-effective in attracting interest and getting people involved.

**Images are powerful, and they are sometimes misunderstood.** For controversial subjects, computer images may suggest that an agency is biased toward one alternative. If illustrations are perceived as deceptive, the agency or the discussion process is open to question. If possible, an agency consults with people representing many positions prior to developing computer images or illustrations.

**Computer illustrations usually show only two dimensions.** Computer images give an idea of depth, but with some limitations. Simulations offer three dimensions, but some older programs have difficulty capturing the nuances of ambient light and depth of view. However, the technology continues to improve.

Agencies need to consider how to provide information to people who are sight impaired. (See **People with Disabilities**.)

**Are computer presentations and simulations flexible?**

**Flexibility is usually related to software costs.** While computer simulations can be designed for great variation and manipulation, some programs are quite limited or relatively static. More complicated software programs allow an agency to not only prepare images and simulations for public presentation but also give some leeway to project designers and technicians working on-the-spot to accommodate design suggestions from the audience.

**Once in place, computer graphics programs can be used repeatedly and in new ways.** A complex transportation issue generates many potential solutions before reaching a set of final alternatives. Throughout this process, participants need help visualizing and understanding the characteristics of alternatives. Computer images potentially provide such visual aid.

**Computer-generated images are used, modified, and re-used.** Once the images and other computer materials have been made, agencies can be flexible in their use and distribution. The Orange County (California) Transit Authority made computer-generated images of alternatives for its projects. These images are used in video brochures available for borrowing. They are also used in mobile kiosks that bring interactive touch-screen programs to various areas of the county.

### When are they used most effectively?

**Visual images are effective at nearly any stage in a process.** A visual depiction of possible changes in a transportation system can be used to acquaint community people with an agency's tasks. Computer images work especially well when used for people with limited language skills or for groups that speak several different languages.

**Computer images have particular application to alternatives,** helping people visualize potential impacts and operations. They are used in corridor studies, long-range planning, transportation improvement programs, or other program or project tasks. Visual communication is very useful at the beginning of a project or at a critical time when decisions are being made.

### For further information:

- Center for Urban and Community Design, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida, (305) 284-2031
- Dallas Area Rapid Transit Dallas, Texas, (214) 749-3278
- Environmental Simulation Center, New School for Social Research, New York, New York, (212) 229-5408
- Environmental Simulation Laboratory, Institute of Urban and Regional Development, University of California, Berkeley, California, (510) 642-2961
- Lexington–Fayette Urban County Government Planning Division, Lexington, Kentucky, (606) 258-3160
- New York State Urban Development Corporation, New York, New York, (212) 930-0431
- Orange County Transportation Authority, Orange, California, (714) 560-5725
- Portland Metro, Portland, Oregon, (503) 797-1743
- Texas Transportation Institute, Texas A&M, (409) 845-1711
- Twin Cities Metropolitan Council, Saint Paul, Minnesota, (612) 291-6423
- Urban Innovations Group, University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, (310) 825-4321

## MAPPING THROUGH GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SYSTEMS (GIS)

### What is a geographic information system?

**Geographic Information Systems (GIS) combine traditional maps with layers of related information in an electronic format.** A GIS assembles, stores, manipulates, and displays data that is identified by location and can relate information from different sources. Any variable that can be located spatially can be input to a GIS. Location may be annotated by x, y, and z coordinates of longitude, latitude, and elevation, or by such systems as ZIP codes or highway mile markers. A GIS can also convert existing digital information into forms it can recognize and use. In addition, census or other tabular data can be converted to map-like form, serving as layers of thematic information in a GIS.

**A GIS stores maps and files layers of information in a way that makes it possible to perform complex analyses.** For example, a GIS user can query a specific location, object, or area on the screen to retrieve recorded information about it from off-screen files. A GIS can also recognize and analyze the spatial relationships among mapped phenomena to determine adjacency (what is next to what), containment (what is enclosed by what), and proximity (how close something is to something else). It is also possible to assign values such as direction and speed to simulate movement through a network. GIS also has the ability to produce graphics on the screen or on paper that convey the results of analysis to people who have input to and make decisions about resources.

**Some of the many broad uses of GIS include:**

- Mapmaking – Incorporating the mapmaking experience of traditional cartographers into GIS technology for the automated production of maps.
- Site Selection – Analysis of multiple physical factors when they must be considered and integrated over a large area.
- Emergency Response Planning – Analysis of the impacts of natural disasters on surface structures, size of affected populations, and emergency response time and available routes.
- Simulating Environmental Effects – Realistic, three-dimensional “before and after” perspective views of the environmental impacts of a given project.

*Source: Geographic Information Systems, U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey,* ***http://www.usgs.gov/research/gis/title.html***

### Why is it useful?

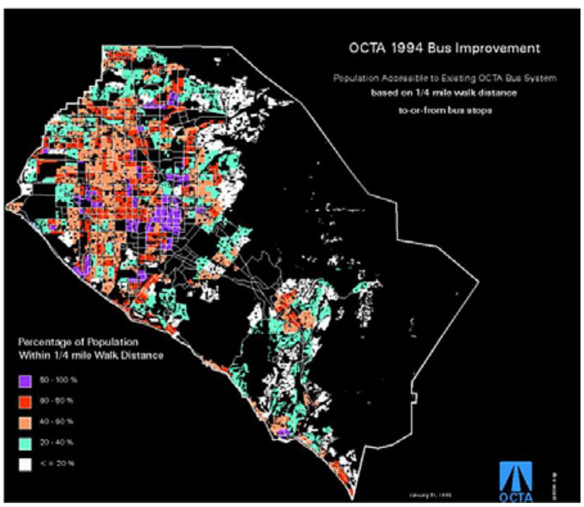
**GIS provides a richness of data that is unlike traditional paper maps.** Complex information can be presented graphically in one place. In addition, GIS maps will typically have more depth of information. For example, while a paper map may show where toxic sites are located, a GIS map of the same information will often be backed up by a full database of information on those toxic sites. Information from a GIS may also be more current than a paper map. While paper maps may be updated on a regular schedule (e.g., annually), recent satellite or aerial photos could be digitized for GIS use to create “up to the minute” maps of an area.

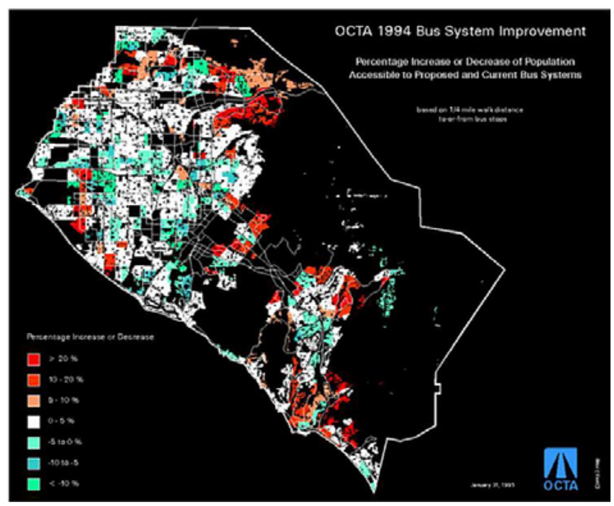
**GIS offers public involvement professionals flexibility in displaying information.** Users determine how and at what levels associated information is displayed. As a result, maps can be quickly customized to a particular purpose. Maps can also be used interactively with the public to gather input and display the possible scenarios resulting from that input in a real-time setting.

**GIS also allows conditions to be analyzed over time.** For example, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) has been using GIS for over 25 years to assist in regional and local planning efforts. By working with its partners, SANDAG has developed cost efficient techniques to update its land use database on a regular schedule. SANDAG’s GIS website also offers interactive maps that can be customized to demographic, economic, transportation, and trans-border themes; downloadable GIS files, and access to printed maps.

**Does it have special uses?**

**GIS can be used in participatory/collaborative mapping.** For example, practitioners and community residents can collaboratively sketch community boundaries, as seen by local residents and identify important community assets and liabilities (e.g., cultural resources, historic sites, toxic sites). GIS also supports “what-if” scenario planning. Mapping of roads, bus routes, pedestrian paths and bikeways commonly can help assess those used and/or preferred by local residents. The results can be overlaid with current and proposed transportation projects for a quick snapshot of potential impacts and can be ultimately integrated with new projects. The following example shows the results of a GIS analysis done by the Orange County (CA) Transportation Authority (OCTA) to determine what effect a proposed change in bus service would have on accessibility to the new service. OCTA used a variety of information, including population density, land use, and “catchment” areas (i.e., the area from which potential riders would be willing to walk to and from the stop) to develop this analysis. The first figure shows population accessible to the existing bus system. The second shows the change in accessibility based on a proposed change. Additional examples from OCTA can be found in FHWA’s Toolbox for Regional Policy analysis, Orange County Case Study, [http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/toolbox/orange_overview.htm](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/toolbox/orange_overview.htm).




**A GIS can be used to survey residents about their local environments** (cross-link to section in guide on surveys). For example, a the National Science Foundation has funded a project at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to help in understanding of elements of local environments that are important to people’s lives. Through a face-to-face interview, participants are asked to assess perceptions about a neighborhood’s boundaries, services, strengths and assets, problems and deficiencies. The interview uses a GIS interactively to plot responses on a map and prompt follow-up questions, as well as to present study findings.

**GIS also provides information to citizens about community information, services, and projects.** On its communityWEBpages, the City of Vancouver hosts a “Projects and Construction” section that includes information about city initiatives, projects, development proposals, construction and roadwork. Information is searchable by community, department, project type, street name or location, and project dates. This information is also mapped using VanMap, a city-wide map application that also provides information on property lines, zoning information, sewer and mains, addresses, and public places.

**Other examples of GIS used to provide information to the public include:**

- "Seattle's Neighborhoods – A Graphical Guide to Services and Activities" maps neighborhoods by census tract. It provides information on City of Seattle services within tracts, as well as brief demographic information.
- North Central Texas COG Transportation Improvement Program Information System provides information about transportation improvement plan projects in the Dallas-Ft. Worth metropolitan planning area through an interactive map.
- The EPA Enviromapper maps various types of environmental information, including air releases, drinking water, toxic releases, hazardous wastes, water discharge permits, and Superfund sites. Maps can be created at the national, state, and county levels.

**Who participates? And how?**

**GIS can be used interactively with participants** at public meetings, open houses, and small group meeting. Practitioners may engage participants as a group or in a one-to-one setting. In addition, the GIS tool could be set up as a stand-alone interactive display for meeting participants to review and comment on proposed plans or analysis. GIS products could also be part of interim and final project or plan documents.

**A GIS tool can also be part of a website.** Like many of the community information services described in the preceding section, individuals who are computer-oriented are most likely to participate. Usage would be limited to those with access to computers and Internet connections. However the public would have the convenience of accessing information from their homes at any time. Agencies must publicize the availability of on-line material. (See **On-line Services**.)

**A GIS may also be available for plan or text mark-up software.** For example, GIS images of proposed routes or service corridors may be placed on a website and through appropriate mark-up software, the public would be able to comment from remote locations at prescribed review cycles. (See **Plan Or Text Mark-Up Software**).

**How do agencies use the output?**

**Agencies can use GIS to gather community reaction and obtain community opinion on projects and plans.** Through GIS, agencies may gain a better understanding of importance of neighborhood/community elements to public. GIS may also assist with joint-decision making and empathy building. Interactively mapping scenarios can help all parties better understand each other's interests and concerns.

**Also, because of the electronic interchangeability of the GIS data files, agencies may save time and resources** once a final concept is approved by using the same materials for the next stages of the project or plan development using materials developed, in part, for public involvement purposes.

**What are the costs?**

**Costs to implement GIS systems may be high** depending on the strategic interest and information technology resources of the agency. In some cases, a project may already have a GIS component. In addition, agencies may have the necessary hardware and software, as well as professionals trained in GIS on staff and available to assist in its use for public involvement. If not, staff training or hiring consultants may be necessary.

**GIS does involve a substantial time commitment on the part of the agency.** Depending on data sources available, maps may have to be generated for intended purposes. In most case, information for public display would need to be customized to the particular project.

**If a GIS is to be available via the Internet, some type of outreach may be beneficial** to advertise the service and ensure return on investment. In addition, set-up and/or licensing costs may apply.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**GIS can be used to:**

- Enhance public meetings, small group meetings, open houses, conferences, and workshops by conveying complex information in manageable layers of information (See **Public Meetings/Hearings; Small Group Techniques Open Houses; Conferences, Workshops, and Retreats**.);
- Facilitate activities like brainstorming, charrettes, and visioning to develop better, community-based concepts (See **Brainstorming; Charrettes; Visioning**.); and
- Provide additional features to and comment opportunities through on-line services (See **On-line Services**).

### What are the drawbacks?

**As mentioned above, cost and training may be a drawback to using GIS.** If the hardware, software, and personnel capabilities do not exist in the agency, or are not being currently employed on the project, significant costs can be incurred to purchase computer equipment and train staff, or hire consulting expertise. The availability of datasets and compatibility of data may also impact the cost of using GIS.

**Because of its electronic format, GIS has the potential for mass media appeal and distribution**. However, agencies must take care to ensure that false impressions are minimized through accurate representations.

**If a GIS tool is to be web-based, project staff needs to consider that the use of on-line services is limited** due to access, expense, and skill requirements (See **On-line Services**). As a result, web-based GIS should be used with other public involvement techniques (i.e., meetings, other on-line services).

### When is it used most effectively?

**GIS is most effective when there is:**

- A need to convey complex information graphically;
- Information that can be tailored to particular users or audiences; and
- Support or complementarities from other public involvement techniques.

### For further information:

- San Diego Association of Governments GIS Resources, http://www.sandag.org/index.asp?classid=21&fuseaction=home.classhome
- FHWA's Toolbox for Regional Policy Analysis, Orange County Case Study, http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/toolbox/orange_overview.htm
- FHWA's Toolbox for Regional Policy Analysis, San Francisco Case Study, http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/toolbox/sanfrancisco_overview.htm

- FHWA Transportation Case Studies in GIS, http://tmip.fhwa.dot.gov/clearinghouse/docs/gis/
- “Neighborhood Evaluation using GIS”, Dr. Emily Talen, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, http://www.urban.uiuc.edu/faculty/talen/GISweb/summary.html
- City of Vancouver, communityWEBpages http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/community_profiles/index.htm
- “Seattle’s Neighborhoods – A Graphical Guide to Services and Activities” http://www.pan.ci.seattle.wa.us/don/neighmap.htm
- North Central Texas COG Transportation Improvement Program Information System http://dfwinfo.com/trans/tipins/index.html
- EPA Enviromapper, http://maps.epa.gov/enviromapper/
- Community University Regional Consortium for Regional Environmental Justice http://www.danj.org/~gelobter/cucrej/
- Integrated Approaches to Participatory Development http://www.iapad.org/
- Hillsborough Project http://www.eos.ncsu.edu/eos/info/ce400_info/roundabout/index.html
- “The World of E-Planning”, Karen Finucan, Planning, July 2001, pp 4-9. Also provides a reference to the public access GIS in Milwaukee and a public participation website for Indianapolis.

## 3-D VISUALIZATION

### What is 3-D Visualization?

**Three-Dimensional (3-D) Visualization is a process in which flat images are enhanced or manipulated by an artist to impart the illusion of depth.** 3-D visualization may be still, i.e., no motion associated with the image, or may include motion, in which case the technique is usually referred to as 3-D animation.

**Flat images, such as illustrations, photographs, films, and graphics in a display area or on a computer screen, can be manipulated through one of several techniques to create the illusion of depth.** These techniques include special viewing lens worn by the viewer to make flat images appear with depth. Computer illustration and animation techniques can also provide depth to an image through special techniques of shading, perspective, motion, and possibly sound. When using a computer-based technique, it is possible to select certain viewing points or environmental conditions to examine the images or objects of interest. For example, a 3-D visualization of a project may be created using a morning, mid-day, and evening context to get a sense of the scale, utilization, and appropriateness of a proposed project in a community setting. All of these techniques have the intended effect of making the objects appear to be "life-like", extending flat images out of the paper, print, film, or screen on which they appear.

**Three-dimensional (3-D) animation, the dynamic version of 3-D visualization, creates the illusion of motion** by viewing a succession of 3-D still images or computer-generated still images. Prior to the advent of computers, animation was achieved by videotaping or filming a sequence of still images or painted sequences one at a time on plastic or paper surfaces. When played back, the sequence of still images give the impression of motion. When first used, computers controlled the movements of the artwork and the camera using this traditional method. Now computers create the artwork and simulate the motion effects.

### Why is it useful?

**Many individuals visually perceive the world and the objects in three dimensions** -- length, width, and depth. Because this is a natural state of observing and viewing our world, information conveyed with this technique does not require extensive translation or adjustment from our normal visual mode of sensing. The advertising industry for years has relied heavily on visualizations (and increasingly 3-D visualizations) to convey messages about products or services, educate the public, or encourage purchases.

**3-D visualization are able to convey in a succinct manner the forms and shapes of an interim or final project design or concept.** This enables the public to better understand the implications of a potentially complex project or plan and enhance their ability to provide review and comments.

### Does it have special uses?

**People perceive the world and objects in three dimensions.** Accordingly, information conveyed with 3-D visualization does not require familiarity, training, or extensive translation or adjustment on the part of the public.

**Computer animation can be used to create special effects and to simulate images** that would be impossible to show with non-animation techniques, such as the look and feel of walking through a community after a large-scale facility such as a replacement bridge or new transit system has been built. Computer animation can also produce images from scientific data. It has been used to visualize large quantities of data, such as those gathered through remote sensing applications such as weather systems

(See **Remote Sensing Applications**). Computer animation can also be used to create a sense of the operations of a proposed facility or system, including representation of vehicular and people movement in a project study area.

### Who participates? And how?

**Almost anyone can participate** in the use of 3-D visualization. However, agencies using this technique should consider alternate methods for involving people with visual impairments.

**The technique can be used during various stages of a plan or project.** Typically 3-D visualization is used after a set of solution options or alternatives have been sufficiently defined and greater insight into the environmental, community, social, and visual impact is desired.

**Because many of the 3-D visualization technique now involve the use of computers, the 3-D products may be shared over a wide range of media outlets,** including the Internet, kiosks, CDs, display tables, VCRs, TV programs, and similar means. Static displays, such as special display boards, may be used at public forums. This static format provides the opportunity for a project representative to offer an explanation of the technique and solicit comments from viewers. On the other hand, 3-D visualization, when coupled with sound, may allow for a self-standing display, requiring no project representative. Self-standing displays may be used in kiosks, on the Internet, or on appropriate broadcast media (as PSAs, for example). (See **On-line Services; Interactive Television; Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks; Public Information Materials**.)

### How do agencies use the output?

**3-D visualization is a natural way of viewing the potential effects and outcomes of a proposed plan or project.** The visualization may also be used to create a futuristic or a "desired outcome" vision for a project or plan, which is not necessarily tied to any proposed solution idea. In either case, once the public has had a chance to understand and review the 3-D visualization, agencies may use the technique to:

- Gather community reaction.
- Obtain community opinion on projects and plans.
- Be a catalyst for further discussion, analysis, or refinement of a proposed alternative.
- Be the basis for an honest and valid sample of community opinion.

### What are the costs?

**While commercial software is readily available to support 3-D visualization, highly skilled techniques and specialized computer equipment are needed to develop quality 3-D visualizations.** The costs may range from several hundred dollars to several thousand, depending on the number of 3-D visualizations required, the extent of animation, and the resolution, source materials, and complexity of the images being developed. Because this is such a specialized skill and the visualization equipment is somewhat unique for these visualization functions, consultant services are usually required.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**3-D visualization can augment a variety of other techniques.** It is especially useful when describing a complex alternative or plan, in which case it can augment text-based or other image-based techniques. 3-D visualization is also useful in providing a baseline or common reference point for soliciting public opinion and comment on a project or plan. (See **Briefings; Public Meetings/Hearings; Open Houses; Conferences, Workshops, and Retreats**.) 3-D visualization may also be used for brainstorming concepts or creative activities, such as a design charrette or community visioning exercise. (See

**Brainstorming; Charrette; Visioning**.) Depending on the acceptability and appropriateness of the 3-D visualization, it may become a "logo" or shorthand representation for a particular project or plan.

**What are the drawbacks?**

**3-D visualization is a costly and potentially time-consuming technique.** Care must be taken to ensure that the investment is beneficial to the overall public involvement goals. Because of its electronic-format, it does have the potential for mass media appeal and distribution. However, agencies must take care to ensure that false impressions are minimized through accurate representations. In addition, proper use of this technique is required to effectively gather accurate and representative public comment.

**When is it used most effectively?**

**3-D visualization is used most effectively when a small number of complex plans or project alternatives** are under consideration for review and/or selection. The visualization, when used in conjunction with other techniques, provides a context for enhanced public understanding, review, and comments.

**For further information:**

- Washington State DOT – Design Visualization. www.wsdot.wa.gov/eesc/cae/desvis.htm
- University of Wisconsin Forest Visualization Project. www.landscape.forest.wisc.edu/Projects/projects.html
- Engineering News Record article on 3-D visualization and public involvement. www.enr.com/new/coverstry_81301.asp
- Taking architectural views to the community with 3D Visualization. www.datacad.com/news/articles/hmfhfin.htm
- TxDOT Project: Cross-town Interchange Public Involvement Features 3D/4D Visualization. http://www.dot.state.tx.us/insdtdot/geodist/crp/xtown/xtown.htm
- Maglev Corridor Transit Project – Baltimore-Washington proposed project using advanced magnetic levitation technologies. http://www.bwmaglev.com/
- Honolulu Rapid Bus Transit project – Summary document with maps and photos of the BRT concept and proposed project. http://www.oahutrans2k.com/factsheet.pdf

## VISUAL PREFERENCE SURVEYS

### What is a visual preference survey?

**A visual preference survey is a technique that assists the community in determining which components of a plan or project environment contributes positively to a community's overall image or features.** As the name implies, the technique is based on the development of one or more visual concepts of a proposed plan or project. Once the visual concepts are developed, they are used in a public forum or other specialized public gathering to provide the public with an opportunity to review, study, and comment on their preferences for the features depicted by the visual representations. Typical uses of visual preference surveys include helping the community define the preferences for architectural style, signs, building setbacks, landscaping, parking areas, size/scope of transportation facilities, surfaces finishes, and other design elements.

**The format for the preference survey** can be a written ballot, a structured set of self-administered questions, a facilitated discussion, a focus group format, an open semi-structured forum, or used as part of another preference collection approach, e.g., handheld/instant voting techniques.

### Why is it useful?

**Visual preference surveys are helpful since they provide the public with a broad and relatively inexpensive range of options** for depicting community features for a proposed plan or project. The actual technique may rely on sketches, photographs, computer images, or similar techniques to provide the basis for participants to rate or assess each visual depiction on a preference scale, such as a five-point scale. As a result, participants can express judgments and possibly reach a consensus about a visual design, architecture, site layout, landscape, and similar design features, which may be incorporated in the goals, objectives, design guidelines, enhancement/mitigation measures, and/or recommended standards for a study, plan or project.

### Does it have special uses?

**Visual preference surveys can assist agencies** in the understanding and development of:

- Community and urban design features
- Transportation sub-area or corridor studies
- Transportation alternatives development and analysis
- Large-scale regional planning efforts
- Visioning exercises (See **Visioning**)
- Design charrettes (See **Charrettes**)

### Who participates? And how?

**Public participation will be dependent on the type of visual preference survey technique employed.** For example, if a focus group format is used, then some public selection process must be used to include a set of individuals who are representative of the views and interest of the larger community. At other times, the visual preference survey may be included as part of a public hearing or public meeting process, with one of several "stations" or display areas containing the visual options. At the display area some means of collecting feedback from interested viewers will be needed, such as responses to a structured interview administered by staff or the completion by the viewer of a preference rating form.

**How do agencies use the output?**

**The results of the survey will provide insights and direction** to the agency on the preference of the sampled group. Based on the objectives of the survey and the representation of the community in the sampled group, the agency may make key decisions on the preferred types of project design features, studies, or plans. The results of the survey are also helpful in focusing community opinion on projects and plans, being a catalyst for further discussions, helping to educate the public about the design or plan choices, and offering an alternative form of collecting public or community opinion and feedback. Because of the visual basis of this technique, concepts and survey results are easily conveyed in the mass media.

**What are the costs?**

**The cost for the visual preference surveys are usually a few hundred to a few thousand dollars,** depending on the range of visual options to be displayed, the desired sample size, and the method(s) of collecting and analyzing public preferences. This techniques can be implemented using agency personnel and resources or through consulting services.

**How is it used with other techniques?**

**Visual preference surveys can complement other survey techniques.** (See **Public Opinion Surveys**.) It can also be used as part of a wider set of techniques to help educate the public about key features of a project or plan and to assist in the development of ideas or concepts. Consequently, visual preference surveys can be used in conjunction with public meetings or hearings, activities involving vision development, design charrettes, and focus group discussions or small group meetings. (See **Public Meetings/Hearings; Visioning; Charrettes; Focus Groups; Small Group Techniques**.)

**What are the drawbacks?**

**Visual preference surveys are time consuming** since they will require the development of one or more visual renderings of options or design features under consideration. This set-up time may require several weeks of preparation, depending on the availability of data, the skills of the artist, and the desired size and level of detail for the visual rendering.

**Agencies using this technique will need to consider alternative methods** for involving people with visual impairments. (See **People with Disabilities**.)

**Because of the visual sophistication of the public, given the pervasiveness and societal influence of mass media and advertising, there may be expectations on the part of the public for high quality and completeness.** The public may dismiss the visual content because the renderings or presentation are not developed to a comparable level of detail and quality they are use to viewing in the print and visual mass media.

**It is also possible for the public to develop false expectations** based on the visual rendering. Agencies need to ensure that a designer's visualizations are true.

**When is it used most effectively?**

**Visual preference surveys are most effective when major design feature decision needs to be made.** The technique is also valuable in helping to build a community consensus and momentum on a preferred design or study approach. Because of its visual nature, this technique is also most effective when complex issues and concepts can be depicted visually.

**For further information:**

- “Shaping Dane” Pilot Project, Citizen-Based Land Use Planning in Dane County, Wisconsin, Electronic Planning Facilitation, http://www.lic.wisc.edu/shapingdane/welcome.html
- UrbanSim software based simulation model, Paul Waddell, 206-221-4161, pwaddell@u.washington.edu, http://www.urbansim.org/
- Envision Utah, http://www.envisionutah.org/
- FHWA’s Toolbox for Regional Policy analysis, Envision Utah Case Study, http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/toolbox/utah_application.htm
- Florida House Institute for Sustainable Development, Tools for Community Design and Decision Making, Inventory of Place-Based Planning Tools, http://www.i4sd.org/tools-2.htm
- City of Mankato, MN Urban Design Framework Manual, Visual Preference Survey (Chapter 2), http://www.ci.mankato.mn.us/urbandesign/chapter2/2.php3

## HANDHELD/INSTANT VOTING

### What is handheld/instant voting?

**Handheld/instant voting is a means by which participants may express a preference** for an issue or idea under consideration and have their preferences recorded, usually anonymously and instantaneously. In typical public involvement practice for example, participants are provided a paper feedback form or ballot to indicate a preference for one or more alternatives of a plan or project. These paper ballots are collected and tallied at a later time with the summary results usually shared with the public through a newsletter, report, website posting, or other means. Improvements in technology allow for more advanced tally techniques, such as an optical scanner, to automate and reduce tabulation errors. More recent technical advances have allowed participants the opportunity to cast their preferences via handheld devices, sometimes using wireless communication systems at a specially arranged location. Some companies are beginning to develop Internet-based instantaneous voting approaches, which allow for a decentralized collection of votes. Wireless companies with their cellular phones or PDAs now allow mobile users to connect to the Internet or e-mail providers and cast preferences for products and services.

**The handheld/instant voting technique is not widespread**, primarily due to cost, but may offer a dramatic improvement in the ability of agencies to collect public preference, especially if electronic voting systems are employed in other forms of democratic processes, such as local, state, or federal elections. Past efforts have been attempted in on-line voting (Cube system tried in Columbus, Ohio during the mid-1970's), but did not success due to technical awkwardness, lack of trust in an accurate vote tally, and minimal social acceptance of this form of democracy.

### Why is it useful?

**The advantages of the direct-recording electronic systems,** where the participant (voter) does not fill out a paper ballot and simply touches a screen or pushes buttons, is that there is no voter intent problem (was a ballot marked correctly), the preferences are captured quickly, and physical presence at a public involvement site/event is not required, only some form of electronic access and validation of the voter. In addition, handheld voting allows for immediate feedback and quick iterations and refinements. Some experts believe the electronic voting systems could enhance the democratic process by enabling referendums or preference surveys to be conducted more often and at less cost. Some studies have indicated the lack of public involvement may be due to the inconvenience of going to the public involvement site, which would be overcome with a handheld/instant or electronic voting system. On the other hand, despite elaborate software safeguards against hackers and fraud, even electronic voting techniques must first gain enough public trust in the techniques security for them to be effective. Most tests so far have involved computers in public buildings with access monitored by vote monitors.

### Does it have special uses?

**Handheld/instant voting is useful when seeking preferences quickly from an audience.** However, care must be taken to understand the nature of the voting group so that results are carefully analyzed and inferences correctly drawn about preferences for more general populations or groups.

### Who participates? And how?

**Participants in handheld/instant voting techniques may be selected** to be representative of a special subpopulation (e.g., a community-based survey) or representative of the more general population (urban, suburban, rural communities in a metropolitan area across all demographic characteristics). At other times, there maybe no pre-selection or screening of voters and those who have access to the devices or voting sites are allowed to cast a preference. The choice of technique and who participates depends on the objectives of the public involvement process.

**A typical use of handheld/instant voting involves having the audience express preferences to several scenarios.** They press buttons corresponding to questions associated with the scenario, using a preference scale to respond to a question, e.g., high to low, like to dislike, one to five, etc. The questions have been carefully selected and sequenced to allow analysts to infer preferences and/or special interests among the scenarios and discussion topics. From the voting, reports may be provided instantaneously or only votes collected instantaneously, with the results presented at a later time through a pre-arranged feedback mechanism. More sophisticated methods allow for the real-time adjustment of subsequent scenarios based on the immediate responses of voters.

**Other types of handheld/instant voting techniques would allow the public to express preferences through touch screens on kiosks or similar computer-aided devices.** The preference results would typically be downloaded to a central tally location periodically (hourly, daily, etc.) depending on the polling location of the kiosk, perceived interest in the topic, and cost.

**In any case, issues of voter fraud, double counting, and ease of access will need to be addressed.** Some techniques use identifying numbers, letters, or similar techniques.

### How do agencies use the output?

**The results are used in a manner similar to those of conducting a survey** or preference expression technique. In general, the output allows for a means of rapidly getting public (or some subpopulation's) reaction to a project or plan, obtaining community preferences for selected scenarios, helping to educate the public about a particular project or plan, and encouraging participation through the fundamental democratic principle of voting.

### What are the costs?

**Handheld/instant voting systems are expensive,** costing anywhere from a few thousand dollars up to several thousand dollars for each portable (wireless) unit. Vendors do provide rental systems, but the costs usually can be several hundred dollars per user, depending on the intended use, number of voters, duration of the rental, and the complexity of the survey. Technology advances will help drive these costs lower.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**Handheld/instant voting can be used with other parts of the project or plan development cycle to improve the agency's understanding of community preferences.** Whenever the public involvement process calls for the expression by the public of a preference for an idea, options, or alternative, handheld/instant voting is a candidate technique.

### What are the drawbacks?

**Drawbacks of the handheld/instant voting technique** include:

- Potentially high initial cost or rental cost;
- Only takes the opinions of those voting, which may cause for skewed interpretation of preferences and results; and
- Participants may be reluctant to use the devices for fear of new technology, accuracy, anonymity, or similar factors.

**When is it used most effectively?**

When a rapid response of preferences is required.

**For further information:**

- Characteristics of a good electronic voting system. http://www.acm.org/crossroads/xrds2-4/voting.html
- The case of electronic voting. www.wired.com/news/politics/0,1283,40141,00.html
- Transportation Blueprint for the 21st Century: MTC Forum Involving Electronic Voting. www.mtc.ca.gov/projects/blueprint/bp_findings.htm
- Internet Voting Technology Alliance for Public Involvement. www.iap2.org/PINlinks/pinlinks.html

## PLAN OR TEXT MARK-UP SOFTWARE

### What is Plan or Text Mark-up Software?

**Plan or text mark-up software is a computer application that allows the user to provide comments**, notes, hyperlinks, or other text or graphical modifications to an existing drawing, plan, document, graphic, or other form of electronic media. As visual renderings become more computer-based, a software application that allows for easy mark-up of visual concepts or text is desirable as a public involvement technique. Such a software tool would enable the public to directly comment on plans and ideas without detailed knowledge of the underlying visualization or text generation software. With advances in telecommunications, the mark-up software can be done remotely and through individual feedback or through structured group activities.

### Why is it useful?

**The plan or text mark-up software would allow for multiple reviewers to comment** in an efficient and effective manner, usually from a remote location, on current plans, concepts, visuals, and ideas. Because the technique is computer based, it is available just about anytime from anywhere. Therefore, it provides an opportunity for a large number of individuals with access to the software and source documents or images to provide feedback and comment.

### Does it have special uses?

**It provides a means for a large segment of the population comment on current plans or ideas.** It is a technique that may complement more traditional methods of convening a public meeting or discussion forum, helping to attract public participants who may not be able to participate due to distance or time constraints.

### Who participates? And how?

**Comments could be accepted from anyone who has access to the plan or text mark-up software.** The software could be made available through on-line services or the Internet at little or no cost and could be developed and configured to operate on a variety of computer systems, e.g., Javascript.

**To participate, a commenter would have to have access to the source document or images** and have access to appropriate mark-up software that can operate with the source documents or images. Once this compatibility and connectivity is established, the commenter would provide one or several rounds of comments on the source materials. These comments would be reviewed and considered by the agency that would periodically receive the comments electronically. The agency would need to implement a plan for document version control and tracking.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Agencies would be able to collect public comments electronically on plans or other source documents associated with a project or plan.** Because commenters provide their reactions in electronic form, an automatic record of participation is generated and provides an audit trail of public comments for future reference, as needed. Moreover, several cycles of comments can be gathered with successive cycles containing an updated version of the document or plan. This technique provides a direct means of gather public comment from those who wish to and are able to respond.

**What are the costs?**

**There is an initial setup cost for establishing the protocols and procedures for the management of the electronic documents.** The mark-up software would also have to be purchased and made available to users, usually through an Internet connection. The costs for the software may range from several hundred to several thousand dollars, depending on the formats and software used to generate the reference documents or plans. In some cases the text mark-up software is already available as part of a computer operating system. For example, Windows 2000 provides NetMeeting software which allows for text or plan mark-up in a group setting. After the initial setup expenses, the primary operating costs become the staff time required to manage the comments and updates to the electronic documents which have been made available for review and comment.

**How is it used with other techniques?**

**Plan or text-markup software is not helpful when starting to develop a document or image,** but instead can better assist the agency when soliciting comments and feedback on more mature concepts and ideas contained in the document or images. Consequently, the plan or mark-up software can be used after face-to-face meetings or activities in which initial concepts and trust have been developed. The software then provides an efficient means of maintaining public contact and gathering comments and feedback as the project advances. While this is an efficient means of collecting feedback, it should be consider as one of several techniques to be used, since face-to-face meetings are still invaluable for unambiguous communications and maintaining community interest and trust.

**What are the drawbacks?**

**In addition the potential high costs of the software, there may be a "learning curve"** for the commenter based on his experience with the software and the document or images on which comments are offered. If this learning curve is too steep or the software is not "user friendly" the commenter may get frustrated and not provide feedback due to technical difficulties. Moreover, the comments are received primarily from those who are able to work with the software and may not be a representative sampling of the general public. Therefore, interpretation of the comments will need to be done carefully.

**When is it used most effectively?**

**Plan or text mark-up software is effective when used in conjunction with other feedback techniques.** Plan or text mark-up software can also be used with small groups, such as advisory or technical panels, and with stakeholders. (See **Small Group Techniques**; **Civic Advisory Committees**; **Collaborative Task Forces**.) It should be used selectively since it is highly dependent on the software skills and capabilities of the commenter. Therefore it should not be the primary means of gathering feedback, but as a complementary approach to reach special audiences who may not be able to comment through conventional means.

**For further information:**

**The evolution of plan or text markup software is episodic.** Text software has existed for approximately 25 years on personal computers and has incorporated increasingly sophisticated means of editing and "redlining" text. Recent efforts have been devoted to plan mark-up languages, but the multitude of graphic (plan) formats, the increased technical complexity of graphics software, and the computer processing needs have not allowed plan mark-up software to advance to the same state as text mark-up software.

**Using most modern day text software, an authorized user is able to redline or mark-up electronically the text during reviews or edits.** The changed text usually appears in a different color or format. Upon saving, other reviewers may also mark-up the text, including edits from previous reviewers. All changes are usually tracked by different colors and/or formats and include author and time/date stamps. After a review cycle of the text is complete, the original author can see and review the marked-up text and accept, modify, or reject the proposed changes. These text mark-up features are usually included in the basic text software.

**Recently, plan mark-up software is emerging in one of two forms.** The first form is similar to text mark-up software. An authorized user is able to modify the plan through special editing tools, which are displayed on the plan as different colors and/or formats. As with text mark-up, several reviewers are able to provide graphical comments on the same original plan. Upon review, the original planner or designer is able to selective accept, modify, or reject the proposed changes. The second form is more interactive and allows several planners or designer to collaborate with one another over the Internet. In this configuration, plans are stored in a central computer (known as a server) and reviewers with authorized access are able to view and edit the plans using specialized software. Software achieving both of these features has been announced, but no commercial available and certified products have been identified to date.

## REMOTE SENSING APPLICATIONS

### What are Remote Sensing Applications (RSA)?

**Remote Sensing Applications (RSA) refer to the combination of hardware and software that allows for the processing of information about land, water, or an object,** without requiring any physical contact between the sensor and the subject of analysis. The term remote sensing most often refers to the collection of data by instruments carried aboard aircraft or satellites. However, remote sensing is also conducted through a land-based network of environmental sensing stations maintained by a variety of federal, state, and local agencies. Such remote sensing may track weather conditions, measurements of air and water conditions and quality, or other specialty data. Remote sensing applications are commonly used to survey, map, and monitor the resources and environment. Examples of images taken from remote sensing, organized by categories such as agriculture, human dimensions (e.g., environmental impact, population), land surface, and oceans, can be found at NASA's Visible Earth site, **http://visibleearth.nasa.gov/.**

**There are several different types of remote sensing devices and applications.** Many systems take photographs with cameras, recording reflected energy or images in the visible spectrum. Other systems record electromagnetic energy beyond the range of human sight, such as infrared radiation and microwaves. Still other systems employ a network of distributed electro-mechanical sensors and a central location for collecting, transforming, and summarizing the remote sensor data.

**RSAs are varied and include archeological research, geologic investigations, mapmaking, meteorology, mining, volcanic activity, oceanography, and atmospheric and aquatic studies.** Once data has been collected, verified, and stored, RSAs may be able to develop summaries and trends for the subject of analysis or topic of interest. For example, information about air quality for a metropolitan area could be collected and summarized by specialized RSAs. The analysis could provide information about compliance with federal air quality standards and the range of feasible transportation projects for that area. Another common use of RSA is photogrammetry or the science of taking measurements from photographs or other types of images to make physical maps, including topographic maps. The maps are generally developed from photographs taken by a special camera on an airplane.

### Why is it useful?

**RSA is valuable since it provides a means of collecting and analyzing environmental data at low cost and relative convenience.** As a public involvement technique, RSA is useful to help the public understand the past and current environmental conditions in a particular study area or region. RSA also provides first-hand access to data that may be used to help educate the public, build confidence in other analytic methods, and foster a more active public role in the project or plan development.

### Does it have special uses?

**Because of the potential large-scale coverage of RSA techniques,** the public is able to develop a firsthand appreciation of the macro and micro environmental features of a study area which would not have been possible until recently. Depending on the availability of quality data, a RSA could be useful in the various stages of a project, such as issue identification, development of options, and the selection of a preferred course of action.

**Who participates? And how?**

**RSA are usually developed and managed by agencies.** However, special interest groups may also use basic data from remote sensors to analyze and summarize their findings. Data sources are becoming increasingly available and without cost on public websites.

**To conduct a remote sensor analysis, one needs access to the data and the conditions under which the data was collected.** The data is then processed through specialized software, which has been developed and tested by experts. The results are verified, summarized, displayed, printed, and/or summarized for further interpretation and use. A variety of these collection and analysis activities are conducting between commercial firms and academic or non-profit organizations. For example, ESRI (a private firm engaged in GIS systems) maintains a Conservation Research Program that provides industry-academic-nonprofit collaboration on a variety of environmental and community remote sensing projects. These projects range from studies in conservation biology to environmental justice assessments (e.g., http://www.conservationgis.org/links/justice.html.)

**How do agencies use the output?**

**Products from RSAs** are used in four primary ways:

- To educate the public about baseline environmental conditions and trends;
- To analyze and develop findings of community and environmental impacts of a proposed plan or project;
- To assist in displaying or conveying complex environmental information; and
- To obtain public comments or reactions.

**What are the costs?**

**Because of the specialized nature of RSAs and the extent of the sensing network, the costs can vary significantly.** Some data and information can be low cost because data and analyses are available through specialized Internet sites. If analyses or findings are not available, then RSAs may need to be developed to meet a specific project need. Sometimes this expertise is available within an agency. Consequently, the costs may vary from a few hundred dollars to several thousands, depending on the objectives of the RSA, the level of precision required, and the complexity and scope of the sensing data and subsequent analysis.

**How is it used with other techniques?**

**RSAs complement other environmental data collection techniques.** RSA is most effective when macroscale surveys of environmental data are required and the hardware and software for data collection, analysis, and reporting have been developed and verified. The data and findings can be used to assist or augment other public involvement techniques such as using reports and display materials to impart a baseline knowledge of environmental conditions, identifying issues/concerns, developing solution alternatives, selecting among alternatives, and communicating/displaying data, information, and knowledge.

**What are the drawbacks?**

**RSA techniques are relatively straightforward,** but the complexity of the process from sensing data to the communicating of findings is highly complex and may not be “transparent” to a non-specialist. This may create some issues of credibility and validity of the findings. Also, the cost of RSAs may be relatively high, although increased use of RSA during the past 20 to 30 years has helped to lower the user costs.

**When is it used most effectively?**

**RSA are most effective when the technique is somewhat familiar to the public,** e.g., weather sensing, the analysis process is relatively intuitive and straightforward, and the findings contribute to additional understanding and interpretation of the issues or discussion topics at hand.

**For further information:**

- The National Aeronautic and Space Administration's Observatorium offers education resources about remote sensing. http://observe.arc.nasa.gov/nasa/entries/entry_7.html
- "Remote Sensing Imagery: Making Sense Of Available Data," by Alex de Sherbinin, Environment, Volume: 44 Number: January 1, 2002.
- Integrated Global Observing Strategy is a major partnership of data providers and data users focused on atmospheric, oceanographic, and land-based observations. See http://www.igospartners.org/
- NASA's Visible Earth provides an excellent array of imagery grouped conveniently into categories such as agriculture, biosphere, human dimensions, and oceans. See http://visibleearth.nasa.gov/

## D. TAKING INITIAL ACTION STEPS

In an era of many distractions and competing interests, agencies need more varied and effective ways to grab the public's attention and engage them meaningfully in planning activities. Here are some steps agencies can take to use special techniques:

1. **Evaluate whether special techniques are needed and why.**
   Perform a self-evaluation of the agency's public involvement efforts to determine if a representative cross-section of the community is responding and being heard. Decide if special techniques are necessary to increase participation or meet a need not being addressed by standard methods. Keep in mind the overall strategy of the public involvement program.

2. **Determine which special techniques are appropriate.**
   Define the specific purpose to be achieved. Explore the array of techniques available to determine which one fulfills that purpose for the intended audience. Assess the interest it might arouse. Seek the advice of participants who are already knowledgeable about agency proposals. Survey a sample of community people or hold a focus group to flesh out their reactions. If interactive technologies are being considered, assess whether the intended audience is likely to be put off or drawn in by them.

3. **Assure the necessary funding.**
   Budget staff time, equipment, supplies, and other monetary costs—even the smallest events incur them. Determine if they can be met within existing budgets. For larger ventures where private funding assistance is needed, develop a cost proposal for potential sponsors, carefully explaining the event and projecting its anticipated benefits to the community at large.

4. **Evaluate the approach with community advisors.**
   During early phases of planning a new venture, seek suggestions from community members or key people. As the date for starting a public involvement process draws near, solicit additional comments on the details of the approach. After a venture is launched and as a guide to future innovations, assess both its positive and negative impacts with community advisors.