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**.)

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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.

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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

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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

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Chapter 3. GETTING FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

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.