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**.)

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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.

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How are they used with other techniques?

On-line services supplement an agency's conventional outreach techniques such as preparing public information materials and contacting individuals. (See **Public Information Materials**.) They should not become the public's only means of participating. On-line services are evolving into a primary method of communication, but they do not preclude or substitute for techniques such as public meetings, personal interaction, and mailings.

Electronic bulletin boards promote and facilitate information exchange. The New York Metropolitan Transportation Council (NYMTC) has established an electronic bulletin board system with message boards to explain its work, its methods, and its specific products and services. The Council's electronic menu offers messages about the region's transportation improvement plan, long-range plan, and potential use of congestion management in developing its travel models. NYMTC will continue to hold hearings and solicit input in its forecasting and planning efforts through other traditional methods.

What are the drawbacks?

Use of on-line services is limited due to access, expense, and skill requirements. Although usage is growing, on-line services and computers reach only a fraction of the total population. Some people are always suspicious of machines, and some resist using means of communication they consider cold and impersonal. Adjustment to technological change is slow, and some social and economic barriers will persist. Just as there are people who do not have cable television, there will always be those without computers and on-line services. Concerns about equity among participants should be kept in mind when choosing this technique. For example, Agencies need to consider how to make information available to people with disabilities and people whose first language is not English. (See **People with Disabilities; Ethnic, Minority, and Low-Income Groups**.)

Participants in on-line services do not represent the entire community. In particular, ethnic groups, minorities, disabled people, the elderly, and other people traditionally underserved by transportation often have limited access to these resources. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups; People with Disabilities**.) As computer use continues to increase in the workplace and on-line services become more common and more available in public places, such limitations may become less pronounced.

On-line services must be used in conjunction with other techniques that allow people to obtain information quickly. They require people to make a commitment to using a computer to obtain information. Users cannot be reached as quickly as with a printed pamphlet, fact sheet, report, or other materials delivered to the door. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

On-line services cannot replace meetings, which allow participants to interact with one another and focus on key points of discussion. Even with the interaction on-line services provide, they lack the dynamic face-to-face interplay that generates and airs ideas during a meeting or focus group. (See **Focus Groups; Small Group Techniques**.)

Information overload is a potential problem. As on-line services make communication easy and many people join in, the sheer volume of information available becomes overwhelming. Agencies are unlikely to receive individual comments unless they help people focus on specific issues. Frequently, this involves communicating through traditional public information materials and meetings.

Are on-line services flexible?

The format of a home page or bulletin board is modified and adjusted as needed, while the essential characteristics of the medium remain unchanged. Other specific on-line actions are also changed frequently. The flexibility of the technology itself (e.g., round-the-clock availability, adjustable format or applications) is one of its most attractive features. The NYMTC Transportation Information

Exchange established 5 bulletin boards and 13 explanatory files, with the express belief that with time and user interaction, more bulletin boards and issue-specific files would be added.

On-line information is changed as often as an agency wishes. It should always carry the date when updated information was entered. The Caltrans home page shows the date of the page's latest update and includes a listing of the information most recently added to the page, with dates next to each item. Seeing how recently the information was added and how recently the whole page was updated adds credibility and a sense of immediacy. It also makes the on-line service more of a here-and-now resource.

A home page can include information from outside an agency. This is the concept of a "portal" in which "one-stop shopping" for information is available to the user. The portal manager collects and organizes similar information about a topic, providing cross-references to other websites and frequent updates of events and plans/projects. One service offered on the Caltrans home page is San Francisco Bay Area Transit Information. It is operated as a pubic service of the University of California, supported by student volunteers working to improve campus on-line services.

When are they used most effectively?

On-line services are best used to improve and expand opportunities for communication, to include dedicated or focused small groups, to bridge great distances, and for providing busy people basic information when they want it. King County Metro Transit in Seattle has used them to give the riding public information about Metro's Rider-Link program. Integrating text, photographs, and video, they give potential riders information about fares, schedules, routes, and connections with other services. With this service, anyone in the Seattle area can get transit information from a desktop computer. In Lexington, Kentucky, the Metropolitan Planning Organization—Urban County Government—puts its TIP and Americans with Disabilities Act reports on electronic bulletin boards.

Over time on-line services strengthen public involvement programs as a means of communication and information exchange. Their sustained use increases as more people become accustomed to on-line services and their advantages.

For further information:

- Alaska Home Page, http://www/dot.state.ak.us/
- Lexington Urban County Government, Division of Planning, (606) 258-3160; E-mail lsfusg.com
- Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (Houston), (713) 739-4000; E-mail webmaster@www.hou-metro.harris.tx.us
- New York Metropolitan Transportation Council, (212) 938-3300; bulletin board (212) 938-4371
- San Francisco County Transportation Authority, (415) 557-6850; E-mail sfcta@thecity.sfsu.edu/~sfctamel
- Texas Employment Commission, Public Information Office, (512) 463-2217; E-mail telnet://hi-tec.state.tx.us:23/
- Editor and Publisher, *Urban Transportation Monitor,* (703) 764-0512; E-mail drathbon@ix.netcom.com
- California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), (916) 654-5266; E-mail webadmin@dot.ca.gov
- North Central Texas Council of Governments, www.dfwinfo.com
- West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc., www.weact.com

HOTLINES

What are hotlines?

Hotlines are agency telephone lines that receive inquiries from the general public. They offer updated information on a project and general news regarding a special program, as well as taking specific inquiries from callers. The hotlines are staffed by a contact person or operate automatically with recorded messages.

Most hotlines have the following basic features:

- An established, well-publicized telephone number that operates—at a minimum—during business hours; many hotlines offer 24-hour toll-free communication access via an 800 number;
- An answering machine to receive calls when staff is unavailable;
- A staff person designated to receive and respond to calls; and
- A policy for ways in which agency staff should respond to calls.

Why are they useful?

Hotlines allow anyone with access to a telephone to contact an agency. They are inexpensive and easy to use for informing a wide range of individuals about a project or planning process and for allowing them to ask questions or voice opinions. The Denver Regional Council of Governments uses a hotline to announce public meetings, hearings, and other events. The Maryland Department of Transportation (DOT) uses an 800 number during project development, and the Colorado DOT uses one during its planning process. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) uses a hotline to announce events and take questions and comments from the public.

Hotlines are used to deliver recorded messages, using one or more telephone lines. Such operations provide specific information to update community members on upcoming program events or announce recent project milestones and decisions. Agencies check the line regularly and make responses promptly. Messages are updated frequently, so that information is current and callers are confident that the agency is monitoring the system. Special technologies are available to enable people with hearing and speech disabilities to activate all hotline features. (See **People with Disabilities**.)

Hotlines are a useful method of two-way communication. They offer both information and an opportunity to register opinions or ask questions. Staff members give real-time responses. Answering machines should include a mechanism to record callers' names and addresses as well as questions or opinions. The Twin Cities Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) in Minnesota has an automated telephone response system. (See **Telephone Techniques**.)

Do they have special uses?

FAX-on-demand services can be provided by a hotline. The Pennsylvania State Legislature provides a FAX-on-demand service to its members and plans to do so for constituents as well. This service provides a caller with facsimile copies of information (in this case, legislative bills) from a prepared menu. A person calling the hotline selects a desired document, provides a number for the receiving facsimile machine, then awaits the agency's transmission. This service eliminates delays that come from telephoning, requesting, and waiting for a mailing, or the redundancy of agency staff answering dozens of identical requests for a "hot" piece of information. For short documents, FAX-on-demand is cost-competitive with traditional mail services, particularly if transmissions are sent in off-hours, when telephone rates are lower.

Hotlines are used prior to open houses or open forums. In this way, they enable staff members to research answers and better prepare for an event. (See **Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses**.) New Jersey Transit uses a hotline for its Monmouth–Ocean–Middlesex major investment study to receive questions from the public prior to project open houses. Callers are asked to state their questions in detail, along with their names and the open house meeting they plan to attend.

Who participates? And how?

Anyone with access to a telephone can use a hotline. Blanket publicity is the key to making sure that the telephone number is well-known. New Jersey Transit hands out refrigerator magnets with its hotline number at all public events. Members of a project technical team hand out magnets when they meet people in the field.

TDD (telecommunications device for the deaf) services make hotlines accessible to people with hearing or speech disabilities. These callers contact a TDD-compatible hotline through their own service. The service then contacts the hotline. The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority regards this service as an essential component of its compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). (See **People with Disabilities**.)

Staff people must be available to respond. Hotlines with recorded messages do not offer callers immediate personal contact with a staff person. A member of a project or agency staff calls back once messages are retrieved. Answers to information requests need to be timely and responsive in content.

To be effective, hotlines must be well-publicized. Publicity is particularly crucial, since people must know about them and know the telephone numbers before they can make use of them. Publicity can be in print media, at meetings, and on public documents. (See **Public Information Materials**; **Media Strategies**.)

How do agencies use the output?

Agencies gauge public opinion about a project. They identify specific, recurring issues or questions. Calls received do not represent a random sample, but they are an indicator of the opinions within a community. If an agency receives several questions in a certain subject area, it can adjust its outreach program to improve general understanding of those issues. Changes may be in order in the content of analyses and plans to respond to participants' concerns. New Jersey Transit keeps a database of comments received on its hotline and at public events that can be referred to by subject area or geographic area.

Recordings allow an agency to prepare a thoughtful response rather than to put staff members in a position they might feel pressure to "shoot from the hip" (especially when dealing with an irate caller).

Who leads the technique?

No special background is needed to set up and operate a hotline. The actual setup is coordinated with a telephone company. Operation of the equipment is a fairly simple task, although the person who records the greetings should enunciate clearly.

The person who answers the calls should be well-versed in the specifics of the project and be able to answer follow-up questions. The North Carolina Department of Tourism and the Wisconsin DOT have trained State prisoners with no prior experience to staff hotlines. In North Carolina, the prisoners receive extensive preliminary training on the subject matter and on phone etiquette before staffing phone banks, and they are equipped with brochures and materials that assist them in answering questions. The system has been in operation for over five years, and its sponsors regard it as a success.

What are the costs?

Hotline costs vary, depending on the complexity of the system, use of a standard or toll-free telephone number, and the staffing plan. A hotline can be as simple as a telephone hooked to an answering machine, usually costing less than $100. The costs increase when additional branch lines are added, requiring specialized equipment.

Staffing costs are linked to usage. Staff members only need to dedicate time when they are actually on the telephone, with some additional time needed for documentation and other administrative tasks.

How are hotlines organized?

Hotlines are easy to set up. Most long-distance companies are able to provide assistance in organizing an answering system. Special equipment is required to set up the answering mechanism if multiple answering modules are to be employed. An alternative approach is to contract with a telephone company to provide the service and permit the agency to access it via an office telephone. This arrangement works only for a system with recorded messages. A toll-free number can be used, and telephone company's bill based on its usage, so operating costs are closely linked to effectiveness.

An agency staff member checks messages regularly to assure prompt responses. If staffing permits, a member of the project team is designated to answer calls as they come in, at least during business hours. This person should be well-versed in several aspects of the project so that she or he can answer a variety of questions. Project management may maintain a contact sheet of team members who can answer detailed questions about specific issues.

How are they used with other techniques?

Hotlines are integrated with a variety of other techniques in the public involvement toolbox. The Denver Regional Council of Governments and the Central Puget Sound RTA use hotlines, along with media advertisements and newsletters, to publicize public meetings and events. (See **Media Strategies; Public Information Materials**.) New Jersey Transit uses its hotline as an RSVP device for committee meetings. The hotline itself is advertised at these events and in project newsletters. A hotline can be used to build a project mailing list. (See **Mailing Lists**.)

What are the drawbacks?

Callers may be frustrated if they receive a recorded message rather than reaching a live staff member. An unhappy caller who is already upset with some aspect of an agency's program becomes more upset when unable to make immediate human contact. This problem is alleviated if a staff member answers the telephone during peak business hours or if the answering system at least gives callers the option of reaching a person. If a satisfactory response to the inquiry comes promptly, most callers overcome their initial frustration at not having their call answered in person.

Hotlines require regular notice in agency newsletters and publications. The Pennsylvania DOT has expressed some dissatisfaction with hotlines due to the constant publicity needed to make hotline use effective. Some agencies have been able to take advantage of word-of-mouth notification through community organizations, but this method should not be the sole means of publicizing a hotline. (See **Media Strategies**.)

Are hotlines flexible?

Hotlines can be changed to meet specific functions. Depending on need, a hotline provides a calendar of upcoming events, heralds project milestones, or offers a clearinghouse for questions from concerned local people. Frequent adjustments to hotlines assure the timeliness of information.

When are they used most effectively?

Hotlines are most effective when integrated with other techniques. They are used as part of an outreach program that includes a variety of printed, electronic, and personal media. Hotlines complement other outreach techniques, providing a means of building mailing lists and initiating more meaningful personal contacts.

For further information:

- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1357
- Denver Regional Council of Governments, Denver, Colorado, (303) 455-1000
- Maryland Department of Transportation, Baltimore, Maryland, (410) 859-7367
- New Jersey Transit, Newark, New Jersey, (201) 491-8077
- Pennsylvania State Legislature, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, (717) 783-6430
- Puget Sound Regional Council, Seattle, Washington, (206) 587-9487

DROP-IN CENTERS

What is a drop-in center?

A drop-in center is a place for give-and-take exchange of transportation information within a neighborhood or community. An easy-to-find location on home turf makes it convenient and easy for people to get information on a program or plan and to express their concerns and issues. A drop-in center offers informal, continuing contact with the community. It can have other names: field office, site office, or clearinghouse.

A drop-in center has the following characteristics:

- It is visible to the community—an office, storefront, or trailer in any visible, accessible, and convenient location within a project area or corridor.

- It can be mobile, using a van or trailer, to maximize contact with various stakeholders.

- It is open during specific, regular hours, not just occasionally or sporadically.

- It is usually in existence for a designated period of time, such as during the planning or construction phase of a project.

- It is usually staffed by planning, project, and/or liaison personnel knowledgeable about the area and the issues.

Why is it useful?

A drop-in center provides easy, convenient access to information for people who might not otherwise participate in a planning process, particularly if doing so requires a long trip to an unfamiliar location. Informal, day-to-day contact between agency representatives and members of a community is easier and more likely if a drop-in center is established in a highly-visible area. In San Francisco, the Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) rented storefronts in shopping malls and maintained them from pre-scoping periods through construction of rapid transit lines.

An agency makes a visible commitment to communication to and from the community by going to the trouble and expense of establishing a drop-in center. Establishing a drop-in center may help convince the community that an agency wants to involve people in planning or project development. Sioux City, Iowa, set up a drop-in center in a downtown storefront and two malls for two weeks during its Vision 2020 planning process. The "design workshops" made it easy for people to talk to planners and designers about physical issues in the city and contribute ideas for change.

Staff gets first-hand knowledge of the community's needs and concerns. In Boston, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) established a drop-in center in Dudley Square—a transit node/shopping district—for a study of ways to improve transit services to that community and others. Planners and engineers were able to see and experience the concerns of residents and transit users and have regular, close contact with area residents and businesses.

A drop-in center provides low-risk access for community residents to get answers and make comments about a process and project. Many people are not comfortable asking questions at public meetings, and some do not want to make statements of support or rejection in front of their peers. (See **Public Meetings/Hearings**.) A drop-in center offers a low-key, easy way to ask questions or make comments.

Does it have special uses?

A drop-in center is often used during high-visibility, controversial projects with major impacts. In Colorado, the Department of Transportation (DOT) opened a drop-in center as part of a controversial highway project on State Highway 82. Input from it led to significant revisions over the three years of planning and environmental work.

A drop-in center provides continuity and historical reference in long-term, comprehensive projects. Boston's Central Artery/Tunnel project set up drop-in centers in three neighborhoods affected by the project. Established during planning and design, these offices will remain open through the ten years of construction.

Drop-in centers help when an agency is based far from a project site. A drop-in center is a cost-effective way to learn about a community and its concerns. It also gives the community better access to the agency. District offices that reach out and interact with community residents are good examples of permanent drop-in centers. The Arizona DOT set up a Tucson District Office as a drop-in center for the Department as a whole—thus enabling it to reach local constituents, monitor consultants, and improve its ability to communicate with local residents and businesses.

A drop-in center in a seasonal community helps get stakeholders involved. Tourists and other seasonal people often need more incentive and assistance to get involved.

A drop-in center is used to break down barriers between agencies and communities. A drop-in center in a neighborhood that is racially, ethnically, or economically different from an agency's home base helps show that the agency is serious about addressing community concerns. (See **Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups**.) In Denver, Colorado, the Regional Transit District (RTD) established a drop-in center in a low-income community through which a light rail line was being built. By being involved with the community and walking along the corridor regularly, the RTD staff was able to answer questions and reduce anxiety about the construction.

Who participates? And how?

Any member of a community, particularly residents and businesses, can use a drop-in center. An office located, for instance, on the first floor in an area with heavy foot traffic draws passers-by off the street.

Neighborhood groups, other agencies, and consultants benefit if the office is well-situated and well-supplied with materials and equipment. Sharing space for public purposes is cost-effective. A transit project drop-in center in San Francisco was shared with a community policing effort. The two groups provided visitors for each other, and the community policing unit provided security for the drop-in center.

People stop by for information. A sign or display in the window encourages people to walk in and give or get information. An all-day public forum in Little Rock, Arkansas, for the U.S. 67/167 major investment study featured information booths and exhibits in a storefront drop-in center. Although not permanent, the storefront location was well-publicized and highly visible.

Meetings are held at the drop-in center. Community groups can use it for their own meetings. This draws people to the center and introduces them to its resources. It also brings other agency representatives, elected officials, and interest groups into the neighborhood to help them understand its people and their issues. The MBTA's site office in Dudley Square was used for weekly Friday morning community/agency meetings for the duration of Phase I of the Replacement/ Transit Improvement Study.

People use a drop-in center as a library/resource center to review documents and plans and to get information. A drop-in center should be well-stocked with information pieces to give away, plans to

review, documents to read and photocopy, and other materials explaining aspects of the project or process.

How do agencies use it?

A drop-in center gives agencies opportunities for broader outreach and communication. With more frequent contact with the community through a drop-in center, an agency is in a better position to listen, address concerns, and counter misinformation. The Portland, Oregon, Tri-Met used a rehabilitated city bus in its planning for systemwide fare changes. The bus was driven to schools, business areas, and grocery stores, staying as long as a week in each location. Trained fare collectors ran the "Bus School," explaining the new fare information to the 150,000 people who used it. A video about the fare changes was also available.

Agencies use drop-in centers to communicate one-on-one with people. Specific abutter concerns or particular issues raised by interest groups are often easier to respond to face-to-face rather than at a public meeting.

Who leads?

Staffing patterns vary with the nature of a project. Some drop-in centers are staffed by three or four people, while others have just one. To a large extent, staffing depends on the project's scale or the degree of controversy it engenders. It also varies with the level of participants' use.

Drop-in center staff members must be knowledgeable about the area and about technical issues and programs. They must be good listeners and be aware of and involved in community concerns. Drop-in centers set up by San Francisco's BART are generally staffed by one person from Community Services. Several times a week throughout a planning process, personnel from the design, engineering, and other technical sections staff the office to learn about the community's concerns first-hand.

The staff must communicate concerns, questions, and sentiments of the community to other project personnel. Staff members must be good communicators for liaison between the community and project officials. They should also be friendly and personable, not confrontational or defensive. Sometimes, drop-in centers are staffed by community members who provide local knowledge, input, and contacts. In Colorado, the staff in a drop-in center for the State Highway 82 Corridor Study included a municipal planner/liaison who assisted the DOT staff engineer.

A drop-in center can be staffed by an existing neighborhood agency familiar with the issues. If possible, that agency should be involved in transportation and able to answer questions about a proposal or direct people to a knowledgeable person.

A drop-in center can function primarily as exhibit space with no staff on hand other than a security guard or caretaker to protect the displays. However, most drop-in centers are professionally staffed, because interaction between staff and visitors is key to a successful planning process.

What are the costs?

The cost to establish and maintain a drop-in center can be high. Assembling an office staff, renting space, installing a telephone, and supplying office equipment can be expensive, especially if the office is in existence for a long time. Creating an inviting, friendly atmosphere and maintaining a comfortable environment can also be expensive. Costs are partially allayed when unpaid public involvement volunteers help staff a center. (See **Speakers' Bureaus and Public Involvement Volunteers**.)

A mobile drop-in center such as a trailer is somewhat cheaper. A mobile center can be moved to different sites to reach more people. It can also be used on more than one project, if necessary. The Arkansas DOT has used trailers as drop-in centers for the past decade. During the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Planning Organization's visioning process, a "vision van" visited numerous neighborhoods, gathering and giving information. For minority areas (Spanish ethnic, African-American poor, elderly poor, and ethnically-mixed areas), the van was customized with visual, easy-to-read signs and displays.

Large quantities of handout materials may be necessary. The potentially high volume of visitors to a drop-in center requires multiple copies of many documents. Encouraging interest in a project leads to requests for more detail or different types of information.

How are drop-in centers organized?

A drop-in center can be established at the beginning of a planning process when an agency needs to build relationships with the community. It is also used when interest in a process is at a peak. Peak interest may be generated as a project advances or media coverage increases.   It can also arise in response to an issue or problem related to construction.

A drop-in center can follow up through design and construction phases of a project. A long-term center provides continuous contact with project personnel after a planning phase. For a $300 million highway project affecting Boston's Charlestown neighborhood, a drop-in center set up during the planning phase continued through construction. The center linked a highly-interactive planning and design process with the construction phase.

The drop-in center must be easy to find and visible from the street. Storefronts with first-floor access are ideal. A drop-in center must be an inviting and active place that welcomes the community. It must have adequate space for exhibits, reading tables, and a small project library. It should have room and chairs for small-group meetings.

A drop-in center must have convenient hours. It should not confine its hours to between 9:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M., for most people are not able to visit during those hours. Opening on weekends and evenings maximizes opportunities for community visits. Shorter weekday accessibility combined with some Saturday time keeps hours to 40 or under per week. The MBTA maintained a 40-hour-per-week drop-in center in Roxbury's Dudley Square during design and construction of a new transit station. The center was open during business hours, but because the area—a major shopping node adjacent to a large public housing development—is very busy all day long, many people visited. The center was used frequently for night meetings as well.

The agency, its consultant, or members of the community can staff a drop-in center, in any combination. A professional staff person should be present at all times. Community people may want to play a role in the center and could be remunerated for their time, if resources permit. A disinterested caretaker can be employed for emergencies only and instructed carefully on how to greet visitors.

Preparation for opening day is essential. The community should have 15–30 days' notice before a drop-in center is opened. The existence of a center must be publicized in many community publications and with signs in the windows. The office telephone must be operable, and its phone number must be publicized and accessible. A sufficient supply of materials (charts, maps, handouts, brochures, fact sheets) must be ready for the opening. On opening day the drop-in center can have a sign that is attractive and visible from a distance. Finally, opening day might include a special event to publicize the office and kick off the public involvement effort. (See **Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events**.)

How are they used with other techniques?

A drop-in center can become a locus of activities for public involvement. It is an ideal place for meetings and charrettes. (See **Charrettes**.) The center can host a hotline or other telephone techniques, such as voice mail for comments, fax-on-demand, and a menu system for project information. (See **On-line Services**.) Citizen training and coordinator-catalyst activities can be organized through a drop-in center. It often serves as a community planning center, clearinghouse, and location for open houses. (See **Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses**.) Teleconferencing centers can be set up at drop-in centers to allow people to communicate not only with the office staff but also with agency personnel in the main office. (See **Teleconferencing**.)

A drop-in center is a source for information pieces. Information is distributed via brochures, flyers, or posters, and displayed on computer terminals or interactive kiosks. (See **Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks**.) Information is augmented and detailed by staff. Public information materials include the address and telephone number of the drop-in center, so that people can call or stop by for additional information. (See **Public Information Materials**.)

What are the drawbacks?

Rental costs can be high. Renting a storefront is costly in a central, easily accessible area. Because a downtown, visible location in Basalt, Colorado, was so expensive, the Colorado DOT set up a drop-in center for the State Highway 82 Corridor Study in a suburban office park on the highway. An agency may be able to obtain donated space in the community.

A drop-in center requires a commitment to keep it open for a specified time period or as needed. This commitment includes staffing and running the office carefully to make it successful.

Staffing needs can be daunting. One or two full-time people may be needed over a significant period of time. The cost effectiveness should be explored before an agency makes a commitment to a drop-in center. One way to hold down staffing needs is to make the drop-in center available for fewer hours per week. Another is to utilize public involvement volunteers to help staff the center. (See **Speakers' Bureaus and Public Involvement Volunteers**.)

A drop-in center can be poorly implemented, despite good intentions. An "exhibit"-type drop-in center, with graphic displays and little else, is less flexible and interactive than a staffed office. A lightly staffed, under-maintained office will not help an agency or a project. A community is alienated by an unattractive drop-in center and an uninformed staff. A field office must have updated materials, displays that are understandable to lay people, and an interested staff.

Location sometimes becomes an issue. A neighborhood can be angered and feel betrayed by placement of a drop-in center in an adjacent community. Boston's Central Artery/Tunnel Project avoided controversy by setting up three drop-in centers simultaneously, even though construction would affect the areas at different times.

The agency may want a high degree of control over information distribution at a drop-in center. For a center to be successful, staff needs to be able to give information relatively freely without having to go through channels at the main office. If access to information is restricted or unreasonably slow, credibility suffers and community activity at the center drops off.

Liability issues are a consideration. Maintaining a drop-in center of any type carries with it a responsibility that the office be safe and clean for neighborhood visitors.

Is a drop-in center flexible?

A drop-in center can be set up at any time during the process. However, once established, it should be maintained for the specified time frame and at a consistent level of staffing. Setting up a center is less cost-effective late in a project or planning process.

When is it used most effectively?

A drop-in center is effective in project development. Many State DOTs use drop-in centers at project locations to give information to people and obtain comments and opinions about the project as it is detailed and more fully developed by the agency.

A drop-in center is valuable as an introduction to the planning process. In Boston, the MBTA Replacement/Transit Improvement Study drop-in center was set up at the very beginning of the planning process.

A drop-in center is particularly useful where community residents are underrepresented in transportation planning or project development. In Denver, certain minority and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, unaccustomed to major construction work, were concerned about upcoming light rail construction. The drop-in center helped a committee of local residents monitor construction.

A drop-in center is used during design and construction stages to maintain contact and build trust within a community. Continuity from planning through design and construction phases is an asset to an agency in terms of working closely with a community.

For further information:

- Arizona Department of Transportation, Tucson, Arizona, (602) 255-7768
- Arkansas Department of Transportation, (501) 569-2281
- Colorado Department of Transportation, Denver, Colorado, (303) 757-9266
- Denver Regional Transit District, Denver, Colorado, (303) 299-2401
- Little Rock Metropolitan Planning Organization, Little Rock, Arkansas, (501) 372-3300
- Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, Boston, Massachusetts, (617) 222-3366
- Massachusetts Highway Department, Boston, Massachusetts, (617) 973-7000
- Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Planning Organization, (202) 962-3200