

# EDC Locally Administered Federal-Aid Projects

**Stakeholder  
Partnering**



## PROGRAM CASE STUDY

This case study highlights Ohio's efforts to use stakeholder partnering as a platform for communication, coordination, and cooperation in streamlining and improving project delivery. This is just one example of how stakeholder councils can operate within the realm of possibilities for each state. It is meant as an aid to those who are initiating stakeholder partnering programs or enhancing existing ones.



View a video case study on Ohio's LPA Advisory Group at <http://bit.ly/OhioLAP>

## Ohio's Local Public Agency Advisory Group

The Ohio Department of Transportation's (ODOT's) Local Public Agency (LPA) Advisory Group is relatively new, less than two years old as of March 2016, and off to a successful start. In addition to improving communication between LPAs, ODOT, and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the group members' expertise is helping guide policy and program initiatives to improve the state's transportation infrastructure.

### Background

Ohio's LPAs contract with ODOT to deliver federally funded projects through a process ODOT calls Local Let. The LPAs are in charge of the project, while both ODOT and FHWA oversee, conduct reviews, and provide support throughout the project life cycle. To achieve and maintain the threshold qualifications required to participate, LPAs must complete a series of training modules on federal requirements.

ODOT uses a decentralized approach to administering the Local Let process through 12 District Offices that work closely with the LPAs. With a large local program continually growing in size, ODOT added Stakeholder Partnering in 2014 as another venue for working with LPAs to deliver Federal-Aid projects, but on a programmatic level rather than on a project basis.

### Implementation

Stakeholder partnering is one of the goals ODOT chose to pursue under FHWA's Every Day Counts initiative. ODOT's Office of Local Programs in the Division of Planning took the lead in implementation. One of the first steps was securing top management's support.

## Ohio's Local Program

- ▶ 6th-largest LPA program in the U.S.
- ▶ 220 LPAs participate annually, on average
- ▶ \$320 million annual construction value
- ▶ 12 ODOT District Offices work directly with LPAs
- ▶ 937 cities and villages, 1,308 townships, and 88 counties
- ▶ 70,500 road miles and 28,942 bridges
- ▶ 3,000 miles of bike paths, 159 public-use airports
- ▶ 12th-highest transit ridership in the U.S.



The Hamilton Road improvement project in Franklin County, Ohio, is one of the more than 250 projects administered annually through ODOT's Local Let program. (Photo courtesy Franklin County, Ohio)

Andrea Stevenson, the Local Programs Office Administrator, took the stakeholder partnering concept to executive management and shared it with the deputy director, who then presented it to the assistant director.

"They felt that it was something that would be a benefit to us and to the locals," Stevenson said. "Our goal, in implementing stakeholder partnering, is to get feedback and support from, and be an advocate for, the locals as they develop transportation projects. We want to look at the process from the big picture point of view and solve problems in a way that locals get the most benefit from in a broad, statewide perspective."

ODOT defined the group's goals and purpose in a simple memorandum of understanding, for each member of the new LPA Advisory Group to agree to, that clearly outlined objectives, membership terms and expectations for participation.

### **Recruiting Members**

In assembling the new group, ODOT strove for a cross section of the local roadway community and statewide representation from urban and rural areas, seeking members from a village, a township, a large urban LPA and some smaller LPAs.

They reached out to their state's National Association of County Engineers affiliate—the County Engineer Association of Ohio, along with the Ohio Contractors Association, the Ohio Township Association, and the Ohio Municipal League, explained to them what they were hoping to achieve with the group, and asked them to suggest members.

"We worked largely through the organizations because we feel that it's really important to have that connection with the organizations and associations that the locals belong to," said Victoria Beale, Assistant Administrator for ODOT's Office of Local Programs. "We want to make certain that we fairly and accurately represent all sides and all types of policy information that they are hoping to achieve for their members, because that's where we then can continue to advocate within the DOT for the locals."

They then identified the prospective members who would likely be active participants and provide ODOT with feedback, whether critical or supportive.

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"We wanted to hear from our locals, so we were not necessarily looking for members who would tell us what we wanted to hear, but rather for those who would tell us where they felt we needed to incorporate improvement into our program," Stevenson said.

The result is that they now have a strong committee that is very knowledgeable about transportation and about how ODOT works.

"I think that has been one of our greater strengths in starting out the first couple years, is that we do have well-versed participants," Beale said. "We have a great demographic and good meetings that accomplish a lot, which I think speaks highly of the selection process from our partners."

## Conducting Meetings

The period of time from when the LPA Advisory Group idea was formulated to when ODOT executed the first meeting was about six months. The group currently meets two times per year at ODOT headquarters in Columbus, which is centrally located in the state. Call-in numbers are available for every meeting to enable members to phone in and be part of the conversation if they are unable to travel on that date.

Meetings are limited to about two hours. ODOT gets the agenda out in advance and keeps a concise schedule. Beale or Stevenson lead the meetings, but also bring in experts to lead certain topic areas.

"We are not experts in every area of transportation, so if there is, for example, a maintenance of traffic issue or an environmental or right-of-way issue on the agenda, we don't try to answer those questions, we bring the experts in from our department to share ideas or updates with them," Stevenson said.

Agenda items reflect the diverse interests of locals based on what they are seeing out in the field as they advance projects through the process. Beale solicits these agenda items from LPA Advisory Group members and from the various disciplines across ODOT before the meetings, and she and Stevenson fill in the agenda with any other updates or items they think are important to share.



ODOT's LPA Advisory Group is helping streamline the department's local Federal-Aid program through face-to-face meetings such as this one in Columbus, Ohio, on April 4, 2016.

## Keys to Success

- ▶ Keep it simple. Develop a straightforward charter or MOU and meeting guidelines.
- ▶ Be flexible. Make it easy for representatives to attend meetings.
- ▶ Develop actionable items. Progress helps maintain motivation.
- ▶ Enlist participation from experienced staff. Have the right people at the table to make decisions.

For follow-up, Beale distributes the meeting notes to participants and Stevenson takes the notes and develops a list of items to start working through so that members are getting answers to their questions or needed support fairly soon. They said that this type of quick feedback is what helps keep the members motivated in this effort.

## Maintaining Momentum

A concern in developing a stakeholder partnering program is maintaining momentum after the initial meetings. One way ODOT is helping ensure members stay engaged is by first making sure the topics they add to the agenda are meaningful to the locals, and then, when they talk about the issue, that they listen to what the locals have to say and try to get a quick response back to them or solve that particular concern.

"One of the lynchpins in keeping the momentum going is the fact that we made certain to let them know that we are responding to them, and that their ideas and comments do very much matter," Beale said. "They can see their time isn't wasted as a part of this committee, because they know there is an end result that comes out of it. Whether it's an answer to their question or a change they get to see happen because of feedback that they've given, they know they are making a difference, and because of that, they want to be engaged."

## Results

ODOT staff felt it was important for the group's motivation that they achieve some successes early on. So to get the ball rolling, once the locals had identified a handful of high-priority concerns, ODOT picked a few to tackle that would not be too time consuming to accomplish. These are the initial items that ODOT addressed:

### **Streamlining environmental and right-of-way processes.**

ODOT worked with the Office of Environmental Services and Office of Real Estate and asked them to develop plain-language fact sheets on areas of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and right-of-way that were challenging for LPAs. The fact sheets were aimed at helping locals understand requirements and providing references and resources. ODOT also created a spreadsheet that spotlighted critical environmental process items for construction.

### **Expanding funding opportunities for different types of projects around the state.**

- *The Ohio Bridge Partnership Program.* ODOT created a new program that resulted in \$120 million of additional money for local bridges over three years, which enabled them to tackle approximately 200 of the 5,000 local bridges that were in poor or critical condition or structurally deficient.
- *Utilization of Toll Revenue Credit.* To help LPAs provide the required 20 percent funding match for federal projects, ODOT made turnpike toll revenue credit available on some of their capital programs specifically to small cities for municipal bridges and for their Transportation Alternatives Program. When an LPA successfully applies for that money, ODOT provides a 15 percent revenue credit match and the LPA provides a 5 percent match to the 80 percent federal funding.
- *Educational Materials.* To increase awareness of existing funding opportunities, ODOT developed an Ohio Resource Guide, which provides information on capital programs and how ODOT funds programs for locals, and developed a website and set of manuals to provide further assistance.

**Creating awareness of LPAs' limited resources and advocating for them where possible.** ODOT Local Programs staff is advocating within the department for the LPAs so that their resource limitations are considered before new initiatives are implemented, and they are partnering with other agencies to consider the impacts of their policies on locals.

## The Local Perspective

Ohio has a tremendous and diverse local transportation network divided among five major urban centers of population and more rural areas. The number of bridge and roadway miles that the locals maintain is higher than the state and federal numbers combined. As the County Engineer for Franklin County, Ohio, Dean Ringle represents one of the state's large, urban areas on ODOT's LPA Advisory Group. He said that the group looks for ways to help LPAs across the state, both large and small.

"Stakeholder partnering is a great idea. It really helps having the local governments and the state and federal agencies all participating and communicating," Ringle said.

"We've discussed environmental issues, because those are constantly changing with new things being added, and that affects project timelines and costs. We have also looked at the right-of-way acquisition stage and how that process has had to evolve to get to construction quicker."

Ringle said that, for populous counties and cities, the work on streamlining processes in these areas has really helped project delivery. One future area the LPA Advisory Group will be working on is expanding ways to share information in between meetings.

"We are still under construction—there's a lot of work that has been done and a lot of work to go," Ringle said. "The state has been very open to listening to our suggestions, and because things are constantly changing at the federal level, we need to keep meeting so we can react to those changes and figure out how to keep the process streamlined and keep projects moving on time."

## LPA Advisory Group Membership

ODOT's LPA Advisory Group has 25 members representing county engineers, city engineers, township trustees, municipal planning organizations, the Ohio Contractors Association, the FHWA Ohio Division Office, the ODOT Office of Local Programs, and the Ohio Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP), as well as ODOT's District LPA Managers. Members serve two-year terms.

The LPA Advisory Group, in turn, has contributed to some ODOT efforts. When ODOT designed a survey recently for LPAs regarding their experiences with the Local Let process, they got feedback first from the LPA Advisory Group about the questions being asked, to make sure they were asking the right ones.

"It did go back and forth a few months, but it was great dialogue," Beale said, "and when the survey

was published, we actually ended up with a 40 percent response rate out of the normal number of LPAs who participate annually in the program, which we thought was just phenomenal. We're going to discuss the findings of the survey with the LPA Advisory Group as far as future steps and work plan items that can be set as goals for the LPA program."

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## ODOT STAKEHOLDER PARTNERING: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The Ohio DOT's LPA Advisory Group is helping improve delivery of locally administered Federal-Aid projects by strengthening relationships among stakeholders at all levels, from townships to FHWA. They are accomplishing this through meetings that help increase their understanding of locals' needs, then categorizing those needs by specific areas to implement process improvements.

### Q. Does the LPA Advisory Group consist of any subgroups?

A. There are not currently any subgroups. Part of the reason for that is the concern with regard to the locals' time and resources, but that is something that could be created if needed.

### Q. How are meeting costs covered?

A. The group uses an ODOT meeting room and the associated resources, therefore while ODOT does have the administrative cost, they do not have to expend any funds for the meeting room.

### Q. How many employees does ODOT have dedicated to providing oversight to the LPA program?

A. In Ohio, we have approximately 35 employees at the DOT who provide oversight in the Local Let program. We have four Central Office staff and about 31 statewide in our districts. In the larger urban districts, we have more staff than in rural areas.

### Q. Do locals do their own design or use consultants?

A. They use a combination of consultants and agency staff. Locals may design simpler projects and then, for more complicated projects, use consultants for design as part of their team. In that regard, consultants function as an extension of the LPA staff.

### Q. Are locals required to use state specifications for design?

A. In Ohio, LPAs predominantly follow the state specs. If there is a special situation where locals need to develop their own, then they go through ODOT to get approval.

### Q. Do LPA Advisory Group members have term limits?

A. Yes, we set up two-year terms on a rotating basis, so that we would have some individuals remain in the group as others rotate off, providing continuity from the previous meetings. We based this on the way Ohio's Local Road Research Board was structured approximately four years ago.

### Q. What percentage of LPA Advisory Group members attends meetings regularly?

A. About 60 percent of the members attend meetings. A lot of locals are very short staffed, and so while they want to participate, they may have other priorities to address as well.

### Q. Is the LPA Advisory Group ODOT's only form of outreach to LPAs?

A. No, we have many forms of outreach. At our district level, which is a very grassroots level, ODOT staff members work with LPAs one-on-one on a daily basis. We also recently carried out a broader scale partnering effort we called LPA Days. We used State Transportation Innovation Council funds from FHWA to carry out meetings at four different areas across the state, and we had about 500 participants. So, our stakeholder partnering effort is an additional tool, one that we utilize to support LPAs, be an advocate for them, and improve our program.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▶ ODOT LPA Advisory Group Case Study Video: <https://youtu.be/AnvZIKK9ncA>
- ▶ Stakeholder Partnering video on Federal-aid Essentials: <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/federal-aidessentials/catmod.cfm?id=109>
- ▶ Stakeholder Partnering Resource library: [https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/innovation/everydaycounts/edc-3/partnering\\_library/index.cfm](https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/innovation/everydaycounts/edc-3/partnering_library/index.cfm)
- ▶ Locally Administered Federal-aid Projects: Stakeholder Partnering for Success: <https://connectdot.connectsolutions.com/p4j3h12kzn7/>
- ▶ Stakeholder Partnering—Making it Work! <https://connectdot.connectsolutions.com/p7ctvexqf2d>
- ▶ ODOT Local Programs website: <http://www.dot.state.oh.us/Divisions/Planning/LocalPrograms/Pages/LocalLetProcesses.aspx>

For additional information about this EDC Initiative, please contact:

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*Every Day Counts (EDC), a State-based initiative of FHWA's Center for Accelerating Innovation, works with State, local and private sector partners to encourage the adoption of proven technologies and innovations aimed at shortening and enhancing project delivery.*



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