Session #8

A PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT ROAD MAP

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ABSTRACT

In order to have effective public involvement, governments need a road map for the decision-making process. Yet, citizens from small and medium sized cities frequently do not have the resources to use sophisticated technology for public involvement programs. With limited budgets, small cities and towns frequently are not able to allocate substantial resources to public involvement. Having the funds for constructing transportation infrastructure is the priority of the local government as well as its citizens. At the same time, if the public is not involved in the decision-making, the government may run into major community resistance after investing time and money into pursuing its preferred alternative.

So, what is required to prepare a public involvement road map that can guide involving a diverse public on a limited budget? Carol O'Dowd, CMC as a former small town manager and a participatory process consultant has used a variety of techniques to meet this challenge. She will review how to:

- identify and recruit participants for the public involvement journey
- promote local leadership and ownership of the process
- design decision-making processes that work
- keep diverse groups focused on accomplishing results
- solicit input and participation without creating unrealistic expectations

A major challenge to mapping a strategy for reaching a diverse public is reaching an audience that frequently is not high-tech. It is not unusual to be working with a public that is not connected to electronic media. For example, as of January 1998 only 33% of small businesses had internet addresses. Although this number is growing dramatically, many associations representing low income citizens are fortunate to have large coffee pots for their meetings, much less a modem. In some cases, citizens most impacted are in neighborhoods where the newspaper is not read with great frequency.

The presentation to be made at the Small and Medium Sized Cities Communities Conference will review a variety of low cost techniques. The presentation will be interactive to give participants the opportunity to share their local public involvement

challenges and to identify techniques that work best in their communities. A paper outlining how to build a road map for a diverse public will supplement the presentation.

A PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT ROAD MAP

WHY A ROAD MAP?

A road map is a critical tool for guiding citizens and government officials through a public decision-making process. These processes have some degree of federal, state or local mandates that can range from the type of study conducted to local public hearing requirements. When government or decision-making agencies invite citizens to participate, they are frequently expecting people who may not know the rules exist, to behave as willing drivers on the government's decision-making road. Without an understanding of the rules of the road, citizens get frustrated by not knowing where they or their government(s) are going with a particular process or activity. Telling citizens, who do not know the rules exist, that they did not follow rules and it is too late for their input to have any impact, can easily generate anger. The result is frustrated citizens and an increased resentment of government.

A road map that creates a vision of the process reduces frustration. A road map that provides a clear understanding of the process provides participants with the vision of how to get where they have agreed to go. The road map does not have to outline the outcome; it needs to outline the process. When the process is done well, participants will defend the results even when they disagree with the outcome. Following a specific agreed upon road map can avoid frustrations on a decision-making journey. A public involvement road map should outline:

- existing conditions
- who should be involved
- destinations and stops to be made

WHAT ARE THE EXISTING CONDITIONS?

Know the Social, Economic, Legal and Political Landscape

The landscape for decision-making includes social, economic, legal and political conditions. Social terrain can best be described with demographics. Census data as well as origin and destination studies are useful for understanding the social terrain. Who lives in the community and where do they travel? Where do people gather and why?

Another factor is the economic conditions. In addition to looking at current and projected employment centers, questions can be asked that may lead to ridership issues. For example, is a potential work force not tapped because they do not drive and are too far from employers who want to hire them? After doing some investigation for one client, we discovered several non-profit agencies focused on employing the handicapped. After talking with major hotels in the area, we discovered that major employers would support mass transit improvements to connect them to entry level employees.

Scanning the political horizon for signs of support or future obstacles can provide useful information. Have recent votes occurred that depict public sentiment towards funding transportation projects? Will the politicians in office during the planning phase be the ones in office to support funding the decisions made during the planning phase?

Clearly understanding the legal constraints can help determine how to structure promotional efforts for projects. For example, some local government charters have limits on the use of public lands for transportation projects. Keeping citizens informed of legal requirements can help avoid creating unrealistic expectations. For example, something as simple as explaining to citizens that they must have their comments in prior to the close of a public hearing in order to be heard avoids some from feeling ignored. Another important legal factor to keep in mind when dealing with controversial projects is the likelihood of citizens undertaking an initiative or referendum.

Define Current Trends

When evaluating transportation proposals, it is important for all involved to understand any major trends. Obvious trends include the use of transit, automobiles and other forms of transportation. Other trends to be attentive to include major shifts in population. When inner cities face an increase in teens and teen parents, demands for access to employment and day care centers increase. Meeting such diverse transportation needs will be a challenge that cannot be ignored when evaluating transportation alternatives for such communities.

Depending upon the community, some trends can become determining factors in how a transportation alternative is viewed. For example, crime and safety are frequently priority community issues. If an alternative can be used to improve safety or reduce crime in the community, it may become a more valuable option compared to a cheaper option that does not improve these conditions.

Sources for Mapping Existing Conditions

Demographics and geography of a transportation study area are useful indicators of community character and condition. Census data are an excellent resource for developing a picture of the demographic and economic characteristics of the community at large. Other sources include the GIS mapping divisions of the governments and developers in the area.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED

When developing a road map for public involvement, it is important to know who will be traveling the road. Obviously the "public" is not a single entity like the Jolly Green Giant. Because the public is composed of three parts, To involve the "public" requires outreach at three levels simultaneously -- society, organization and individual. Effective public involvement programs connect with communities, organizations, and citizens.

Community Level of Involvement

To determine if transportation proposals address community issues, it is important to define the larger community within which the transportation system operates. A study area map showing geographic landmarks as well as the road system gives citizens an easy reference tool for determining whether they, themselves, their friends, their businesses or their neighborhoods are in the area. Including major portions of a larger community rather than just transportation corridors in the analysis allows the evaluation process to build community awareness of transportation needs.

While many portions of a transportation system function as connectors, others function as barriers. It is important to observe what areas are connected in a community and how the transportation system supports and hinders those connections. Identifying connections and barriers in a community early is useful for avoiding unnecessary conflict.

Identify Barriers as well as Connections

Portions of a transportation system can function as barriers or connections among parts of a community. For example, highways are seen as connectors when crossing rivers, gulches, railroad tracks and other land forms that function as barriers between communities. On the other hand, citizens frequently define interstate highways, four lane highways and even two lane arterials as barriers more difficult to cross than a river. In some cases, portions of a road or rail system are walled off and function as major physical barriers between certain portions of a community or between neighborhoods. Constructing a map of the major barriers is an exercise that gives people a different way to look at their community.

It is important to observe what areas are connected in a community and how the transportation system supports those connections. By identifying those connections early, confrontation can be avoided later with community members. A connected trail system became as important for connecting neighborhoods as an improved transportation system. Constructing a map of major barriers and connections is an exercise that gives people a different way to look at their community.

Sources for Community Representatives

When deciding who can speak for or represent the community at-large, we have found elected officials to be important community representatives. However, it is critical to remember that government is not the community. Therefore, it is critical to include representatives of organizations that work on community-wide issues. Boards of directors as well as program staff are likely to be citizens respected as community leaders among the public.

Organization Level of Involvement

In any community citizens participate in a variety of organizations. They join organizations that represent a specific interest or provide them employment. Examples are businesses, governments, churches, environmental associations, health clubs, alumni associations, and parent-teacher organizations to name a few.

Governments Are an Active Part of Community

Governments are key players in community decision-making. Local governments are organizations actively involved in transportation issues. Obvious governments to include in a public process include cities, towns, state legislatures, regional councils and regional transportation districts. If more than one local government or regional government is in a planning or project area, multiple needs must be accommodated. Also, special districts or quasi-government organizations created through intergovernmental agreements may be resources for financial support of transportation projects or be entities that make major demands of transportation systems. Such governments need to be involved in the public process.

Organizations and Institutions

A variety of organizations have major concerns with transportation services and will become active to influence the outcome of transportation projects. Major businesses located in employment centers can become a major force in defining what transportation alternatives the business community will accept. Chambers of Commerce frequently organize their business members to address transportation issues.

Educational institutions are another organizational group that have transportation concerns and can impact transportation alternatives. Transportation alternatives that directly impact access to schools may require involvement of the schools and/or the affected school districts. Also, large educational institutions such as colleges and universities rely on public transportation systems for access. These organizations can have strong community identify. Therefore, how transportation alternatives impact these community facilities can become factors in a community evaluation of alternatives.

Homeowner and neighborhood associations are becoming more active as political organizations. Some are well organized and deliver hundreds of citizens to meetings to block the implementation of decisions made by governments. These organizations when joined by special interest groups frequently force debate over the "consent of the governed." Therefore, it is wise to make a list of neighborhood associations even if they are not active. At Athena's Consulting Network, we have dealt with associations that were maintained on paper only to bloom into life to stop a development proposal. Yet, when leaders of these types of associations are invited to participate early in a process to identify effective transportation solutions, they can be most helpful in getting community feedback.

Sources for Organizational Representatives

Developing a list of organizations active with or concerned about transportation issues can provide an indication of how transportation decisions are influenced in the community. An easy reference tool for locating organizations is the local phone book. Other sources include Chambers of Commerce and governments. These entities maintain listings of active service organizations and homeowner associations in the community.

Individual Level of Involvement

With so many political agendas being driven by organizations, politics has shifted the focus of government to special interest groups. Many government officials operate as if only organizations with large memberships, special interest groups or big businesses are the public. The collective impact of individuals or a group of small businesses tends to be ignored when they are not organized.

Therefore, understanding individuals' needs is critical to involving the public in a transportation decision-making process. Sometimes describing characteristics of individuals in the transportation study area is useful for identifying individual needs. For example, an increasing number of single teen parents and a substantial number of low paying service workers in a community may cause transportation to jobs and daycare to be a priority transportation issue. If the number of seniors is increasing, access to employment centers may not be as critical as access to pharmacies, recreation facilities and health centers. Individuals in the community will expect the evaluation of transportation projects to include factors that address their needs.

Sources for Individual Representation

To get names of key individuals, we have found a variety of sources useful. A valuable resource is attendance lists collected at public meetings on local transportation issues. More and more local governments tend to record and maintain attendance at public meetings. Such lists provide names of individuals that have expressed concern about previous transportation issues. Contacting these citizens can lead to key participants.

Interviews of key citizens are another way to collect names of individuals in the community. By asking during the interviews who else should be interviewed, we collect names of individuals regarded as caretakers in the community. Caretakers are people that others look to for advise or are sought out as community advisors. These individuals are not always positional leaders. They may be a local shop owner who is viewed as the source for neighborhood news or a senior citizen that neighborhood children tend to adopt as an after-school grandparent. Such individuals tend to be the volunteers for local projects or programs. They are connected to others in the community regardless of organizational affiliation and can influence organizations. We have found them to be useful barometers of whether our evaluation process will have validity with the community at large.

WHAT ARE THE DESTINATIONS AND STOPS

Involving citizens in a public decision-making process requires establishing a common vision of the process. In some cases citizens without prior experience in government processes do not know where they are going much less understand where government officials are going. Therefore, it is critical to pinpoint the key decisions along the way as a guide for citizens and government officials through the decision-making process.

Pinpointing decisions ahead of time, gives everyone involved a sense of direction by clearly defining the decisions to be made and the time frame for making the decisions. For

citizens to be productively involved in a decision-making process, they need to understand the decision that is to be made. Frequently misunderstandings are created when government staff assume that citizens know the impacts of specific decisions. Unfortunately the outcome is frustration on the part of government employees and resentment of government on the part of citizens.

In addition to making a map that pinpoints the key decisions, it is important to frame the impacts the decisions can make. Some clarifications that help citizens understand their role and avoid creating unrealistic expectations include explaining frequently if the decision:

- is a final decision or a recommendation used by another government entity
- has any legally binding authority or legal status
- impacts a neighborhood, community, region or is part of a larger plan
- is short term or long term in duration
- will be considered part of another political agenda

To keep citizens interested in reaching the destinations and stops along the way, the process must stay focused on results. An effective way to focus the process on results, it is best to begin with the end. Take the time up front to explain clearly what the end result will be. Is it a comprehensive plan, a report, a recommendation, a collaborative agreement or something else? Make sure the public process includes educating the public on what will and will not be achieved to avoid unrealistic expectations. Help the public understand what the contents of the final product will be, how the final product will be used and who will use it.

Having a clearly defined end product, an updated Comprehensive Plan, as a focus helps explain why there are certain stops along the way to the final destination. We found having written documentation shared up-front with citizens a useful tool for reminding citizens what topics will and will not be addressed by a particular process. An effective tool for sharing the vision of the results is to chart how the final document will be produced and who makes the final decisions.

By educating citizens, staff and consultants can work with citizens as partners in the decision-making process. By involving diverse groups and citizens with diverse interests throughout the process, community-wide communication is established. By keeping the process open and flexible, conflicts generate creativity and alternatives for addressing a wide variety of community needs. The end result is community-based decisions built upon consensus. With publicly supported decisions, expensive lawsuits or special elections are avoided, saving the government and its taxpayers money and time in the long run. Direct citizen involvement in making tough transportation decisions, helps build an educated citizenry ready to tackle the next tough public issue.

Clearly defining the issues is critical in order to attract the participants and stakeholders needed to develop implementable solutions. With highly controversial issues, participants

are likely to come to the table with firm positions. By taking time to clarify and define the issues, citizens become less emotionally attached to specific positions and focus more on developing solutions. There are a variety of techniques for defining the issues.