

Developing Public Involvement Plans

Certain Mn/DOT personnel are responsible for overseeing public involvement programs for specific projects, and for various types of transportation plans. For these people, developing public involvement plans is a critical task. The level of detail of the plan will depend on the magnitude and potential impacts of the project or plan. The following steps, excerpted from the National Transit Institute manual “Public Involvement in Transportation Decision Making,” describe this process.

1) Identify and assess stakeholders and their issues

A stakeholder is any person or group that is affected by a transportation plan, program, or project, including those not aware they are affected. Stakeholders may also be any person or group that think they may be affected by a transportation plan, program, or project even if they are not actually affected. They are a subset of the public. By identifying stakeholder groups you can systematically examine the many different segments of the public and the means to involve them. Typical stakeholders vary depending on the phase of the transportation decision-making process. Stakeholders include:

- Non-governmental organizations such as environmental, health, citizen, neighborhood, and civic organizations;
- Traditionally underserved communities such as low-income, racial and ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities;
- Residents of affected geographic areas;
- Commuters and tourists;
- Transportation professionals such as transportation service providers; and,
- Government agencies - even those without a formal role in decision making.

Stakeholders may be identified through:

Self-identification - anyone who participates by attending a meeting, writing a letter, or phoning for information.

Third-party identification - ask representatives of interest groups for their suggestions or key contacts.

Staff identification - this can be a rich source for identifying potential groups or individuals.

Other agencies/organizations - state, city, and county planning agencies, Metropolitan Planning Organizations and regional planning organizations, and private transportation providers and shippers.

User survey - conducted on users of transportation facilities and services.

Sources to identify potential stakeholder groups or individuals include:

- yellow pages
- associations or neighborhood groups
- service organizations
- newspaper library (i.e. letters to the editor)
- lists maintained by planning departments
- universities and schools
- bicycle shops and outdoor stores
- mass transit providers
- residents and businesses in the area
- historical records
- lists of participants in earlier studies
- chambers of commerce
- voter records
- city and county directories
- direct mail lists
- clean air advocacy organizations
- mass transit user groups
- trail organizations, groups, and clubs
- landscape architecture professionals
- rail passenger associations
- complaint files
- government agency personnel

- minority organizations
- advocacy groups (the disabled, pedestrians, bicycling, safety, minorities, low-income)
- agencies serving low-income populations
- Metro Commuter Services

For each stakeholder you identify, you need to:

- Assess their knowledge of the project or plan;
- Identify their initial issues and concerns - not just transportation-related but in general;
- Assess their overall level of interest; and,
- Determine their preferences for frequency and means of interaction.

The best way to perform this assessment is to speak directly with each stakeholder, when practicable, and while doing so, ask them who else should be contacted. After awhile, the outside contacts will cease bringing up new names and the identification process is completed. However, new people can and do turn up at any point in a public involvement effort.

2) Define the objectives of your public involvement effort

Establish objectives that broadly address stakeholder concerns as well as planning and project development goals. The objectives will guide all outreach activities. Objectives can be established as part of the initial phases of early public involvement activities and will rarely change over the course of the outreach effort. Ask yourself if each objective can be measured. For each objective, ask yourself *why?*

Some examples of general public involvement objectives are to:

- Identify and involve traditionally underserved communities in defining the problems to be addressed by the project or plan.
- Educate the public as to the funding and decision-making requirements specified by regulations.
- Maintain timely contact with key stakeholders throughout the process. At a minimum, some type of contact should be maintained no less than every four months.
- Build credibility for the Agency.

Possible objectives for public involvement in a transportation plan are to:

- Involve as many stakeholders as possible so that all viewpoints are heard.
- Provide an information base to educate and inform stakeholders.
- Foster constructive debate about transportation issues.
- Obtain input from the public on policies and investment strategies.

Possible objectives for public involvement in project development are to:

- Get to know and understand all potentially affected parties.
- Determine and clarify key issues.
- Identify environmental and social issues for further study.
- Entice affected parties to participate in project development.

3) Identify public involvement activities

In planning your outreach effort, consider the following:

- Who are you trying to reach?
- What message or information do you want to convey or receive?
- How much will it cost?
- Which combination of techniques (and how many) is most appropriate?
- How easy (or difficult) is it to implement?
- Relate each activity to your objectives. (For examples of public involvement activities see Chapter 5 and Appendix A of this document.)

Characteristics of effective public involvement activities include those that:

- Meet a particular need and objective;
- Are appropriate for the scale of the project;
- Are appropriate to, and reach, target stakeholders in the relevant geographic area;
- Can be implemented within budgetary and time constraints; and,
- Are compatible with the community's operations, structure, politics, and style.

4) Evaluation

Evaluate your public involvement effort based on achievement of objectives and feedback from the public. Design milestones during the public involvement process at which point the status of the effort can be reviewed against the objectives. As issues and concerns change over time, your public involvement plan should reflect these changes. Always ask, "Is this still the case?"

As public involvement proceeds, document how public input affected decisions. Start with any documentation of public concerns and input, such as meeting summaries from public forums, responses from questionnaires, and comments from draft environmental impact statements. Next, group key issues together and respond to them stating how the input affected the final decision. Highlight areas where public input actually changed the final decision. It is acceptable to not incorporate all of the public's advice, but you should take the time to explain the reasoning behind this decision. People will typically give their support if they believe the process was fair and their concerns were considered. Finally, communicate back to the participants how they affected the decision.

Part of any evaluation effort involves measuring the results of a public involvement process against established measures for success. Including this component is important in order to allow a project manager or transportation planner to make necessary adjustments as the process progresses and to improve future public involvement plans. The difficulty in establishing measures of success for public involvement revolves around the subjective nature of public involvement itself. Is a public involvement plan successful if there is a large turnout at public meetings, even if the sentiments expressed are uniformly negative? Is it successful if few people participate but the dialogue is fruitful, with new alternatives suggested that become part of the transportation plan/project? Is it successful if a large number of people participate and are satisfied with their opportunity for input, even if they are not representative of the overall affected community?

The following measures are proposed by the task force for consideration as a means to evaluate the success of public involvement plans at Mn/DOT. The measures themselves will be evaluated as they are implemented, to ensure that they are helping us achieve our

vision for public involvement.

Public Involvement Family of Measures 9/2/98 Draft	
OUTCOME	MEASURE
Build Ms/DOT credibility.	<p>I. Timing: when to start a P.I. Plan and how often contact is made</p> <p>II. What types of media is used (incl. non-english venues)</p> <p>III. Do stakeholders feel that they are a part of planning & project design from the start of process</p> <p>IV. Omnibus Survey results</p>
Public Involvement is accessible to all segments of the public.	<p>V. Meeting convenience: time, place, and transit-accessible</p> <p>VI. Were communication tools clear and effective</p> <p>VII. Survey the effectiveness of participation from the participant's perspective</p> <p>VIII. Was outreach program tailored to specific community needs, e.g., cultural and/or language barriers</p>
Public Involvement involves a representative group of the community that is part of the planning/project area.	<p>IX. Document demographics of participants</p> <p>X. Was a Citizen's Advisory Board established, if appropriate</p>
Public Involvement is responsive to the input received.	<p>XI. Feedback</p> <p>XII. Information exchange</p> <p>XIII. Integration of concerns</p> <p>XIV. Were stakeholder groups able to overcome their self-interest and work toward an overall problem solution</p> <p>XV. Documentation of where P.I. Affected the plan or project.</p>
Ms/DOT develops plans/projects that support community goals and values.	<p>XVI. Support of neighborhood/civic/interest groups and affected units of government</p>