
EXTRACT FROM:
Environmental Impact Assessment of Roads, OECD, 1994

**US experience
on planning
public
involvement
in road projects**

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US EXPERIENCE ON PLANNING PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN A ROAD PROJECTS

Although many of the issues presented in this guidance are specific to practice in the US, the overall concepts of effective communication and involvement of the public during project development should have universal application.

The guidance consists of two tools to assist in planning effective public involvement for transport projects:

- 1 **A general model for selecting public involvement techniques, and**
- 2 **An outline of a planning process for designing a public involvement programme for a project. The planning process enables one to apply the selection model to the project development process.**

Exhibit 1 is a model for use in selecting public involvement techniques. The techniques themselves are described below under the heading, “**Techniques for Public Involvement**”. Exhibit 2 outlines an approach, based on Exhibit 1, to planning a public involvement process for a highway project. Planning a public involvement process need not be an elaborate effort for small projects. For example, for non-controversial projects with no significant impacts, a media release discussing the proposed improvement may suffice. Direct contact with property owners might be the principal involvement technique when only minor amounts of land are needed and no other issues arise.

Contents

A MODEL FOR SELECTING PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT TECHNIQUES	3
PLANNING A PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROCESS	4
TECHNIQUES FOR PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT	5

A MODEL FOR SELECTING PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT TECHNIQUES

- I - Determine the specific purpose and objectives that public involvement is to accomplish for the project. For example, what information does the transport agency want to collect from the public or to communicate to the public? What potential or actual conflicts between the agency and public groups or individuals may need to be resolved?

- II - Identify the public which either might be interested in participating or whose participation is necessary in order to achieve the objectives. Which groups or types of people are of interest? What are their demographic characteristics, how many might be expected to participate, what are the relationships between groups, etc.?

- III - Select a technique (or techniques) for interacting with the public which will achieve the objectives. Selection criteria include: (1) type and size of concerned public, (2) agency resources in terms of money and staff expertise, and (3) time available to plan and implement the technique.

- IV - Select suitable notification technique(s) for reaching the desired public with the desired information. Selection criteria are similar to those used for interaction criteria in III above.

- V - Determine if the public needs assistance to be able to interact with the transport agency. Select assistance techniques.

- VI - identify how the results of the public involvement are to be specifically incorporated into project development, in particular how they are to be used either in the course of environmental studies or in the final decision making at the end of environmental studies.

- VII - Determine how the techniques are to be evaluated.

PLANNING A PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROCESS

I - Preparation (During the very early phases of project development)

- A. Review applicable public involvement/public hearing procedures and other pertinent laws, regulations, and requirements.
- B. Determine if there was any public involvement on the project during the planning process which generated the project. These planning processes could be either the national, regional, statewide, metropolitan, or other strategic efforts. Review output, if any.
- C. Review what is initially known about the project from planning document and other sources. This particular review focuses on factors relevant to the degree of public interest and controversy either potential or actual. These factors include scope and scale of the project, type and degree of expected social (or neighbourhood) and economic impacts, environmental impacts which may arouse public as contrasted to agency interest (e. g. areas used informally for hiking or hunting), and past levels of public interest or controversy.
- D. Based on the review of the project; develop a preliminary understanding of which issues are likely to be of concern to the public, which issues the environmental staff may wish to gather information about from the public, which issues may lead to conflict between public groups or between the public and the transport agency, and which issues are of concern to other public agencies.

II - The Initial Public Involvement Plan

- A. Using information from Step I, apply the criteria for public involvement from any requires procedures;
- B. If the project includes formal scoping, design the scoping public involvement in detail, using the selection model in Exhibit 1. Since input from the public scoping will be used in planning the remaining public involvement activities before any public hearings, outline the remainder of the public involvement process (see below, III. The Public Involvement Plan during Environmental Studies).
- C. If the project does not include formal scoping, design the public involvement process for the project in detail using the selection model in Exhibit 1.

III – The Public Involvement Plan During Environmental Studies

- A. For projects with formal scoping.
 - Design the public involvement process for the remainder of the environmental studies, incorporating the scoping results and using the selection model in Exhibit 1.
 - Revise the planned public involvement process as needed during environmental studies if current public involvement activities indicate that revision is needed.
- B. For projects with no formal scoping; Revise the planned public involvement process as needed during environmental studies if current public involvement activities indicate that revision is needed.

IV – Planning a Public Hearing

Use Exhibit 1 for general considerations, keeping in mind that Items I and III have been already decided.

TECHNIQUES FOR PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Any public involvement process for a project includes the following kinds of public involvement techniques:

- Identification of participants
- Dissemination of information
- Interaction
- Assistance
- Follow-through

The precise way these elements are carried out will vary from project to projects.

WHO IS THE PUBLIC?

In order to involve the public as participants in project development, it is necessary to identify the groups who may have an interest in the proposed action. The public often is not one undifferentiated group, but rather is composed of separate groups affected in different ways by the project. Different groups often need different types of information about the project. Names and addresses of individuals and groups affected by the project or geographical identification of communities affected by the project is the usual ways of identifying the public. Other possibly useful dimensions are special interests affected by the project's impacts, demographic characteristics (elderly, ethnic, or racial, income/education), level of interest in the project, or attitude toward the project.

This information can be collected from a variety of sources. Direct sources are contact with participants themselves, and surveys conducted at community meetings and hearings. Indirect sources are mailing lists from other projects or prior projects activity, lists or directories of organisations and officials, and census data. Collecting information about the public should be an on-going effort throughout project development. The information identifying the public is used in planning the public involvement activities and in carrying them out (e.g. notification for public hearing opportunity).

INFORMING THE PUBLIC

During public involvement, written notices can disseminate information to the public relative to attendance at involvement activities. At public meetings and hearings, information can be disseminated about the features and impacts of the project.

NOTIFICATION FOR PUBLIC MEETINGS AND HEARINGS

The transport agency's public involvement/public hearing procedures should contain requirements for public hearing notices: notification periods, numbers of notices, media used, etc. For projects with special conditions such as substantial environmental impacts or significant public interest/controversy, consider whether it may be wise to exceed the minimum requirements. For example, a double notice system with an initial 30-day notice and a second notice 5-12 days in advance of the hearing may be more appropriate for a large or controversial project even through the procedures allow a single notice with a shorter notification period. In addition, regulatory or other requirements may specify a particular relationship between public hearing notices and notices of the availability of environmental documents. Notices for public meetings vary greatly depending on the character of the public meeting and the expected public attendees.

A general rule is that large meetings should receive notification similar to that for a public hearing. A small meeting with special interest group could either require considerable notice (e.g., several weeks) or a few days notice if the group is cohesive and organised. Again, the transport agency's public involvement and public hearing procedures should contain specific minimum requirements.

Effective notification requires careful selection of the medium. This can be a public medium such as general circulation newspapers, press releases, radio and television interviews, public service announcements, and local or community newspapers and newsletters. There are also minority media to consider. A wide variety of formats are available, and notices need not be limited to a newspaper's legal notices section. Private or house media, such as agency newsletters or fliers, are also available.

There may be a requirement that a notice appear in the legal notices section of a newspaper. "Reasonable notification" usually consists of a formal announcement in a local newspaper of general circulation supplemented, as needed, by other means to reach interested or affected individuals and groups. The objective is to find out how the public affected by or interested in the project actually receives information and then to make sure that the notification process includes that medium.

The public notice for a public hearing should include the information or the availability of information needed by the public in deciding whether to attend. The basic information in a public notice identifies the project, the date, time, and place of the public hearing, and the address for written comments along with a date. In addition, the notice can include as needed:

- a map or other description of the project's location ;

- a summary of major impacts, project features, or issues ;
- numbers of expected residential and business relocations ;
- a description of the relocation assistance programme or reference to the relocation brochure ;
- a summary version of the public hearing agenda ;
- a description of the role of the public hearing in the environmental process ; and ;
- The name, business address and telephone number of someone to contact for more information.

DISSEMINATING INFORMATION AT THE PUBLIC MEETING OR HEARING

The presentation at a meeting or hearing disseminates information. Other ways to disseminate information at the meeting or hearing are posters, handouts, maps or charts, or photomontages. Whatever methods of information dissemination are chosen, they should be suited to the audience, suited to the information, and suited to the time, personnel, and financial resources available to the transport agency. Presentations are most effective if carefully organised and limited to about 20 minutes. In the past, long, detailed right-of-way and relocation presentations have often led to overly long agency presentations. These two topics are most effectively presented when the information is kept brief and designed to alert members of the public to the possible locations of acquisitions and relocations, the supply of replacement dwellings, and the availability of further information on the process for right-of-way acquisitions and relocation assistance.

In developing an effective presentation, the transport agency should also consider:

- Who is to deliver the presentation? One person delivering a prepared presentation gives unity and control; having several

specialists speak in their areas gives the specialists public exposure and may make the presentation more credible.

- Are the speaker(s) to read a prepared text or speak from carefully prepared notes? Able speaker(s) using notes rather than reading a text are more interesting, but this approach requires greater speaking skills to avoid rambling, stumbling, or misinformation.
- How long is the presentation to be and at what level of detail? Usually, people are able to maintain interest in a technical presentation for no more than 20-30 minutes regardless of the visual aids. A shorter time is more effective. Thus, the use of handouts, displays, recesses to view displays, simultaneous information sessions, etc., must be carefully orchestrated at a public meeting or hearing so that those citizens desiring detailed information may obtain it without others being overwhelmed by information.

When presenting project information to the public, it is essential to avoid confusing jargon in discussions with the public. Jargon often alienates the public and leads to angry confrontations. Eliminating jargon is difficult because transport professionals become so accustomed to it among peers and because jargon is usually a short way of referring to something more complex. Some ways to avoid jargon are to review presentations specifically for it, or ask agency staff or others whose background is more like the public in the area to help identify confusing jargon. Such persons could include staff not specialised in a given area, secretaries, or family members. Once identified, jargon should either be replaced by more understandable expressions or it should be clearly explained.

Physical displays such as posters, aerial photographs, maps, handouts, audio-visuals, etc. require planning in conjunction with

the specialised staff who actually produces them. All displays, handouts, etc. should be ready sufficiently far in advance of their use so that agency staff can:

- Review all materials for accuracy and make needed revisions, and
- Rehearse the meeting or hearing including use of the actual displays and audio-visuals. The rehearsal should be a week before the event so that any displays found difficult to use can be revised.

All display materials should be designed to be as self-explanatory as possible. Necessary keys, texts, references, etc. should be supplied. This reduces the demand on staff at the public meeting or hearing so that they may focus on hearing public concerns and answering more complex questions. It also avoids public misinterpretation of materials such as handouts or mailings, which are intended for the public to, study independently of agency staff.

In addition to making the displays informative and self-explanatory, the public should receive enough information to make sense of the project and its effects. At the same time, the public should not be overburdened with information that is too technical, filled with jargon, or too detailed. For example, the public has limited time to read with care detailed handouts at a meeting or hearing.

Information from the identification of the public such as socio-economic character, education levels, or level of interest in a given topic will help determine how much detail a public group can absorb.

INTERACTION BETWEEN AGENCY STAFF AND THE PUBLIC

This is the central element of public involvement. In general, interaction is most effective when it is informal and allows for

effective communication between both sides, such as in private meetings.

The lack of an audience makes it easier for both public and agency staff to focus on communicating with one another and altering positions as new information is received. During interaction the agency both collects information and disseminates information. There are many settings available for interaction:

- informal, private meetings
- organised public meetings
- public hearings
- committees and task forces

PUBLIC MEETINGS

These range widely in size and format from private meetings with individual citizens to small group meetings to large informational meetings.

All meetings differ from public hearings in the use of a more informal format. Registration of speakers, formal testimony, and transcript are usually not required for public meetings. The emphasis is on greater interaction, exchange of information, and informality. A project should have enough meetings to fully inform all interested groups, individuals, and communities, identify and clarify issues and impacts, and resolve conflict caused by lack of information. This may require several meetings for large geographic areas or specific groups (e.g., distinctive neighbourhoods, special interest groups or urban vs. rural areas).

Meetings should be scheduled and located at the convenience of the public expected to attend.

Usually, they should be located in the project area in an available room or auditorium large enough to contain the numbers expected. The meeting site should also accommodate the chosen format.

Avoid sites with emotional overtones for

the public, such as religious buildings, or buildings associated with a particular group and not acceptable to others. Information identifying the public will indicate whether an evening or afternoon time is best. For example, a retirement community may welcome a meeting in the afternoon but not in the evening, while employed persons are not available before 7:00 p.m.

Evaluation of a meeting includes:

- Did it meet its original objectives?
- Was information clearly presented?
- Did all participants (both public and agency) feel they had sufficient opportunity to contribute and receive information?
- Did the attendees represent the intended audience?

PUBLIC HEARINGS

As opposed to meetings, hearings are generally highly structured and formal gatherings, which are required by regulations or other project development directives. However, public hearings are most successful when conducted with less formal formats complemented by informal involvement methods. Which such an approach, the hearing is viewed not as strict public involvement requirement, but instead as the formal capstone of a process relying on the less formal approaches to gathering and disseminating information.

Because the proceedings of a public hearing become part of a project's official record, arrangements must be made for a transcript and for registering the names and addresses of public speakers.

Official stenographers or tape recorders can be used to document the proceedings.

Tape recordings preserve the "flavour" of a hearing, but require equipment in good order, back up equipment, and skilled use of microphones to get a usable recording. Speakers can be registered for a public

hearing either at the door on cards or lists or through a mail-in request in the hearing notice.

Use of mail-in requests results in additional work dealing with multiple requests for the same speaking time. For controversial or lengthy public hearing, consider the use of the time limit of 3 or 5 minutes for speakers to enable as possible to speak without domination by a few.

After a public hearing, the transport agency should conduct an evaluation of the proceedings. Evaluation of a hearing is similar to the evaluation of a meeting.

OTHER INVOLVEMENT TECHNIQUES

There are many other available involvement techniques suited to different purposes, types of audiences, and agency resources. Direct participatory techniques include on-site tours, group discussion sessions, task forces or advisory committees, agency telephone information resources, surveys, and field offices or project-site information centres. Indirect participatory techniques include newsletters, pamphlets, brochures, posters, information kits, and current mailing lists. The mass media may be used through news releases, articles, advertisements, and formal notices in area-wide and minority or community newspaper, as well as advertisements, new realises, and feature reports on radio and TV. A variety of techniques should be used, as needed for individual projects. It is important that the techniques used fit the scope and scale of the project and its impacts, as well as carry out specific objectives of the project's public involvement process.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES CONCERNING PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The results of the public involvement are incorporated into project development in two ways.

There are mundane activities, such as adding names to a mailing list or responding to questions which could not be answered at a meeting. However, feedback to decision-making is the more important form of follow-up preparation of internal agency reports documenting public responses for decision makers, debriefings for decision-makers, or preparing comments from the public for incorporation into the environmental document are all ways to incorporate output from the public into project development.

Citizen input can clarify the next step to take in project development (e.g., need or lack of need for additional public involvement). Citizen input gathered, for example, from a workshop meeting can also provide the agency with on data on needs, goals, interests, and concerns which otherwise have to be collected through a survey.

A particular problem in incorporating public input into project development occurs where public input is very emotional if not hostile. Transport agency staff often find it difficult to respond to such public statements which can be:

1. personally insulting to agency staff
2. totally rejecting of a project whose need seems clear and even accepted by other elements of the public, or
3. Lacking in any substance to which the agency can respond. Emotional statements indicate the intensity with which the speaker views the topic. The emotion and its intensity are the message. Agency staff should keep in mind that they personally are not the object of attack. Nor is the agency. The object of emotional statements from the public is either the project, some feature of the involvement process which appears belittling to the public, or some other issue for which the project in question is

serving as a catalyst in attracting public outcry. If the project is the object of the emotional statements, then as indicated already has input. If the public involvement process is the object, review and revise the process.

CONCLUSION

Successful and effective public involvement provides a solid foundation for transport improvement programmes and projects. It is a tool for collecting needed environmental data. Effective public involvement results in projects with sufficient public support for implementation. Public involvement requires as much discipline, thinking, and structure as any other type of environmental data collection or analysis.