

Minnesota Department of Transportation

St. Paul, Minnesota

Snapshot of Minnesota

- 2000 U.S. Census Population: 4,919,479
- Percent Change in Population 1990 to 2000: 12.4%
- 2000 U.S. Census Racial/Ethnic Composition:
 - White: 89.4%
 - African American: 3.5%
 - Asian: 2.9%
 - American Indian and Alaska Native: 1.1%
 - Other: 1.3%

OVERVIEW

Over the years, Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) has placed considerable emphasis on the need to continually evaluate the way it interacts with the public. Recognizing the need to involve as diverse a range of voices as possible to arrive at optimal planning and project development decisions, the DOT launched a study to examine ways to enhance the involvement of individuals traditionally under represented in the transportation decision-making process.

Designed to identify, build partnerships with, and solicit the participation of non-traditional transportation stakeholder groups in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area, the project provided a forum for two-way conversation and learning. As part of this study, a series of "dialog meetings" were held that resulted in recommendations to enhance the agency's interaction with people of color, low-income constituencies and the disabled. New ideas for outreach and communication developed as part of this study led to a larger agency initiative to identify better ways to address the needs and values of the agency's stakeholders and resulted in the development of *Hear Every Voice*, Mn/DOT's comprehensive guide to public involvement. Periodic evaluation of the agency's outreach activities is an integral component of the plan.

WHAT HAPPENED

NON-TRADITIONAL TRANSPORTATION STAKEHOLDER DIALOG PROJECT

In 1995, in an effort to enhance its relationship with the public and respond to both the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) and the Executive Order on Environmental Justice (12898), Mn/DOT initiated the Non-Traditional Transportation Stakeholder Dialogue Project. The purpose of this study was to identify, engage, build partnerships and establish an ongoing dialogue with constituencies traditionally under represented in the transportation decision-making process. The intent was to help these groups better understand their capacity to provide input and affect transportation decision-making. This effort was consultant-led with significant involvement by Mn/DOT staff.

One aspect of the project was to identify what constituted successful outreach. Previous experience dictated that the agency's standard methods of engaging the public were not necessarily well suited to all segments of the community. Mn/DOT sought the community's input by initiating a series of two-way discussions on the issues of participation and involvement. From November 1995 to May 1996, eighteen (18) "dialogue meetings" were held throughout the state. Participants included representatives from formally recognized district councils in St. Paul, community councils in Minneapolis, community-based institutions, and neighborhood groups throughout the metropolitan area. One hundred and forty-one (141) people participated in these meetings.

New ideas for outreach and communication included printing meeting notices in languages appropriate to the target audience, using brochures instead of reports to communicate summary information, utilizing visual preference surveys to test alternatives with "non-experts," and the provision of child care and meals to encourage meeting attendance. Methods and approaches identified as part of this study are included in a handbook for Mn/DOT Planning and Project Development entitled *Methods and Approaches to Enhance Involvement in Non-Traditional Transportation Stakeholder Communities and Neighborhoods*.

**(Online address of this report for purposes of a hotlink:
<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/pubinvolve/partner>)**

Based on the issues advanced during the dialog meetings, it became apparent that there was a need to update Mn/DOT's public involvement plan (PIP) to more effectively address the needs and values of the agency's stakeholders.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL EVALUATION

To further improve its interaction with the public, the agency launched a second initiative to solicit the public's advice on how they would like to be involved in the transportation decision-making process. This effort, combined with the information provided during the Non-Traditional Transportation Stakeholder Dialog Project was used to inform the development of the PIP.

To develop the PIP, Mn/DOT established a Public Involvement Task Force in 1997. Primarily composed of Mn/DOT Planning and Project Development staff, the Task Force was charged with developing a proactive public involvement plan that would integrate public outreach activities among disciplines. As part of this effort, the Task Force reviewed federal and state requirements for public involvement and best practices nationwide. Intent to develop a plan responsive to the needs of the agency and its constituency, Mn/DOT also undertook both an internal and external evaluation of its public involvement activities

Internally, employees were queried on prior experiences in conducting public involvement efforts. A questionnaire in the form of a "Technique Template" was distributed to all project managers, communicators, functional group and office directors, district engineers, planners and select consultants that queried them on why they used a particular technique, how it contributed to the decision or project outcome, what if any, the particular drawbacks of using the technique were and what they would do differently. Nineteen (19) Templates were completed and submitted as part of this effort. They are included in the PIP and provide a comprehensive set of examples on the application and effectiveness of a particular tool or technique within the scope of a plan or project. Additionally, four (4) case studies detailing the

full complement of outreach activities employed during the course of a project were also submitted and included in the PIP. They provide a valuable resource for future projects.

Externally, focus groups were held in the cities of Mankato, Grand Rapids, Minneapolis and Marshall. Two focus group discussions were held in each city. Participants were selected randomly selected to assist the agency in identifying ways to improve the effectiveness of its current outreach activities. The groups averaged 9 to 10 persons for a total of approximately 75 to 90 respondents.

Upon review of the comments provided, the following conclusions emerged: people respond to being addressed personally and politely; it works best to provide a forum where everyone is listened to, and just as importantly, afforded a response; people want to be given a real chance to affect decisions that affect their lives; and finally, people want to not only be given a choice, but to be given information to help make a reasoned decision.

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY

To ensure a broader sample, questions pertinent to the public's opportunity to be involved in transportation decision-making were also included in the 1997/1998 statewide survey conducted by the University of Minnesota's Center for Survey Research.

Each year the University conducts a statewide and metropolitan public opinion survey comprised of a variety of topics submitted by separate state agencies. The response rate for 800 telephone surveys was sixty five percent (65%). The sample consisted of households randomly selected from all Minnesota telephone exchanges. Three questions to gauge the public's satisfaction with current opportunities to involve themselves in transportation project decisions were included in the 1997/1998 survey with the following results:

- Of metro area residents, sixty percent (60%) were very to somewhat satisfied with their opportunity to be involved in transportation project decisions. Those dissatisfied were generally asking for more information (19%).
- When asked how they would rate the following methods as ways to inform them about opportunities for involvement in future transportation decisions based on a 1-5 scale with 1 being the best and 5 being the worst, participants rated the following 1-2 (high)
 - 60% Television
 - 57% Radio
 - 52% Newspaper Articles
 - 44% Public Notices in Newspapers
 - 31% Public Meetings
 - 27% Internet
- Generally, there is more interest in becoming involved in future transportation project decisions among Twin Cities metro area residents (55%) than those residing in Greater Minnesota (47%). However, both areas indicated they want an opportunity to get involved in the transportation planning process.

Adopted in 1999, *Hear Every Voice* incorporates the input provided from all of these activities into a comprehensive resource document. The PIP also provides guidance on the evaluation of public involvement activities.

IDENTIFICATION, APPLICATION, AND EVALUATION OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT TECHNIQUES

To assist managers in identifying and evaluating the appropriateness and effectiveness of particular outreach techniques, the PIP includes detailed technique matrices and accompanying "Technique Templates," for both planning and project development. Each is designed to correlate with a set of public involvement objectives defined by the agency.

To help inform project managers of both the time and resources associated with the tools and techniques, a resource matrix is also included. This matrix identifies a variety of tools/techniques and ranks them according to the level of resources (time, money, staff) required.

INCLUDE TOOL/TECHNIQUE MATRICES (Located on pages 53 and 54 of the PIP) AND RESOURCE MATRIX (Located on pages 55 of the PIP)

To illustrate the application of the techniques at various stages in the planning and project development process, nineteen (19) of the Technique Templates submitted by staff during the internal evaluation process, nineteen (19) of the Technique Templates submitted by staff during the internal evaluation are included in the PIP and cited as references in the planning and project development tool/technique matrices. Four (4) case studies from the internal evaluation are also included that detail the strengths and weaknesses of a particular technique, whether the outreach conducted was effective in reaching the target audience, and how the outreach contributed to the decision or project result for an entire project.

INCLUDE EXAMPLE OF TECHNIQUE AND CASE STUDY TEMPLATES (Located on pages 57-108 of the PIP)

Recognizing that evaluation involves the measurement of results against established measures for success, the PIP also includes a draft public involvement "family of measures" developed by the Public Involvement Task Force. Outcomes include building the agency's credibility, making public involvement accessible to all segments of the public, involving groups representative of the study area, responsiveness to the input provided and the development of plans/projects that support community values. Measures include timing, meeting convenience, documenting the demographics of participants, integration of concerns and support of community interests and affected units of government.

INCLUDE PERFORMANCE MEASURES (Located on page 52 of the PIP)

Taken together, the technique matrices, the Technique Templates, the Case Studies and the family of measures provide detailed guidance to staff on what to do when.

LESSON 1: IDENTIFY TOOLS/TECHNIQUES THAT FIT YOUR OBJECTIVES

Mn/DOT's values include being responsive to customer needs in all planning and project development activities. We live out these words through early and proactive involvement of users and neighbors living near our projects. Consideration of community values is a key ingredient of context sensitive design solutions that save time and leave a lasting legacy of better project designs and public trust.

-- Delbert Gerdes, Director, Project Delivery Streamlining

Four public involvement objectives are identified in the PIP: inform, involve, feedback, participation. To achieve each of the four objectives identified, the PIP identifies tools and techniques and their application within the planning and project development process. For instance to achieve the objective "inform" in the planning process, tools and techniques range from establishing a civic advisory committee to conducting key stakeholder interviews to developing media strategies. Applications include utilizing the tool/technique for the following purposes: total planning process; developing values; establishing goals and objectives; choosing alternatives; plan implementation and feedback modification. The appropriateness of utilizing each tool/technique during a particular phase in the planning process is also indicated ranging from always appropriate to not very appropriate.

LESSON 2: ASSESS THE RESOURCES REQUIRED TO IMPLEMENT A PARTICULAR TOOL/TECHNIQUE

A public involvement techniques and resource use matrix is also included in the PIP to provide guidance on the resources required to implement a particular tool/technique including use of time, money and staff resources ranging from very intensive to less intensive. For instance, interactive video displays and kiosks are listed as moderately intensive in terms of time and staff resources and very intensive in terms of cost. While the chart does not include the full complement of techniques, it is useful in providing managers with an overview of the resources required.

LESSON 3: IDENTIFY PERFORMANCE MEASURES

To help begin to evaluate the success of Mn/DOT's public involvement plans, the Public Involvement Task Force developed a public involvement family of measures complete with desired outcomes and measures during development of the PIP. It was intended that these measures would continue to be evaluated and refined as implemented to help Mn/DOT achieves its vision for public involvement.

To effect the outcome that public involvement is accessible to all segments of the public, measures include meeting convenience (time, place, accessibility), whether the communication tools were clear and effective, and whether the outreach program tailored to specific community needs (e.g., cultural and/or language barriers). To gage the effectiveness of these activities from the public's perspective, a survey is recommended.

Evaluation of the agency's activities against defined performance measures would help guide the agency's outreach efforts.

LESSON 4: DESIGN RESOURCE MATERIALS TO SUPPORT PERIODIC EVALUATION

As agencies struggle to balance limited resources against the need to provide citizens with ample access to the transportation decision making process, it is important to assess what works and what doesn't.

Mn/DOT has been diligent in defining and documenting a set of objectives, methods and techniques to guide their outreach efforts. To be effective, applicability of the tool/techniques identified will need to continue to be examined to determine the appropriate context for their use. The Technique and Case Study Templates provide a valuable resource to document what works and what doesn't, providing the opportunity for further refinement of the tool/technique matrices.

By querying managers on why a particular technique was used, how the technique contributed to the decision or project outcome, the drawbacks of the technique (if any) and what they would do differently, the Template provides managers with the opportunity to take a coherent look at a particular outreach initiative. Similarly, the Case Study Template enables managers to document the full range of techniques employed during the course of a project. Documentation of these efforts provides a ready reference of the agency's approach to the public during various phases of the planning and project development process that can be used to inform the update of future PIPs and state long-range plans.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Mn/DOT has expended considerable time and energy to listen to what its stakeholders have to say about how they would like to be involved in the transportation decision-making process. Development of the agency's PIP was significantly informed by the public and includes detailed guidance to staff on how to address the needs identified.

The challenge for Mn/DOT has been to maintain the momentum to continue to document, analyze and refine its public outreach approach. Until recently, other than including the Technique Templates and Case Studies in the PIP, no steps had been taken to formally distribute and administer the use of these forms as an ongoing evaluation tool. Last month, at a training session for new managers at the agency's Project Management Academy, participants were provided guidelines on how to complete the Templates and asked to submit the completed forms to Communications and Public Relations Office. This represents a positive first step. It is expected that the collection of the information will be further refined as the agency begins work on phase two of its public involvement training and development. Currently there is currently no formal process in place to ensure the completion, collection and analysis of this data.

Mn/DOT is currently in the process of administering a large-scale construction program (252 projects per year statewide). Given the staff commitment required to implement these projects, the agency has had little opportunity to comprehensively evaluate its public involvement activities since adoption of the PIP in 1999. Fortunately, the work associated with

developing the PIP has well positioned the agency to begin to evaluate these activities when the time permits.

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