



The road to consensus

How to build stakeholder support for large, complex and controversial transportation projects

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Winning public support for a complex, multijurisdictional, controversial project is essential to success. This white paper presents best practices, curated over three decades of public outreach, that are proven to advance the most formidable transportation projects into final design and construction.

In this white paper:

- Understanding the stakeholder of today
- Balancing competing stakeholder interests while meeting a project's stated purpose
- Anticipating the needs and concerns of stakeholders

Understanding today's stakeholder

The project approval and environmental documentation phase is a necessary venture into public opinion and consensus. Here, the owner purposely brings together a cross section of the population that would be most affected by the project to disclose potential impacts and find common ground on which to advance the project.

For projects with minimal impact, the PA/ED phase can be a relatively smooth process. However, in a highly urbanized environment, where a mobility project can be complex, multijurisdictional and potentially controversial, a smooth PA/ED process can be a challenge. Each stakeholder group may weigh the impact differently, have conflicting requests or directly competing views of what the preferred alternative should be. Achieving consensus can be a challenging proposition.

For that reason, it is helpful for owners to understand how stakeholders are evolving and how their evolution likely will influence the PA/ED process:

- **Informed.** With the help of Internet search engines people instantly can obtain a wealth of information on a project's history, making them far more informed and prepared to challenge proposals and demand answers, especially if they foresee impacts to themselves or their communities.
- **Savvy.** Informed citizens require a more sophisticated level of communication. Owners must be prepared to meet this new dynamic with detailed, thoughtful information and explanations. Responding to stakeholder concerns may require evaluating multiple alternatives or performing detailed analysis. Additional due diligence, while necessary with today's stakeholders, can expand a project's scope and timeline beyond the owner's original estimates.
- **Influential.** Traditionally, when stakeholders felt a project was unjustified or potentially detrimental to their quality of life, they appealed to elected officials, who acted on their behalf. Today, stakeholders also have the power to mobilize opposition through social media. A small but motivated group can spread news – and misinformation – instantly through social media, forcing owners to invest precious time and resources on damage control instead of focusing on advancing their projects.

Although small in number, opponents can influence decisions about regional mobility that would benefit the greater population.

Performing a balancing act

Balancing competing stakeholder interests and potential impacts while meeting the project's stated purpose and need requires a set of proven best practices:

- **Select the right consultant.** The right consultant possesses an effective blend of project knowledge, technical expertise and people skills. Qualified consultants must understand the project from a historical context, possess vast technical knowledge to answer a variety of questions, be open to all views and exercise good judgement. Consultants who remain calm and objective during emotionally charged stakeholder meetings add professionalism and legitimacy to the proceedings. Those who genuinely listen can identify what is important to the community early in the process and will be more successful in achieving community consensus.
- **Retain third-party facilitators.** Owners may want to consider retaining a neutral, third-party facilitator to eliminate any undertones of bias a consultant facilitator unintentionally might convey. Optimally, the facilitator should have established bonds within the community for maximum impact.
- **Customize the format.** The PA/ED process seeks the community's thoughts on the project proposal, the problem statement and proposed solutions. To gather this intelligence, owners traditionally have formed stakeholder advisory committees to act as sounding boards.

Having seen advisory committees with the power to significantly delay PA/ED proceedings, some owners are reluctant to give stakeholders the authority an "advisory" title implies. One solution is to define roles and establish rules of engagement upfront. For example, in a large highway extension or expansion project, the advisory committee would be expected to offer feedback based on the consultant's information, but the owner would ultimately make the final decision.

One format of engagement does not have to exclude another. Owners have used effective combinations of advisory committees, community liaison groups, small groups and briefings with elected officials. Other options include roundtables and one-on-one meetings. Roundtables can be effective when they include participants with conflicting views because everyone knows where everyone else stands. Participants gain a global understanding of the challenges, allowing them to more easily identify areas of potential

benefit and compromise.

One-on-one conversations give stakeholders the opportunity to express concerns they may not feel comfortable stating in group settings. One-on-one meetings were highly effective in the Dallas City Center Master Assessment Process, CityMAP™. CityMAP was a groundbreaking study of the challenges and opportunities in redesigning the area's aging urban interstate corridors. The CityMAP team conducted more than 80 "listening sessions" with local, state and federal elected officials, the chamber of commerce, nonprofits, professional associations, coalitions/advocacy groups, developers, colleges and churches. Together, they focused on highway design and how it can contribute to economic development, mobility and livability.

In addition to the one-on-one listening sessions, the CityMAP team held three large public meetings, reviewed previous planning studies, analyzed current corridor design projects, studied traffic patterns and then looped stakeholders and the public back in through recap sessions, intended to first vet key findings and, later, to vet the draft assessment. The outreach effort produced one of the most comprehensive urban highway assessments the transportation industry has ever seen.

- **Start early.** Engaging stakeholders and elected officials in the first three to six months of a project conveys openness, transparency and a willingness to work with the community to solve transportation challenges.
- **Anticipate and address needs and concerns.** Proactively identifying and addressing stakeholders' concerns and needs can diffuse opposition quickly. For example, if an owner proposes a large highway expansion/extension project, residents may balk, arguing the new addition would bifurcate communities and require the acquisition of hundreds of properties. Such opposition has caused projects to go dormant for decades while mobility worsens.

One way an owner can revive a project like this is to implement a new PA/ED phase, but they should be prepared to evaluate all possible options, including tunnels, light-rail transit, bus rapid transit and low-build alternatives to improve hotspots and local intersections. This strategy has brought 50-year stakeholder standoffs to an end.

Another way to anticipate the needs and concerns of stakeholders is to emphasize how a large project will help achieve regional mobility and air quality goals.

- **Manage competing expectations.** The most effective way to address opposing opinions during a public meeting is to collect all stakeholder input and adjourn. Allowing time between meetings gives tempers time to ebb and the consultant time to carefully consider all input. At the next meeting, instead of explaining why an idea isn't feasible or why a concern is or is not founded, the consultant should present pros and cons of each view, allowing the public to see the answers for themselves. This tactic relieves the consultant from passing judgement and alienating participants. It also acknowledges the validity of the participants' views and creates transparency.
- **Add project elements.** When consultants listen, learn and adjust their approach accordingly, it builds trust with the community. In fact, consultants should look for opportunities to incorporate stakeholder suggestions into the project when appropriate. Adding or modifying project elements will generate goodwill.

If a community is opposed to a roadway widening because it would consume precious open space for public gatherings, the owner could modify the project to include features that would address these issues. If the community doesn't fully agree with the project, but they trust the owner and the consultant are trying to do the right thing, consensus can be achieved.
- **Maintain communication.** According to the National Environmental Protection Act, owners are required to communicate with stakeholders at the initial stage of the project and after the draft environmental document is released. On a controversial project, limiting communication to these milestones is not adequate. Ongoing communication allows the owner to adjust the project, when possible, to accommodate stakeholder feedback and minimize potential delay after the draft environmental document is released.
- **Tap third-party experts.** When the community pushes back on a proposed project, the owner and consultant could attempt to explain why, or they could let a third-party expert do the talking. For example, when a community questions the need to replace a beloved, historic bridge, the owner may want to bring in an unbiased expert from the academic field to justify a new bridge. Hearing it from a third-party makes a difference and often results in the community understanding the need and ultimately supporting the project.

From contention to consensus

Reaching consensus in a multijurisdictional, complex and contentious project is possible. With the right PA/ED consultant and a set of proven best practices, owners can turn stakeholder contention into stakeholder consensus and move their projects forward into design and construction.

Resources

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