Public Participation in Transportation Planning in Greensboro

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The planning procedures involved in providing transportation within urbanized areas have undergone a major transformation with the creation of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) and the Clean Air Act Amendments (CAA). Both include specific mandates that require administrators to develop a public involvement process that solicits meaningful and timely input from the general public. In accordance with these requirements, the Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are required to promote increased community and private sector participation in all areas of transportation planning. To meet these requirements, the Greensboro Department of Transportation has changed their approach towards public involvement through the development of several innovative concepts. This paper will describe several case studies that illustrate these concepts.

As stated in the Federal Register, “Public involvement processes shall be proactive and provide complete information, timely public notice, full public access to key decisions and opportunities for early continuing involvement.” As with ISTEA, a total innovative public involvement process must be developed. It should allow the public to play a major part in the decision-making process of transportation related issues. In contrast, the traditional methods of planning allow for public comment and consideration after a major decision has been made and a “hard sell” is made to citizens for implementation. With the growing trend of citizens pro-actively making their local governments and communities more responsive to their needs, the end result of the traditional process has been one of increasingly negative and pessimistic sentiment. The empowerment of citizen groups has become the wave of the future and active participation in the decision-making process is no longer a wish; it has become an expectation.

The new transportation planning process seeks to develop new partnerships. It is predicated on early and inclusive public involvement to develop long- and short-range plans. The key words are “early”, “inclusive”, and “involvement.” In order to be effective, public involvement must start early or at the beginning and must be inclusive of all players in the process. Greensboro is striving to meet these objectives.

Description of the Greensboro Service Area

As the county seat, Greensboro is centrally located in Guilford County, which is part of the north-central Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. Interstate 85 connects Greensboro with Durham to the northeast and Charlotte to the southwest. Interstate 40 connects Greensboro to Winston-Salem to the west and Raleigh and Wilmington to the east. Although only one of several incorporated areas in Guilford County, the City of Greensboro accounted for nearly 53 percent of the county’s population in 1990. The other incorporated areas are High Point and Jamestown, southwest of Greensboro, and Gibsonville to the east.

Certain characteristics of Greensboro present challenges to achieving a successful public transportation system. Compared to other North Carolinians, Greens-
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Boro residents are relatively affluent, have small households, and display a fairly high incidence of automobile ownership, all of which tend to reduce public transit demand. While there is population growth in the outer areas of the city, much of that growth consists of low-density residential and automobile-oriented commercial land uses. Employment centers are widely dispersed throughout the city and county.

Greensboro’s land area and population have increased over several decades. Between 1980 and 1990, the population of Guilford County increased approximately nine percent, while Greensboro’s grew about eighteen percent. Annexation accounts for some of this growth; major land acquisitions increased the size of the city from 60.7 square miles to 81.8 square miles.

Like many other American communities, Greensboro’s population is aging because of lower birth rates, longer life expectancy, and a baby boom generation which is approaching middle age. Compared with 1980, there are now fewer children and youth (under 19), many more adults between 30 and 45 years of age, and more persons over 45.

Setting the Stage

The City of Greensboro Department of Transportation (GDOT) has always attempted to bring good as well as bad news to its citizens in open transportation planning forums. During a period when environmentalists feel that there are no “good” roads, when the federal government is mandating clean air and water, and when consumers are not willing to give up their automobiles for mass transportation, the transportation professional must be sensitive to a wide range of interests.

In 1985, the Greensboro One Bond Task Force considered various issues and needs facing the community as part of the process of recommending a bond package to be placed before the voting public in the fall of that year. During their deliberations, it became apparent that public participation was needed to measure existing public opinion concerning transportation. At the request of the City Council, the Transportation Planning staff developed a proposal to study existing services and assess the needs and demands within the community. The study was designed to evaluate services against community-based goals and objectives and to offer a set of recommendations or improvements if warranted.

Two committees were formed to design and conduct the study. The Technical Steering Committee, composed of city staff and service providers, with additional representatives from the United Way and the City of High Point, served as advisors for technical evaluation and analysis. The Advisory Committee, composed of politicians, administrators, and private citizens, sensitized the team to public attitudes and needs.

The final study consisted of nine separate tasks:

1. Establish community-based goals and objectives for public transportation in Greensboro.
2. Identify service provider roles and the public they serve.
3. Assess service performance of current providers,
4. Assess the funding environment,
5. Assess the legal environment,
6. Identify alternative service options,
7. Identify alternative organizational structures,
8. Evaluate alternative organizational and service options, and

The following case studies provide a representation of the Greensboro Department of Transportation’s efforts and commitment towards public involvement in transportation planning.

Case #1: Public Involvement Process for Review and Approval of the Greensboro Urban Area Long-Range Transportation Plan

Under the requirements of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA), it is the responsibility of each Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), through its Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC) and Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC), to ensure that the public is adequately informed and involved in the metropolitan transportation planning process. In the case of a significant revision or update to the Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), the TCC shall recommend a specific Public Involvement Plan (PIP) appropriate for the particular action being considered. Developing, approving, and implementing the PIP will be among the earliest tasks completed in a LRTP revision or update.
The PIP should include provisions enabling the TAC to monitor the progress of the process.

Each PIP shall describe and schedule suitable efforts designed to inform, educate, build consensus, and facilitate a collaborative decision-making process. The PIP will be designed to provide timely information to potentially affected parties (such as public officials, citizens, and other agencies) early in the process and at important decision points along the way. Potentially critical steps in developing the LRTP include:

- Defining community goals and objectives,
- Proposing strategies and policies,
- Reviewing assumptions and projections,
- Identifying deficiencies,
- Establishing evaluation criteria,
- Generating solutions,
- Evaluating alternatives,
- Recommending and prioritizing projects, and
- Approving the final plan.

Special efforts will be made to contact and consider the needs of groups traditionally underserved by transportation systems and underrepresented in the planning process, including but not limited to the elderly, the disabled, low-income households, and minority residents. A variety of techniques will be used to achieve the goals of the public involvement process as effectively as possible. Potential techniques may include:

- Charettes,
- Transportation fairs,
- Interviews,
- Focus groups,
- Polls and surveys,
- Newspaper inserts/articles,
- Commercial radio, television, and public television,
- Newsletters/mailing lists,
- Hotlines,
- Workshops,
- Community/neighborhood meetings,
- Task forces,
- Steering/advisory committees,
- Written comments, and
- Public hearings.

Initial Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) approval of the PIP shall be required, and the TAC may at any time require such revisions to the PIP as are needed to maintain a full and open process. Adequate public notice shall be given concerning any revision to the PIP. The approved PIP will be documented and made available to the public, and will be included directly or by reference in the final LRTP document, along with a summary of significant comments and responses.

The type and degree of public involvement required to provide effective community input and review for the Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) varies according to the action being taken. The specific public involvement process described below should be considered the minimum acceptable level of public involvement.

The essential elements of the public involvement process for the Greensboro Urban Area's Long Range Transportation Plan are:

1. The Greensboro MPO's Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC) and Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) shall review and comment on the draft LRTP document prior to granting tentative approval. The tentative approval shall be subject to public comments forwarded to the TCC and the TAC during the public review period.

2. Copies of the draft LRTP will be made available to the public in the City Clerk's office, the County Commissioners' office, and the GDOT office. The public review period shall be thirty days. A notice will be placed in the major local newspapers for seven consecutive days at the beginning of the 30 day comment period preceding review and action by the TCC and TAC. The notice will include a due date for comments, locations of draft LRTP's, and a contact person with an address and telephone number. All comments should be in writing. A public meeting at the end of the 30 day period is at the option of the TAC. The notice for a public meeting
should be placed for three consecutive days at least one week prior to the meeting, and will include a date, location, and contact person.

3. At least one Greensboro MPO staff person shall be designated to answer questions from persons or groups concerning the LRTP.

4. Relevant information will be provided in a timely manner to any citizens, public agencies, private providers of transportation services, or other parties or segments of the community identified as being significantly affected by the proposed actions.

5. Public comments shall be assembled and presented to the Greensboro Urban Area TCC and TAC. Response to the public comments shall be prepared at the discretion of the TAC.

When a significant number of written or oral comments are received on the draft LRTP, the Greensboro MPO shall prepare a report summarizing the public comments and their analysis and disposition. This report shall be submitted along with the final LRTP document to the Federal Highway Administration, the Federal Transit Administration, and the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT), and made available to other parties upon request.

After reviewing public comments, the TCC and TAC shall meet to consider approval of the final LRTP document. If the final LRTP or action differs from what was made available for public comment to a degree that raises new and unforeseen material issues, additional opportunity for public comment will be provided.

The Greensboro MPO’s public involvement process will be coordinated with NCDOT’s statewide and project-specific public involvement plans whenever possible to enhance public consideration and reduce costs, redundancies, and confusion. This Public Involvement Process will be evaluated periodically to determine its effectiveness, and revised as necessary to provide full and open access. Any revision to the PIP will require a 45 day public review and comment period.

Case #2: Citizen Participation in the Greensboro Transit Authority

Beginning in 1934, the transit division of Duke Power Company provided bus service for the City of Greensboro under a 99-year franchise agreement. In the early 1980s, a number of transit studies determined that transit service levels and quality needed vast improvement. To encourage public participation, numerous public hearings were held regarding this issue. In 1988, Greensboro citizens confirmed their strong support for improved public transit by voting to pass a referendum allocating monies to support the creation of the Greensboro Transit Authority (GTA).

Since its inception, the GTA has dedicated itself to actively encouraging public participation on a continuing basis through the use of interviews, surveys, public hearings, site visitations, and informational meetings. Many changes and improvements in the GTA system are the direct result of citizen input—considered to be an invaluable source of guidance for the system.

On July 1, 1991, the GTA, under the direction of the Greensboro City Council, assumed full responsibility for the operation and future direction of Greensboro’s public transit system. In order to meet its commitment to enhance the quality of service and expand the transit service area to meet the needs of a growing Greensboro, GTA reached out to the community to help identify their requirements. GTA did this in a number of ways. First, it conducted extensive ridership surveys on the buses regarding the quality of service and desired changes. Second, it interviewed local businesses to determine employer and employee needs. Third, GTA held a series of focus groups with riders and nonriders to identify unmet transit needs, potential destination sites, and public perceptions of service. Lastly, GTA hosted public hearings to determine possible route, time and destination changes.

Meanwhile, market research allowed the GTA to review and revise routes and schedules to reflect shifts in population density, changes in demand, and new development. All of the information gathered led to GTA’s adoption of four major service improvements, which include: expanded service hours, service to new areas, improved headways and increased route efficiency. The system was further designed to provide on-time service to a wide range of requested destinations, including entertainment sites, cultural centers, and schools. GTA also responded to community requests for increased frequency of service, later running hours on certain routes, and service to a local community college.

On October 7, 1991, GTA rolled out 22 new state-of-the-art buses, officially launching its expanded public transit system. Each bus is accessible, with a wheelchair lift and “kneeling” feature for persons with special mobility needs. All buses are also in compliance with current EPA particulate emissions standards. Passengers are able to ride in comfort during the summer months with the addition of air conditioning,
which was not available on the Duke Power buses.

The Greensboro Transit Authority’s marketing focus also emphasizes citizen input and participation. From the initial GTA kick-off event, the public has been an essential and invaluable partner in forming and developing marketing strategies. Indeed, the primary mission of marketing efforts is to communicate ideas to others. GTA has taken this concept one step further and has listened to the public’s ideas in order to better serve them.

Initial marketing efforts involved a concerted campaign to inform Greensboro citizens of the new and improved transit service. This consisted of creating strong positive awareness of the new system and its benefits; educating the community about useful new features of the service; and overcoming negative perceptions regarding the Duke Power service which had resulted in low ridership. A wide range of media was utilized to reach extensive portions of Greensboro citizens with a high-visibility, community-oriented message emphasizing the benefits of public transit. Presentations to civic groups, displays at cultural events, participation in parades and fairs, and talks to school groups reinforced GTA’s message to the community. GTA is proud of the level of community involvement utilized in marketing its system. Greensboro citizens’ continuing contributions will allow the Greensboro Transit Authority to accelerate into the 21st Century offering excellence in service to the entire Greensboro community.

Case #3: The Greensboro Transportation Exposition

On October 10, 1994, the first Transportation Exposition was held at the Greensboro Coliseum Special Events Center. The event was hosted by the Greensboro Urban Area Transportation Advisory Committee and the local policy body of the Metropolitan Planning Organization.

The Greensboro Department of Transportation was designated to serve as the lead planning agency for coordinating this event. Local staff members were asked to develop a sketch of the way a transportation fair or expo would be organized. A transportation fair or expo is an event used to interest citizens in transportation planning and to provide them with the opportunity to learn about and comment on transportation projects.

Normally held for one day, the event should be heavily promoted with local media coverage (television, radio, and newspaper). The expo should also utilize visual exhibits, videos, maps, and models of projects and processes. At a minimum, the expo should include the following:

- Visual interest and excitement.
- Variety in exhibits: maps, photos, models, slide shows, videos, full-sized vehicles, and gift items.
- Accessibility in a central location for the target audience,
- Extensive publicity to attract participants,
- Attraction for a variety of people of all ages, and
- Opportunities for comments by participants.

The 1994 expo was divided into two main components: (1) visitation of events and exhibits, and (2) active participation through panel discussion and interaction with local officials. This two-stage process was programmed to allow the exhibits to be visited for the duration of the event, and the interactive sessions to take place during the evening hours to allow working individuals an opportunity to take part. The total process involved video cameras, Q&A stations, and ongoing recording by local transportation groups of the public’s comments, suggestions, and concerns. The information collected will serve as a review and critique of the event as well as a guide for planning future activities of this nature.

Public participation at expo events can be predicated on several factors: weather, day/date, location, and awareness. Contact was made with several special interest groups throughout the city to raise their awareness as well as seek input regarding items, exhibits, and discussions. At best, a small representation of citizen groups was expected and did attend. Other groups invited to participate included: Volvo-GM, Epees Trucking, Sierra Club, and the local Institute of Transportation Engineers chapter from North Carolina A&T State University. Citizen groups that attended the expo closely examined the information gathered and are expected to bring follow-up comments to an open interaction session scheduled later.

Description of the Expo

Starting at noon on the day of the expo, the public was invited to see, feel, and learn about the many transportation matters operated by the City of Greensboro. Many pieces of heavy equipment used in the daily operation of the department were on display, including asphalt equipment, snow plows, leaf trucks,
and sign-marking trucks. The Greensboro Transit Authority offered schedule information, bus passes, and opportunities to review their handicapped accessible transit bus. The North Carolina Department of Transportation presented safety exhibits, public transportation and rail information, congestion technology, and motor vehicle registration information.

Beginning at 6:30 p.m., three interactive panel discussions were presented over a three-hour period. The first session focused on the status of all state and local transportation projects in the Greensboro area. The panel included a spokesperson from NCDOT, a local traffic engineer, a city engineer, a project planner, and the transit administrator. The second session was a review of the current ISTEA efforts, including explanations of metropolitan planning, project selections and funding, and necessary public involvement. The makeup of this session included a statewide planning engineer, a local traffic engineer, and city budget and evaluation administrators. The third and final session dealt with an overview of the various transportation-related planning efforts underway at the local, regional, and state levels, with emphasis on coordination and citizen participation. Key players in this session included the Mayor Pro-Tem, city and county engineers, Council of Government officials, and statewide planning engineers. All sessions were moderated by representatives from city and county government. As noted earlier, these sessions were open, with opportunities for the public to raise questions concerning specifics of various projects.

Special emphasis in these sessions was given to the presentation materials. All presenters agreed on using computer-generated presentation software, and handouts of the computer-generated visuals provided participants with easy reference for questions and comments. While budgetary expenditures were minimal, the staff time and resources involved were extensive. The largest costs were associated with facility and equipment rental. Dedicated staff support was considered essential in the final stages of this process as well as during the actual event. Organizational meetings were essential for fine-tuning the solicitation of exhibitors and publicity.

Analysis and Recommendations

This type of event cannot replace the public process that records statements in a formal manner for the general public. It does, however, provide a complement by providing an informational basis about the many varied operations and procedures of transportation. This event serves as a high-impact informational tool for discussion by the public. As recognized by various transportation administrators, the major reason that the public has not had a large impact in the planning process is simply because they are not aware of the total picture. An event of this nature stimulates awareness and understanding.

A major consideration for our next expo is the need to plan earlier for this type of event. Outside agency participation is highly contingent on requesting an activity of this nature on their yearly schedule. The dividends of this small task should provide flexibility during the selection of activities for public participation. Early organizational meetings with representatives from all phases of the event are essential.

Director's Comments

Richard Atkins, Director of the Greensboro Department of Transportation, viewed these public participation projects as the trend of the future. The highly technocratic engineer is now being replaced by a customer relations planner/engineer that can deal with the general public using layman’s terms. The word “advocate” is no longer a term used exclusively by land use planners, but rather is being used universally in the development of transportation systems.

Transportation is typically one of the larger planning functions that does not normally allocate funds or resources to educate the public on the process. Many citizens do not understand the complex requirements of transportation planning and usually do not get involved in the selection of transportation projects. Most citizens are involved in transportation planning only when proposals have turned into a project, and many of them do not realize the magnitude of transportation services that the community receives, including: street maintenance, street cleaning, snow removal, leaf collection, drainage, dead animal pickup, signs and markings, signal maintenance and construction, and public transportation. The Greensboro Department of Transportation staff desires to continue to develop a process that encourages the public to be more involved in the transportation process. Ultimately, citizen participation will improve the provision of quality transportation.

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Notes

1. 23 CFR 450 and 49 CFR 613.