

ASSESSING THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN FLORIDA

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Public involvement has long been a staple of the transportation decision-making process of state transportation agencies and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs). Although now a routine part of transportation planning and project development, the current state of the practice in public involvement is not well documented. In Florida, public involvement is carried out by FDOT Districts and MPOs based on each agency's internal guidelines, using a variety of techniques adapted to local conditions and project requirements. General guidance and limited training are provided by the FDOT Central Office. However, more information is needed on the current state of the practice in Florida, issues faced by transportation agencies when attempting to involve the public, and ongoing training needs of transportation practitioners.

OBJECTIVES

The goal of this research was to assess current public involvement practices and processes in Florida, considering all phases of transportation decision-making and including MPOs, various divisions within FDOT's Central Office, and each FDOT District, including each functional unit within the District and its role in public involvement. Specific objectives included the following:

- Document current public involvement practices of FDOT and MPOs during all phases of transportation decision-making.
- Define best practices in the field of public involvement that can be shared with FDOT and MPO staff throughout the state.
- Identify training needs at the FDOT and MPO levels.
- Develop recommendations for the future development of public involvement performance measures.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The FDOT and MPOs have made significant strides in their public involvement practices over the past several years and are committed to involving the public in a meaningful way. Most of those interviewed considered public involvement an integral part of their job, across the functional units and Districts. There was evidence that methods other than formal meetings are being applied where needed to more effectively involve the public and to convey project information. It was also clear that there are several continuing challenges and training needs.

One ongoing challenge was the difficulty of maintaining continuity in addressing public concerns as transportation projects move through the planning and development phases to construction. Complicating this challenge was the tendency for the represented public and the FDOT project staff to change as projects progressed through the various phases. Providing adequate public involvement, particularly on larger or more controversial projects, was also challenging in light of required staff reductions, which are being addressed by increasing reliance on consultants. Other commonly identified challenges included inadequate public understanding of the transportation planning and development process (including construction), managing competing interests and difficult personalities, and inadequate intergovernmental coordination in public involvement.

Researchers developed a set of recommendations that focus on four broad areas: involvement and outreach, continuity and commitments, training and information exchange, and performance measures and evaluation.

Involvement and Outreach

- Maximize opportunities for one-on-one or small group dialogue.
- Create opportunities for staff to build relationships with the public and to provide education on transportation issues, both within and outside of project development.
- Provide opportunities other than public meetings for people to have input into project decision-making.
- Seek ways to coordinate and communicate with other agencies on public involvement or outreach activities.

Continuity and Commitments

- Establish a process for passing project information on public concerns and comments from phase to phase.
- Increase communication between functional units within FDOT Districts on project development issues of importance to the public. Consider instituting regular cross-functional debriefing meetings and cross-functional area attendance at key project meetings.
- Consider a project management approach or creating for the public a single point of contact who has the necessary technical knowledge and would follow a project from planning or project development through to construction.

Training and Information Exchange

- Provide regular public involvement training and target the training, where appropriate, to specific topics of interest or concern and to specific functional units or responsibilities.
- Provide organized opportunities for FDOT Districts, as well as MPO staff, to share experiences, ideas, and best practices in working with the public.

Performance Measures and Evaluation

- Develop a systematic method, based on defined performance measures, that can be used by the FDOT functional units and MPOs for evaluating the effectiveness of their public involvement process.
- Develop performance measures that focus on desired outcomes and that correspond with and advance the business plan of that functional unit.

BENEFITS

FDOT District Offices, MPOs and other transportation agencies spend millions of dollars every year to conduct public involvement activities during all phases of transportation project development and decision-making. Yet, there exists no database of current public involvement practices or processes and no comprehensive methodology for determining the effectiveness of the various public involvement activities. Thus, no mechanisms are in place to determine if Florida transportation agencies are achieving their stated public involvement objectives.

Public involvement practitioners can use the lessons learned and suggestions offered in this research to modify their current public involvement practices and policies, making their public involvement activities more effective and more valuable to the overall transportation project development process.

Additionally, this comprehensive assessment is envisioned as the first phase of a research effort that will ultimately lead to the development of public involvement performance measures. Development and implementation of public involvement performance measures, built upon the comprehensive review of existing public involvement practices and processes in the state, would provide FDOT and other transportation agencies with a mechanism for determining the effectiveness of their current public involvement activities. This will help the State's transportation leadership direct scarce resources toward most effectively involving the public in transportation decision-making processes throughout the state.

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