

Reaching Out to Reach Better Decisions

By Jerri Horst and Monica Hernandez

In the past, transportation projects could be designed and constructed largely from technical criteria with minimal public involvement. Expectations have changed. Stakeholders are better organized, better informed and capable of profoundly affecting any project in the country. With the scrutiny that transportation projects receive in today's environment, public involvement is essential. Establishing an atmosphere of trust and credibility becomes as integral as design to the program's overall success.

In response, public involvement programs must be proactive, strategic, responsive, open and broad-based. The National


impacts; there must also be adequate agency and public scrutiny so that good decisions can be made.

Ensuring a successful community outreach program and making good decisions goes beyond the basic public involvement requirements of NEPA. A program must be tailored to fit the needs of the particular community affected, which requires getting to know that community. Implementing an effective public involvement process involves several major elements, including:

- Develop clear objectives for initiating a public dialogue
- Identify relevant stakeholders and other public groups
- Establish specific techniques for engaging target audiences
- Institute procedures for effectively notifying target audiences
- Incorporate public input when making project decisions

These last two points are of particular importance. The public must have ready access to project information if they are to contribute valuable feedback. Likewise, creating a public involvement process is meaningless unless public input is given serious consideration come decision time.

In addition, it is imperative that the public involvement program be periodically reassessed to determine if it is still effective. Some tools for reassessment may include: comment cards, survey forms, or informal interviews at public involvement events; e-mail account and/or telephone hotline with adequate advertising indicating that feedback is welcomed; queries to participating agencies, project committees, technical teams and project staff.



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Environmental Policy Act of 1970 (NEPA) ensures that federal agencies use an interdisciplinary approach in planning and decision making that impacts the environment. A major objective of NEPA is fostering better decisions. NEPA procedures make environmental information available to public officials and citizens before decisions and actions take place. To be effective, the NEPA document and process for transportation project development should be more than a scientific analysis of the

Case Studies: Central Phoenix/East Valley Light Rail Project

HDRIS.R. Beard & Associates, as leader of a joint venture, is serving as the Program Management Consultant to Valley Metro Rail (VMR) for the \$1.2 billion Central Phoenix/East Valley Light Rail project. One of the roles of the firm is public involvement. A public involvement process was put in place from the initial planning phase on through to construction with specialized services created to address the needs and concerns of all stakeholders. This public involvement effort combined an urban design task force, accessibility oversight committee, business outreach program, construction signage program and community advisory boards for each line section.

The Central Phoenix/East Valley Light Rail project calls for a 20-mile light rail transit operation in 2008. Construction is now underway. The comprehensive public involvement program for this project is one of the most extensive ever undertaken for a transit project in Phoenix. It employs a full-time staff of about 10 public outreach specialists.

METRO Solutions

As the general planning consultant to the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, Texas, (METRO) since 1998, HDRIS.R. Beard & Associates is responsible for all public involvement activities related to METRO's system planning activities.

METRO initiated the public outreach effort for METRO Solutions two years in advance of an anticipated election date with the goal of having a regional system plan that had broad community support before the agency had formally called for an election.

The METRO Solutions transit system plan featured the most comprehensive public involvement program METRO had ever undertaken. Thousands of Houstonians attended meetings and provided comments on the draft plan, which was mailed to every household within the agency's service area. The planning consultant, agency staff and METRO's board of directors worked together to modify the plan in response to public comments, and ultimately the board adopted a plan that received strong community support, including support from key community leaders who previously had been strong critics of the agency. The regional county referendum for the plan was successful.

All Systems Go!

The Capital Metropolitan Transit Authority of Austin, Texas, (CapMetro) sought assistance to move a transit plan forward for public vote. The agency conducted many studies and planning efforts to identify future transit improvements, but one element of the plan, a 30-mile commuter rail line, would require voter approval for implementation. Though the commuter rail line served only one corridor within the region, CapMetro's board of

directors believed they could convince voters throughout the region to approve the project, despite past experience to the contrary.

HDRIS.R. Beard & Associates was tasked to work with the agency, its board and existing consultants to develop a proposal that would be supported by the entire region. The challenge was gaining an understanding of key issues and then developing a process that allowed the community to affect a plan that, in many respects, was nearly complete. The process was initiated in March 2004, and, after months of extensive outreach, the agency was able to call a vote for a regional system plan that reflected the community's desires and had a level of endorsement not previously experienced by the agency's efforts. In a community that has a high level of citizen activism, CapMetro demonstrated that a government agency could harness the energy necessary to gain 62 percent support at the ballot box during a general election. This vote marked the first time a regional transit initiative had passed in the Austin metropolitan area.

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Area businesses and residents have participated in the Central Phoenix/East Valley Light Rail project from planning through construction.