

Executive Summary

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Overview

Meaningful public participation, community engagement, and user feedback is essential in all infrastructure plans and projects. This input is critical for building support and achieving sustainable, equitable decisions. Despite long-standing efforts to create inclusive, broadly representative participation processes, many infrastructure agencies and organizations still struggle to engage communities meaningfully and fairly, especially disadvantaged communities. The research completed as part of the HDR Fellowship Program explores the current state of the practice of participant compensation within infrastructure public engagement, assesses its broad potential as a strategy for achieving more meaningful engagement based on existing literature and insights from other fields, and recommends initial guidance for practitioners to responsibly direct its use going forward.

Findings

While participant compensation is an emerging practice within infrastructure public engagement, it is not rare. The findings from the research suggest that participant compensation can be a beneficial tactic and is worth consideration among engagement practitioners. However, it is not a solution to all challenges within infrastructure public engagement and may not be appropriate for all projects and situations. Participant compensation should be viewed as one tool among many within the public engagement toolbox and used strategically.

Research activities

- **State of the practice survey:** To better understand the current state of practice related to participant compensation within the infrastructure industry, public engagement practitioners were surveyed about their knowledge and perception of the practice and their experiences of implementing it.
- **Real-world project insights:** Examples of participant compensation in use were summarized to enhance the understanding of the current state of practice. The examples highlight different applications across geographies and markets, and include insights related to rationale for using it, challenges with implementation, anecdotal effects, and lessons learned.
- **Literature review:** While participant compensation is newer within infrastructure public engagement, several other fields have used versions of compensation to impact participation in surveys and studies for decades. A literature review was conducted to identify insights from other fields that may be relevant to infrastructure public engagement.



A decision-making framework for participation compensation in infrastructure public engagement

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to participant compensation in infrastructure public engagement and no resource that can tell practitioners exactly what to do in every situation. However, thinking through the key considerations below will help maximize potential benefits and mitigate potential risks. Reference the complete decision-making framework in the full report to help answer these questions.

Considerations to identify whether you should implement compensation

- What are your engagement goals?
- Do you need statistically representative engagement results?
- What are the incentives and barriers that exist in your standard approach to engagement?
- Are you restricted from implementing compensation on this specific project?

Considerations to develop your compensation approach

- Who should compensation be directed towards?
- What should be compensated?
- What type of compensation should you use?
- How large should the compensation be?
- What are the potential unintended consequences?

Implementation recommendations

For practitioners

These recommendations are relevant for practitioners of any agency or organization considering participant compensation in their infrastructure public engagement processes. These recommendations can help realize the benefits of the practice while mitigating the risks.

PROJECT PLANNING

- Be intentional about your use of participant compensation and clearly document your rationale (i.e., who, what, when, where, and why)
- Review relevant policies and laws to make sure your approach is implementable before making commitments
- Consult with the community to inform your approach—community involvement leads to more success
- Seek an independent review of your proposed approach to check for bias and risk

SCOPING AND BUDGETING

- Understand what mechanism you have available to support payments
- Include participant compensation as a strategy and the details of it explicitly in your scope of work
- Include funding for direct payments and administrative time explicitly in your budget

IMPLEMENTATION

- Include your approach and rationale in your engagement plan and follow your plan, and update your plan if your approach changes - it is important to have an accurate summary of what you did
- Track all payments for project records
- Track participant levels and characteristics, as appropriate for the community context
- Document lessons learned

For implementing organizations

These recommendations are what agencies and organizations can do at the enterprise level to allow for participant compensation while reducing the risks. However, the use of participant compensation at an individual project or program level is not dependent on these activities occurring.

- Establish guidance for participant compensation that gives clear direction but allows for flexibility
- Review related policies and procedures for consistency
- Identify an owner to guide the practice within the organization
- Establish a process to provide independent review of proposed approaches
- Create template contracts and payment protocols
- Provide training to organization leadership and staff
- Build a library of examples as a resource for staff