

RES2013-47: Innovative Strategies for Public Involvement for TDOT

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Description of Problem & Need

Public participation in Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) planning efforts in recent years has been limited. Often the few individuals in attendance at TDOT's public meetings are strong opponents of proposed TDOT transportation projects, and these people generally do not represent prevailing public opinions about future projects. Thus, the agency needs to involve a wider cross-section of people in public meetings to provide balanced input to the transportation decision-making processes. Such broad and balanced public involvement will help ensure that TDOT's transportation decision-making efforts are sound and offer the greatest benefit to as many stakeholders as possible. Future efforts to secure significant and balanced public involvement must use innovative techniques to meet the needs of a given transportation plan, program, and/or project. Public participation should be seen as a "multi-way interaction in which citizens and other players work and talk in formal and informal ways to influence action in the public arena before it is virtually a foregone conclusion" (Innes & Booher, 2004, p. 429).

Securing significant and balanced public involvement in TDOT's short-term and long-term planning efforts must involve strategies that fit the needs of each individual region within the state of Tennessee. All four regions [Knoxville (Region 1), Chattanooga (Region 2), Nashville (Region 3), and Jackson-Memphis (Region 4)] are unique, which should be taken into consideration when applying new public outreach strategies.

As stated above, there is little public participation in the transportation decision-making process and this can be seen even more within the underrepresented populations (minority and low income citizens) who rarely get involved in the transportation planning process. This may be because transportation professionals have not been successful in engaging these citizens in planning activities or in communicating planning goals and opportunities for involvement effectively. Other significant reasons for little or no participation in transportation decision making among all citizens include, but not limited to, a lack of understanding of the planning and design process, the potential impact of transportation projects on their community, and the importance of their input. The overall goal of this proposed applied research project is to develop innovative strategies to gain greater public participation in transportation decision-making and provide access for citizens to participate across Tennessee.

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To achieve these goals, the research team will work with TDOT's planning staff within each region to coordinate with community and neighborhood leaders (including leadership of community centers, churches, neighborhood associations, and other appropriate entities) to design and plan citizen workshops and to recruit participants that are likely to be actively engaged and willing to share their knowledge with others in their community. The research team will identify innovative techniques that make it easier for citizens (especially minority and low income citizens) to participate in transportation decision-making, methods of information sharing that most effectively communicate transportation planning in such a way that citizens understand the importance of their role in the process, and venues and communication strategies that are most likely to engage these citizens in a productive manner.

Benefits to TDOT

This project will help TDOT enhance their public participation efforts by identifying and putting into practice innovative, successful strategies that can subsequently be incorporated into TDOT's overall Long Range Plan. These strategies will help ensure that future public participation efforts involve a diverse mix of stakeholders and yield significant public input. Significant public input can be defined as input that is trustworthy and valuable (by identifying important aspects of future TDOT projects) in settings that are less likely to be confrontational and counterproductive.