



Research Summary

Community Engagement in Rural Communities



WHAT WAS THE RESEARCH NEED?

Historically, rural communities receive less attention from the federal and state governments compared to urban communities in terms of mobility issues. Due to barriers with regards to technology, geographic location and resources, rural communities often hold a different array of views and concerns on issues pertaining to transportation. Therefore, the Tennessee

Department of Transportation (TDOT) identified the need to improve engagement with rural communities to access first-hand information about community-specific issues and concerns otherwise unknown to the agency.

Project Number:

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TDOT Lead Staff:

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Project Term:

August 2019 to May 2021

WHAT WERE THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES?

The objectives of the research were:

1. Identify appropriate locations for meetings and other activities, as well as the best time of day to engage, and any geographic or technological barriers.
2. Develop guidelines for outreach channels, including social media, newspapers, and radio.
3. Identify best practices for working with rural community leaders.
4. Document generational differences in shifts in transportation best practices.
5. Incorporate rural community engagement strategies within TDOT's existing public involvement plan.

WHAT WAS THE RESEARCH APPROACH?

The research team employed a mixed method research approach for this study. They began by conducting an extensive review of the literature to learn the most

effective rural engagement strategies. With the information gained from the literature, a semi-structured interview instrument was developed for conducting interviews with four regional OCT supervisors, and leaders in four Tennessee rural communities: Cookeville, Gordonsville, Greeneville, and Brownsville. These interviews allowed the research team to identify technological, cultural, social, and economic factors of these rural communities that impact the ways in which they engage with State agencies. These recommendations used to develop two rounds of Delphi surveys, which consisted of recommendation statements made in the interviews which were analyzed against a 70% agreement threshold.

WHAT WERE THE FINDINGS?

The research uncovered five major findings:

- Strategies that work for engaging communities in urban settings may not work in the same way in rural communities – transportation, technology, and resources vary widely.
- Social media should only be used as a complementary outreach strategy due to the lack of consistent internet and cell phone coverage in rural communities.
- Virtual meetings are also problematic because of internet coverage; virtual meetings cannot replace in-person meetings in rural communities.
- Securing support of influential community leaders and elected officials is vital to improving engagement and successful implementation of the project.
- Transparency and open communication are vital in rural communities from the onset of a project to increase trust in TDOT and make citizens feel as if they have an impact.

IMPLEMENTATION AT TDOT

The research team developed five recommended courses of action for TDOT:

1. Build trust with communities by keeping lines of communication open between TDOT and the community. Go beyond hosting only informational meetings, seek community input on projects through surveys or informational polls to assess opinions.
2. Use a combination of radio, newspaper, social media, and local news media to advertise meetings. Communicate how the project will have a positive impact on the community and collaborate with existing events and meetings to increase attendance.
3. Work with elected officials, local planning departments and local road committees, leaders of civic organizations, the chamber of commerce, and city staff when planning community engagement activities.
4. Be creative in striking a balance of the needs of the generational groups in the community in their transportation plans and designs. TDOT should thrive for multiple strategies to entice different generations in effective engagement.
5. Update TDOT's "Public Involvement Plan" to include the best practices and strategies identified to enhance its rural engagement and help shape the future of the state's transportation infrastructure that is designed and developed for all.

MORE INFORMATION

Find the final report here: https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/tdot/long-range-planning/research/final-reports/res2020-final-reports/RES2020-17_Final_Report_Approved.pdf.