

COLLABORATIVE TASK FORCES

What is a collaborative task force?

A collaborative task force is a group assigned a specific task, with a time limit for reaching a conclusion and resolving a difficult issue, subject to ratification by official decision-makers. Its membership usually includes local people or representatives from interest groups, appointed by elected officials or agency executives. Agency staff people are frequently assigned to provide technical support. Collaborative task forces have been used on a project level and for resolving issues within a project.

A collaborative task force differs from a civic advisory committee and citizens on decision and policy bodies. While they focus on similar issues, each plays a different role in the decision-making process. A civic advisory committee acts primarily in an advisory role, studying issues and presenting a mosaic of opinion to the agency; consensus is not required. (See Civic Advisory Committees.) Citizens on decision and policy bodies are local community people appointed, along with other representatives, to boards or agencies that make decisions or propose recommendations to elected officials. (See Citizens on Decision and Policy Bodies.) By contrast, a collaborative task force usually helps solve a specific problem, working strenuously toward consensus and presenting a strong and unified voice.

A collaborative task force has these basic features:

- a sponsoring agency committed to the process;
- a broad range of representative interests;
- emphasis on resolving an assigned issue through consensus;
- detailed presentations of material and technical assistance for complete understanding of context and subject matter; and
- serial meetings to understand and deliberate the issues.

Why is it useful?

A collaborative task force can extend community input for decision-making and enhance self-governance. Task force discussions help agencies understand participants' qualitative values and reactions to proposals. They can aid in development of policies, programs, and services and in allocation of resources. A collaborative task force was used to explore alternatives for the Charles River crossing of Boston's proposed depressed Central Artery and to recommend a preference to the Massachusetts Highway Department..

A collaborative task force helps resolve impasses through a participatory process. Following a difficult process or unsettled controversy, it involves people in solving a problem. In Fort Worth, Texas, the issue of a controversial widening of a downtown interstate freeway was assigned to a collaborative task force.

Decisions can be expected to have broad (although not universal) community support. Task force members represent a broad cross-section of interests. This helps legitimate the process and decisions. The views expressed are typically exhaustive. Often the group begins by making small and specific decisions early in the process; later group decisions become somewhat easier.

Does it have special uses?

A collaborative task force deals with high-profile issues that have generated significant public or media attention and community polarization. It can be used productively at any time in a complex project or planning study, but because of time and cost commitments it is often used to resolve an impasse. If some participants or the agency itself take intractable positions, consensus is very difficult or impossible to achieve. (See Facilitation; Negotiation and Mediation.)

It can bring together a wide range of opinions to assist in exploring issues. The breadth of representation is accompanied by depth of probing. In a collaborative task force, a great depth of discussion is expected and can be accommodated. For example, in Maine a group of 58 community people and agencies worked together to explore Turnpike widening and alternative modes of transit in implementing an initiative approved by the voters.

Who participates? and how?

Participant groups are invited by the sponsor, with the groups selecting their representatives. Representatives are selected from affected interests, but the collaborative task force may add new representatives to round out its membership.

A broad cross-section of interests is desirable and may include local governments, transportation or environmental groups, civic or business groups, and consumer organizations. Other people are involved through outreach and participation programs, including open house presentations or newsletters. (See Public Information Materials.)

People participate by engaging in the discussion. Members of the group react to each other's opinions and bring up alternative ideas. The facilitator guides discussion to cover all agenda items that the group determines it wants to cover. Coaching and training of participants in the process and in conflict resolution is sometimes necessary.

How do agencies use the output?

A collaborative task force helps resolve a difficult issue or problem. Such a group is used primarily when an agency can seriously commit to incorporating the group's decision into ongoing work. Because of the important role of a collaborative task force, the sponsor may agree to ratify its findings, if not too costly or unimplementable. For example, the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) formed a collaborative task force to deal with the difficult issues of

rebuilding an interstate highway bridge and its approaches in downtown New Haven and agreed to accept the task force's consensus recommendations among alternatives if technically feasible and within the budget.

The sponsor sets broad limits on issues to be explored. A mission statement for the task force is clearly identified before it begins its work. The schedule reflects the complexity of the issue and the time required to come to a resolution within the task force.

Many sponsors observe groups in a non-participatory role without assuming any leadership function. Representatives of the sponsor respond to questions from the group and provide technical assistance while retaining a neutral position. Expressions of support for the process from high-level agency leaders also help sustain commitment and progress, especially when a task force is wrestling with difficult issues.

Who leads a collaborative task force?

A collaborative task force needs a facilitator to maintain the agenda and schedule and assure that all participants are heard. The facilitator assists participants in verbalizing or crafting positions and in developing a constructive process for group decision-making, problem-solving, and conflict resolution.

The facilitator plays a special role in the task force. Feedback and encouragement to the group are required to maintain progress in the development of issues and steps toward resolution. Facilitators need to tell the group when the process is doing well and warn them if a dead end or irresolvable conflict is approaching. They may need to coach and instruct task force members in methods of conflict resolution.

The facilitator must be viewed as neutral to the process but supportive of the goals and outcomes determined by the group. The chosen person may be from inside an agency but is typically an outsider provided by the sponsor. The group can dismiss the facilitator if it perceives that the person is not serving their interests.

What does a collaborative task force cost?

Significant resources are required. A facilitator experienced in group processes and conflict resolution is mandatory, and staff technical support required. Graphics—and in some cases, presentations by technical experts in language geared to lay people—are necessary to understand technical issues. Modeling of anticipated impacts, structural and engineering issues, and traffic simulations need to be explained. Each meeting can consume several hours.

Specialized consultants may be needed to provide a neutral facilitator or technical support for complex projects. Schedules are tailored to fit the needs of participants and the sponsor. Meetings may be held in the evening to allow participants to attend without interfering with

daytime jobs. The time required for preparation is substantial, because each meeting must be tailored to the agenda determined by the group.

Policy support within an agency is required. Staff follow the course of discussions and respond to the need for information. A neutral meeting site not associated with the agency or any stakeholder must be selected. Staff work is essential for preparation of meeting minutes, notices of upcoming meetings, correspondence, newsletters, press releases, or advertisements about outreach events.

How is it used with other techniques?

A collaborative task force uses other techniques as needed. Brainstorming or a charrette can be integral to a task force's work as it seeks solutions to difficult problems. (See Brainstorming; Charrettes.) Visioning may establish a desirable goal to work towards. (See Visioning.) Facilitation is essential early in the process, when goal-setting helps establish a means to measure progress. (See Facilitation.)

A task force can sponsor its own events to apprise the community of issues and potential solutions. These events are useful ways to elicit and review community comments and to find responses as appropriate.

How is it organized?

The sponsor determines the interests to be represented on the task force and selects a facilitator. Typically, a cross-section of organizations is invited to participate, and each selects its representative to the group. The task force then identifies additional participants essential for broad representation. On two rapid transit lines in Boston, task forces were assembled for design of each individual station. The Federal Transit Administration has a current project to develop collaborative decision-making processes.

A collaborative task force has a target date determined by the sponsor to provide a framework for and guide scheduling. For example, in Canada a task force of 24 interest groups met over an extended period to plan a light-rail transit facility for Calgary, Alberta. A task force's mission may be defined by the sponsor in broad terms, but the group usually determines its own approach to problem-solving. It is self-governing, and its work is usually based on a consensus process rather than voting.

The sponsor sets an overall schedule, leaving detailed scheduling to the task force itself. The sponsor provides technical support, either from within the agency or from consultants familiar with the topic. To retain neutrality, the technical staff should not be co-workers of the facilitator.

The task force determines the need for a chairperson. The group develops its own norms or rules to guide the process over time. These may be explicit or implicit; in some instances they are prepared in written form to remind participants of their expressed intent.

The task force monitors its own progress. Where appropriate, the facilitator reminds the group of the agenda and schedule and makes suggestions to keep the work moving toward resolution.

What are the drawbacks?

The process is long and expensive. To achieve a full understanding of all issues, an extensive number of meetings and presentations is required. This long process demands patience, good will, and a commitment of continued funding. Participants must make an extensive commitment to the process. Staying with the program over a long period of time may be difficult for many individuals. Similarly, agency commitment is critical; the process can be long and wrenching.

A high degree of facilitation skill is required to keep the task force on course. Technical support is needed to respond to questions and prepare responses to unforeseen work that may be requested.

Chapter 1. INFORMING PEOPLE THROUGH OUTREACH AND ORGANIZATION

B. INCLUDING PEOPLE WHO ARE UNDERSERVED BY TRANSPORTATION

Public involvement needs to encompass the full range of community interests, yet people underserved by transportation often do not participate. They not only have greater difficulty getting to jobs, schools, recreation, and shopping than the population at large, but often they are also unaware of transportation proposals that could dramatically change their lives. Many lack experience with public involvement, even though they have important, unspoken issues that should be heard.

Underserved people include those with **special cultural, racial, or ethnic characteristics**. Cultural differences sometimes hinder full participation in transportation planning and project development. **People with disabilities** find access to transportation more difficult and their ability to participate in public involvement efforts more constrained. **People with low incomes** often lack both access and time to participate. **Poorly educated people** may not be fully aware either of what transportation services are available or of opportunities to help improve them.

These groups are a rich source of ideas that can improve transportation not only for themselves but also for the entire community. Agencies must assume responsibility for reaching out and including them in the decision-making process—which requires strategic thinking and tailoring public involvement efforts to these communities and their needs. Techniques to reach the underserved are grouped here under two headings:

- **ethnic, minority, and low-income groups; and**
- **Americans with disabilities.**

ETHNIC, MINORITY, AND LOW-INCOME GROUPS

What does this mean?

Individuals from minority and ethnic groups and low-income households, women, children, and uneducated people often find participation difficult and are also traditionally underserved by transportation. While these groups form a growing portion of the population, particularly in urban areas, historically they have experienced barriers to participation in the public decision-making process and are therefore underrepresented. These barriers arise both from the nature of the system and from cultural, linguistic, and economic differences. Recent efforts to include many different cultural or disadvantaged groups in this process have been designed to assure basic, equitable access to the system rather than to favor one group over another.

Although America prides itself on being a melting pot of many peoples, deep differences in culture or income often impede participation. Language differences are only the most immediate hurdle to overcome in order to work effectively with various cultural groups. Economic barriers such as the costs of child care or transportation to meetings also hinder participation. More importantly, understanding and accommodating the deeper psychological and cultural differences—such as the various ways people interact with one another to make decisions, or their belief in their own power to do so—is the major challenge of getting people to work together successfully toward common goals. A starting point in effective interaction is calling people by the names they want to be called at the time. For example, at the time of this publication, American Indians prefer to be called that rather than native Americans, a term that includes non-Indian native Americans. Preferences change over time.

Today, agencies work to empower people to help define the *kinds of processes* they need to participate effectively. Thoughtful consultation with minority, ethnic, and low-income people enables agencies to identify specific barriers and find effective ways to overcome them. In Orange County, California, attendance at a series of introductory open houses for a major investment study was high for all sectors of the affected population except Mexican-Americans. In subsequent meetings with leaders from this community, county planners learned that these constituents were uncomfortable with the open-house format and intimidated by one-to-one interaction. Supplementary, informal, small-group meetings in Latino neighborhoods eventually brought increased participation.

Governments at various levels have played a significant role in protecting the rights of underserved populations. Presidential Executive Order 12898 of 1994 requires Federal agencies to identify programs, policies, and regulations with a disproportionately high and adverse effect on minority and low-income populations. The order directs Federal agencies to conduct their programs, policies, and activities so as to ensure that they do not have the effect of excluding persons from participation in or benefits of the programs. This can usually be done by modifying existing participatory programs.

The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) requires transportation plans to avoid a disproportionate impact of transportation policies or investments on

traditionally-underserved communities. The Final Rule on Metropolitan and Statewide Planning requires MPOs and states to “seek out and consider” the needs of the transportation-disadvantaged.

Outreach to minorities and ethnic groups has several objectives in addition to the basic aims of public involvement:

- convey issues in ways that are meaningful to various cultural groups;
- bridge cultural and economic differences that affect participation;
- use communication techniques that enable people to interact with other participants;
- develop partnerships on a one-to-one or small group basis to assure representation; and
- increase participation by underrepresented groups so they have an impact on decisions.

Why is it useful?

Outreach to traditionally-underserved groups helps assure that all constituents have opportunities to affect the decision-making process. These efforts are particularly useful because they:

- provide fresh perspectives;
- give first-hand information about community-specific issues and concerns of which an agency may not have been aware;
- flag potential controversies;
- provide feedback on how to get these communities involved; and
- provide solutions to problems that best meet their needs.

These efforts widen the basis of consensus on an implementable plan or project. The greater the consensus among all community members, the more likely a plan or project will succeed.

Agencies can address issues specific to minority, ethnic, or other underserved groups. At the inception of its long-range plan, the Georgia Department of Transportation (DOT) had special forums for minorities so the planning process could address their concerns from the outset.

Local leadership may become more active. For the past fifteen years, the Houston, Texas, transit agency has had a good working relationship with all segments of the community, especially underserved populations. As a result, their leaders have been very active in the decision-making process, and controversy about transportation proposals is minimal.

Participation establishes trust and openness in the decision-making process. The St. Louis, Missouri, MPO works in close collaboration with minority, ethnic, and low-income groups from the beginning of planning and throughout the process, fostering a sense of ownership of the outcome.

How do underrepresented groups participate?

Community organizations and their leaders are invaluable in building communication between agencies and underrepresented groups. Often low-income people, for instance, are so busy eking out a living by working several jobs that they do not have time for grass roots participation; they rely on their community leaders to represent them in the process. The Albany,

New York, MPO uses the Albany Service Corps (a job-training program for disadvantaged youth that is part of the national Americorps group) to distribute information to low-income communities. In many cases, agency staff can easily identify and reach out to community leaders as a first point of contact. The Virginia DOT distributes materials through the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to reach minorities. Working with leaders also increases the credibility of the participatory planning process. Respecting ethnic tradition, the Alaska DOT has found it helpful to meet first with Alaskan native elders to establish a rapport prior to presenting projects to whole communities.

Community groups provide access to individuals and can serve as forums for participation.

Agencies sometimes focus initial attention on active community groups to prepare for later approaches to the general public. MPOs in Portland, Oregon, and in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, work through established neighborhood organizations. Often, community organizations reflect community-wide concerns and can advise an agency on useful strategies for interaction. In Arizona, Tucson's MPO involved several Mexican-American neighborhood associations in updating its long-range transportation plan. In Chicago, Illinois, the Center for Neighborhood Technology brought minority groups into the existing regional citizen coalitions. Cooperation with community groups follows the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" principle. If working through an established organization serves the purpose, an agency wastes effort by creating a new forum that probably will not work as well. Agencies need to be cautious, however, about presuming that any one group represents an entire community.

Religious organizations in particular are an effective way to reach minority and ethnic groups.

Most of them have civic as well as religious activities and interests, along with a strong geographic base. They have broad constituencies and often have a strong ethnic or cultural focus. They are particularly good avenues for reaching people who are not active in the community in other ways. The Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) has established communication links with African-American, Latino, and Asian religious institutions in order to increase participation of underrepresented groups. The Little Rock, Arkansas, MPO, works to establish good relations with, among others, the African-American Ministerial Alliance in its region.

Agencies need to make special efforts to communicate with people who use languages other than English.

For example, of the approximately 2.5 million households in Los Angeles County, 40 percent speak a language other than English as their first language, and 13 percent speak no English. Thus, translations and bilingual speakers are often necessary. The Alaska DOT has produced radio spots in indigenous languages. In addition, translations to other languages, logos, and project terminology need to be carefully reviewed from a cultural perspective. A leading car manufacturer found that although a particular model sold well among the general population, it did not sell well among Latinos, because "no va" in Spanish means "doesn't go."

Understanding a culture is often critical. The Dallas, Texas, transit agency (DART) finds it helpful to research an ethnic group's customs and language. Changing demographics in East Dallas led DART to accommodate the language needs of Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Arab, Iranian, Ethiopian, and Nigerian communities. This outreach identified a need to provide training

in several English-as-a-second-language programs on how to use the transit system. The custom of bus travel was unfamiliar to some participants and practiced very differently by others.

Agencies also need to recognize varied styles of communication derived from ethnic or minority cultures. In some cultures, for example, it is considered improper to disagree with authority. As a result, agency staff people attempting to assess community response to different alternatives have found it difficult to move beyond polite agreement with all alternatives. In other cultures, discussion with the entire community precedes decisions by its leaders, and elders may have a particular role in decision-making. In some groups, speaking up is interpreted as “making trouble.” Agency staff members can learn about traditions and behavioral patterns by careful observation or by tactfully and privately asking group members what is going on. Group members familiar with mainstream culture are particularly good sources of such information. The Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department reports getting a cool reception to its initial attempts at outreach through local churches. Research discovered that this was because its spokesperson addressed local congregations from the main pulpit—a place of honor reserved for the ministry. In subsequent visits, the representative moved to the regular platform, the audience relaxed, and constructive dialogue took place. In communities where there is reluctance to disagree or criticize, opinions may only be expressed after prolonged consideration or in very indirect ways.

American Indian tribal governments are considered domestic sovereign nations; i.e., they have a direct and special relationship with the Federal government as a result of treaties and are independent of individual States. For example, tribes deal directly with the Federal government in securing funding for Indian reservation roads if they are tribes on a reservation, even within an MPO. Agencies need to identify issues regarding American Indians and transportation needs, plans, projects, and outreach early in the process. Expert guidance (for example, from members of the Governor’s Interstate Indian Council) should be sought in developing relationships with tribes, reservations, and individuals. Since tribes are eligible to apply for and be awarded separate funding, transportation practitioners need to consult with both Federal transportation agencies and local tribes to coordinate plans and projects.

How do agencies use the output?

Understanding the full range of a community’s needs enables an agency to create more responsive and even innovative plans. Interacting with community members yields insight into the reasons why they support or disagree with proposed plans or projects. The perspective of traditionally-underrepresented groups casts a whole new light on the goals and outcomes of planning and project development—and one that is often at variance with the thinking of the majority and even of the agency itself. Ethnic and minority group members suggest fresh approaches to transportation issues that otherwise would not be raised. However, input from underserved groups is not “separate” from other input or given more weight; rather, to be most useful, it is integrated with and balanced by the needs and concerns of all interests.

Agencies may discern new or improved transportation options. Input from predominantly

Mexican-American communities led to a hybrid option for transit in the Los Angeles Metro Red Line Eastside Corridor. In a mid-range of cost, the new option has the highest potential ridership and offers significant service advantages. The region's leadership and project planners agree that the new alternative is the best solution and readily admit it would not have been identified without the help of ethnic constituents.

Agencies also use community input to assure equity in the distribution of services and impacts. In order to do this, they must use a variety of techniques to solicit public input from the traditionally underrepresented population—particularly minority and low-income groups as identified in the Executive Order on Environmental Justice. Typical meeting announcements in newspapers and on radio, for example, may not reach these populations. Agencies need to understand how these populations get information. This could be, for example, in church bulletins, on grocery store or laundromat bulletin boards, and in community meeting places. (See Public Information Materials; Media Strategies.)

Who leads outreach to these groups?

Existing staff may lead, provided they have the appropriate skills or training. To be successful, they need to have an open-minded attitude, process skills, and sensitivity to cultural differences. They also must be committed to encouraging minority and ethnic group participation, not only because it takes persistence and creative thinking to foster inclusion of people who have historically been outsiders, but also because lack of such commitment is easily perceived and undermines trust and credibility.

To enhance the effectiveness of interaction, staff should come from a variety of backgrounds. As the Oregon-based Sensible Transportation Options for People (STOP) suggests, "Don't use all white men in suits" to interact with traditionally-underserved communities.

Special outreach coordinators can provide particularly strong leadership and demonstrate an agency's sincere commitment to responding to ethnic and minority concerns. A number of agencies hire staff specifically charged with outreach to the traditionally underserved. MPOs in Madison, Wisconsin, Seattle, Washington, Twin Cities, Minnesota, and Dane County, Wisconsin, all have a minority affairs coordinator. The Cape Cod, Massachusetts, Commission has two positions for minorities and one for American Indians. To enhance communication, Pennsylvania DOT uses an intermediary when addressing Amish communities, because this is their traditional way of dealing with outsiders. Only elders are allowed to speak with an intermediary. By communicating with an intermediary, DOT staff better understands the community's culture, dress code, language, and beliefs, as well as their specific transportation needs and concerns.

Consultants with special expertise or skills can also enhance the process. For a major investment study in transit, South Sacramento, California, utilized consultants with experience working in the affected ethnic neighborhoods. The St. Louis, Missouri, MPO regularly contracts

with the Urban League for focus groups and information dissemination.

Translators or interpreters are essential to reach non-English-speaking groups. Many agencies now provide interpreters when needed, as well as translations of some or all of their information materials. Florida DOT has a bilingual affairs staff and a bilingual newsletter. The Los Angeles, California, MPO has “foreign language teams” for its region. The transit agency in Houston, Texas, prints information in up to five languages. For large meetings, the University of Massachusetts has tear-off pads saying “I need an interpreter” and provides translators in six different languages. In California, Orange County transit agency staff members wear blue dots on their name tags at open houses if they are bilingual. Alaska DOT has local residents volunteer to interpret for Eskimo communities.

Translations must take into account the fact that often minority people who do not speak English well also do not speak literary or standard forms of their native languages.

Agencies need to make sure that translations are clear, easily understandable, and in an idiom native to the group to be reached. A Portuguese translation, for instance, must recognize that people from Portugal have difficulty understanding Brazilian Portuguese speakers, and vice versa.

What are the costs?

Costs are linked to the complexity of an issue. A large minority or ethnic community can be reached in traditional ways, through news media, literature, and informal meetings. However, when an issue is highly controversial, the need for participation intensifies, and agencies may need to use more varied and innovative techniques—resulting in higher costs in staff time and funding. Eliciting participation may involve translations and interpreters, advertising, and other special efforts.

Costs climb when a large number of underrepresented people needs to be reached.

Encouraging disadvantaged groups to participate is time- and energy-consuming for agency staff. Some groups are typically more difficult to draw into transportation planning processes than mainstream participants. For the Miami East-West Corridor Major Investment Study, Florida DOT held an average of 30 meetings per month over a two-year period to reach the varied populations within the 22-mile study area. Communities, particularly the ethnic communities, continuously requested meetings and invited project staff to attend numerous meetings sponsored by neighborhood organizations. The agency estimates that staff participated in approximately 1,000 meetings on the project, ranging from one-on-one discussions to larger meetings.

How is such outreach organized?

A basic task is to identify which minority and ethnic groups require special attention for a transportation plan or project because of its impact on them. This can be accomplished through careful research about the communities potentially affected by a plan or project. (See Key Person Interviews.)

Agencies draw from the full array of formal techniques to involve minority and ethnic groups, along with others. Formal techniques are inclusion on committees, task forces, and other official advisory and/or decision bodies; participation in meetings and conferences; focus groups; surveys; and working through recognized neighborhood groups. In San Francisco, California, the MPO created a special Minority Citizen Advisory Committee as a result of a lawsuit in the mid-70s. It includes African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans. The Wisconsin DOT created focus groups for American Indians, African-Americans, and Latinos. As part of its long-range planning effort, the Nevada DOT sponsored meetings in which surveys were used to make initial contacts. These contacts were used to identify representatives of American Indian nations and to administer a more comprehensive survey of transportation needs and concerns in the reservations. The questions covered the condition of roads and access to public transportation, as well as services for the elderly and handicapped. Representatives from each of the 24 Indian nations in Nevada responded, as did the executive director of the Nevada Association of Nations.

Informal techniques are especially useful. They include developing relationships with underrepresented groups and networking within communities. During a corridor study in East Los Angeles, the transit agency's Spanish-speaking staff walked through the neighborhood, personally inviting people to attend—which resulted in high turnout. Creating partnerships

between DOT staff and community members helps increase access and familiarity on both sides. Working together, they can develop strategies for outreach, anticipate the issues and concerns people are likely to raise, identify appropriate locations for meetings, and jointly sponsor ways for the community to get transportation information.

Many minority, ethnic, and low-income groups prefer small meetings. They are less intimidating and more conducive to interaction. Agencies that have turned to small groups for involving ethnic populations include DOTs in Alaska, Idaho, and Wisconsin. (See Small Group Techniques.)

Agencies can hold meetings where ethnic or minority groups cluster in the community. New Jersey Transit holds meetings in many unconventional places, including shopping malls, housing developments, senior centers, and work places. The Boise, Idaho, MPO reaches the underserved through group homes and head start centers. (See Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events; Media Strategies.)

Announcements in minority or ethnic news media can heighten interest in a process. In Seattle, Washington, the transit authority advertises in different languages in minority newspapers to obtain increased participation and greater trust in the agency's good will. The Twin Cities MPO in Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota, interests the owners of minority media in an upcoming transportation process or project and, through them, the broader community. The MPO not only places advertisements but also receives much free public interest coverage from such personal contacts. The St. Louis MPO aggressively promotes public service announcements in minority media. Because radio is often preferred over newspapers, many agencies spend more funds and energy on this medium. The Sacramento, California, transit agency featured an interview and call-in show on a Spanish radio station. (See Improving Meeting Attendance; Focus Groups.)

Financial and other incentives may be used to improve attendance. The St. Louis MPO paid unemployed people to participate in focus groups. The Albany, New York, MPO provides scholarships for low-income people to participate in its conferences. The Alaska DOT paid airfare for some Alaska natives to attend meetings. In Montana, Blackfeet Community College offers American Indians college credits for attending community meetings. Agencies sometimes provide day care and/or transportation to help low-income people participate. The Portland, Oregon, MPO provides child care at large meetings, as does New Jersey Transit.

Outside financial assistance may be available. In connection with the New Mexico DOT's long-range planning, the Alliance for Transportation Research obtained a grant for a two-day conference for people not traditionally involved in transportation.

How is it used with other techniques?

Outreach to underrepresented groups is integral to an effective, overall public involvement program. The initial contact with minority, ethnic, or low-income communities not only helps reach a wider audience but also sets the tone for the subsequent process or project activities. Outreach promotes a spirit of inclusion for those communities that have been outside of the

decision-making process.

Minority, ethnic, and low-income groups are empowered to help make transportation decisions. These groups can be invited to participate in civic advisory committees, task forces, and other policy bodies. (See Civic Advisory Committees; Citizens on Decision and Policy Bodies.) Such inclusion not only empowers these groups but also helps to “mainstream” them into the whole participatory effort. Many agencies have one or more seats for minority or ethnic members, including the Green Bay, Wisconsin, MPO; Portland, Oregon, Metro; and the Cleveland, Ohio, MPO.

What are the drawbacks?

Staff time and resources may be significant. One-to-one contact requires substantial staff time and energy. Administering an outreach program involves monitoring inquiries and responses, as well as documenting and answering numerous requests for meetings or briefings. Many ethnic groups lack a tradition of participation in government and require extra urging. For example, Miami’s Cuban-Americans were reluctant to participate in planning for a new rail system in the mid-70s because public participation was not part of their cultural heritage. Planners turned to the Catholic church and the Latin chamber of commerce to obtain the perspectives of the public. Now assimilated, two decades later, this ethnic group participates vigorously. In fostering grass roots involvement, agencies need to assess carefully the cultures of each specific community, for there may be significant differences, even within an ethnic group.

Special efforts can encounter institutional resistance. Many innovative, creative techniques are different from past practices and may be initially uncomfortable for some agency staff. In some cases, this generates backlash. Local laws prohibiting expenditure of public funds to prepare material in languages other than English are one example. Planners who face misgivings about “special treatment” might note that techniques tailored to individual segments of the public such as business communities have long been common to effective public involvement programs.

Is such outreach flexible?

Outreach to minority, ethnic, and low-income groups needs to be inherently flexible. Agencies must constantly monitor and adjust their approaches to discover and capitalize on what works. During the project development phase of a new light rail transit system, the Denver, Colorado, transit agency disseminated information widely. One low-income neighborhood requested more information on the project. As a result, the agency established a neighborhood drop-in center both to provide more information to the community and to gather input about its concerns. (See Drop-in Centers.)

To be most effective, techniques may need to be altered or augmented, because styles of communication and behavioral patterns differ from culture to culture. Early, informal consultation with members of target groups about what barriers to participation exist and how to

surmount them is essential. Often a more personal, direct dialogue is needed between agency staff members and individuals from ethnic or minority groups. When dealing with such groups, the Twin Cities MPO finds it useful to modify its meeting format to draw out the participants. It addresses the issues one-to-one by directly asking each participant his or her opinion. The Montana Native American Technology Transfer Technology Center phones individual members of the American Indian community to remind them that their attendance at an upcoming meeting is vital to assure a sound and responsive plan or program. For its project planning process, an Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department representative attends as many as four different church services on Sunday mornings to invite people to participate. In rural areas, he goes to people working in the fields, before or after their shifts.

When is it used most effectively?

Outreach efforts to the underrepresented start early and extend throughout the process and are integrated with other public involvement efforts insofar as possible. Informing communities of events and providing status reports help to establish a good working relationship. This approach is also very effective in diffusing potentially controversial issues by addressing concerns early.

The advantages for early outreach in both project development and long-range planning include:

- diffusing potentially controversial issues;
- allowing more people to understand a process or project;
- promoting proactive participation;
- establishing good relationships with underserved groups;
- getting people to help in the planning;
- breaking down historical barriers; and
- increasing chances for obtaining consensus.

Public and staff education can begin even before a process or project planning effort is initiated. The Denver Transit Agency sends out meeting notices to schools for children to take to their parents. It also provides bilingual, educational coloring books as an incentive to attract children who, in turn, involve their parents. A key pre-initiation activity for agency staff is self-education about the culture of the affected communities. Reflecting his people's fear of vulnerability through public involvement, a participant at the National Congress of American Indians revealed, "Once I allow you to capture my concern that way, you can trade it off against other concerns, and I will lose." Clearly, transportation planners and project managers need to be aware of such issues as they attempt to establish good-faith communication and trust.

For further information:

Alaska Department of Transportation, Statewide Planning Chief, (907) 465-2171
Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department, Environmental Division, (501) 569-2281
Florida Department Of Transportation, West Project Field Office, (305) 262-7033
Houston, Texas, Transit, Capital and Long-range Planning, (713) 739-4000
Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Public Affairs Manager, (213) 244-6891
Nevada Department of Transportation, Carson City, Nevada, (702) 687-3463
New Jersey Transit, Executive Director of External Affairs, (201) 491-7130
Sacramento, California, Regional Transit District, Project Manager, (916) 261-4785
St. Louis, Missouri, MPO, Director of Policy and Programming, (314) 4241-4220