

CTS Research Brief 2012-01

Enhancing Public Engagement in Transportation Policymaking

The researchers present a four-step framework for public organizations to use in deciding how to design and manage the public engagement process.

Public engagement—gathering public input to inform decision making by government agencies, political leaders, or nonprofits involved in administering public policies and programs—has become a fundamental feature of government's relationship with the public. However, public engagement is less common in transportation than in other areas of public policy. This study presents a framework for increasing and improving public engagement in transportation policymaking and suggests opportunities to apply this framework in Minnesota.

Why Bother with Public Engagement?

Documented benefits of public engagement include:

- Allows participants to contribute valuable resources and knowledge to decision making.
- Determines how to use limited public resources in a fair way and improves the equitability of resource distribution.
- Generates better buy-in and limits delays, mistakes, and lawsuits; stakeholders are more likely to accept a decision reached in a participatory manner, even if it was not their preferred decision.
- Helps build relationships and trust that facilitates communication and collaboration among the parties.

Challenges for Public Engagement

Trust and Legitimacy Issues

It is not uncommon for the public to question the value of an engagement process because their involvement does not seem to influence decisions. This occurs partly because conveners and participants often have mismatched expectations about the goals and expectations for engagement.

Engaging Expert and Lay Perspectives

The technical complexity inherent in transportation planning, financing, and infrastructure development presents special challenges and benefits for public engagement. Challenges include making issues and choices understandable to the public so that they can be informed participants in policymaking.

Enhancing Diversity and Equity

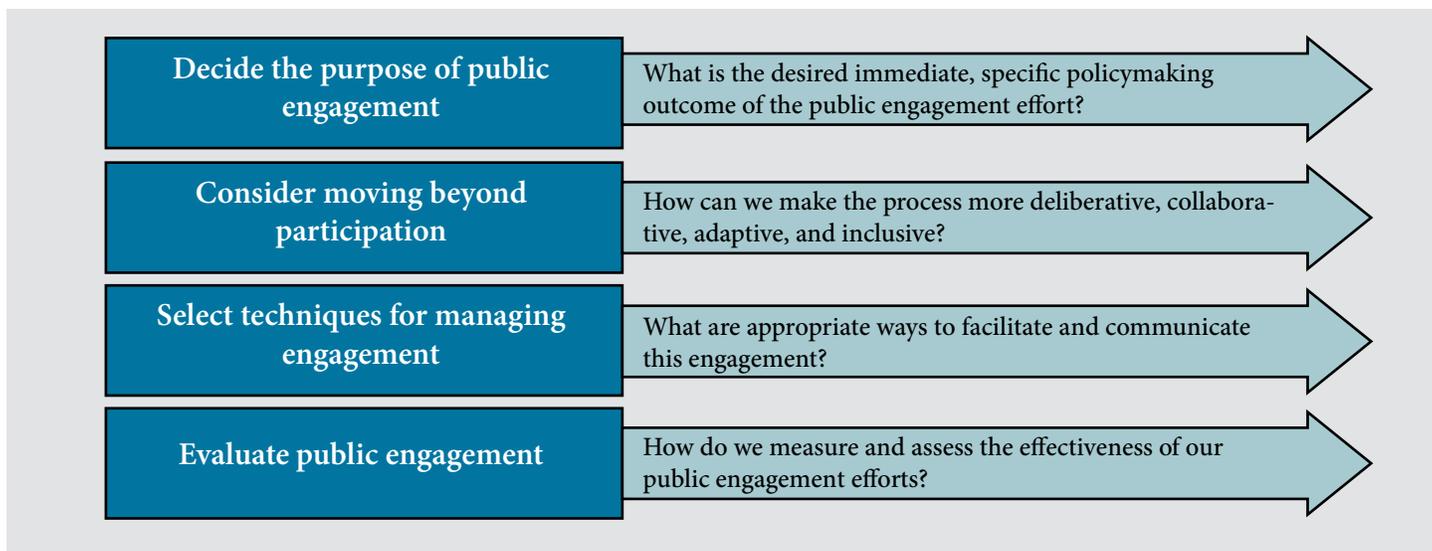
Diversity and equity in access to public engagement is a persistent concern; individuals of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to have the time, money, and civic engagement skills or Internet access to participate, and those with greater individual and collective social capital are more engaged.

Existing Public Engagement Methods



A Framework for Transportation Engagement

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for public engagement, so the authors of this study present a four-step framework for public organizations to use in deciding how to design and manage the public engagement process.



Transportation Engagement Opportunities in Minnesota

In Minnesota, there are numerous opportunities to apply the framework for public engagement described in this research.

- Deliberating the possibility of reducing the level of service for some road systems in rural areas.
- Demonstrating the feasibility of a mileage-based user fee system to replace the traditional fuel tax.
- Assessing the potential for public-private partnerships in transportation development.
- Involving transit users in service planning to decide how to cope with budget cutbacks.
- Engaging historically marginalized communities in planning for proposed transitways in the Metropolitan Council planning area.
- Rebuilding trust around transportation infrastructure projects through novel approaches to mobilizing artists, community organizers, and bicycle advocates.

Taking advantage of these opportunities for public engagement will help build meaningful collective decisions to address transportation issues in the face of a severe funding shortage. Public engagement may provide new information, new motivations, or new ways to understand issues and solve problems; may lead to more inclusive,

democratic, and equitable decisions about how to utilize limited public resources; and may generate better public buy-in and reduce delays, mistakes, or lawsuits in policy decision and project delivery.

About the Research

Suggested Design and Management Techniques for Enhancing Public Engagement in Transportation Policymaking is authored by Kathryn S. Quick and Zhirong (Jerry) Zhao of the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs and sponsored by the University of Minnesota's Center for Transportation Studies. More information is available at: www.cts.umn.edu/Research/ProjectDetail.html?id=2011080. The Minnesota Local Road Research Board has funded the next phase of the research.