



Transit



Walking to Transit

Background

WalkBoston has often noted that while traditional public participation processes carried out over the last 20 years by public agencies' planning exercises are often full of energy, they primarily attract participants who have a zeal for community activism, have previously participated in the planning process, and have honed their knowledge and understanding of transportation issues. These activists are able to participate with a high level of expertise, aiding public planning in a great variety of ways. However, WalkBoston also noticed that many community members are missing from planning processes, in particular the "under-represented" people such as members of minority groups, speakers who have Limited English Proficiency (LEP), or residents who are not familiar with public input processes.

Objectives

WalkBoston's project focused on developing and testing techniques to broaden the scope and range of public participation in a large neighborhood in Boston. The team explored methods of seeking out and talking with people who are seldom involved in the formal planning processes. The goal was to explore public participation techniques designed to elicit their opinions on the plans being developed by public agencies.

Findings and Conclusions

Low-cost, low-tech public participations techniques can and should be used to help ensure that a full range of transit rider opinions and concerns are included in transit planning and design.

WalkBoston conducted a number of low-cost, low-tech public participation techniques such as short in-person surveys, door-to-door merchant interviews, presentations at local communities, and "Walk-By Visioning" exercises that were able to effectively engage non-traditional participants in transit planning. Rather than inviting residents to come to planning meetings, WalkBoston went to them—to bus stops, local professional/business/community meetings, community events, and door-to-door in merchant interviews. Among the findings:

- Public participation efforts can and should reach all parts of the community.
- Reaching under-represented people requires new public participation techniques.
- Formal meetings are a modest method of expanding public participation.
- Surveys expand public participation only slightly.
- Participation is not broadened significantly through media coverage.

- All new techniques should address substantive issues.
- New techniques of public involvement can be kept quite low cost.
- Simple questions posed on the sidewalk or through informal interviews with business people can be illuminating.
- Interactive exercises are an especially attractive way to proceed.

Based on the findings of this study, the research team recommends that further inquiry into new participation tools focus on bringing the outreach to the participants and tailoring the methods so they are simple and non-burdensome. The outreach should focus on the most relevant issues but be sufficiently flexible to adjust to unanticipated relevant information that may be provided.

Benefits

This research identified straightforward and inexpensive methods to expand public participation efforts to draw more people into the process and found ways for them to express opinions and preferences. These methods should be used to help ensure that a full range of transit rider opinions and concerns are included in transit planning and design. Techniques of involvement that are informal and anonymous and that do not require regular meeting attendance or responding to formal surveys hold promise for broadening participation.

Project Information

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This research project was conducted by WalkBoston. For more information, contact Cheryl Hershey, Senior Advisor, FTA Office of Planning and Environment, at (202) 366-6161, Cheryl.hershey@dot.gov. All research reports can be found at www.fta.dot.gov/research.