

**HOW TO SUCCEED IN ETHNIC AND MINORITY OUTREACH  
BY REALLY TRYING**

**by  
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Since the passage of ISTEA, public involvement practice has improved significantly and many planners now realize that "cookie-cutter" approaches do not achieve the widespread, proactive participation needed. Increasingly, local agencies are becoming more sophisticated in designing their programs— identifying the diverse publics that need to be involved, strategizing what is to be accomplished with each, and developing different approaches for targeted collaboration, consulting extensively with the affected communities at each step.

The public most difficult to draw into community involvement programs to date has typically been the "traditionally-underserved", a group defined by USDOT to include low income households, Native American Nations, the disabled, and minority and ethnic populations. This paper focuses on the latter two.

While minority and ethnic populations constitute a growing portion of the nation's citizenry, particularly in urban areas, they have historically experienced barriers to participation in transportation decision-making processes. The obstacles stem from the nature of the planning processes and from cultural, linguistic, and economic differences.

To achieve good participatory planning as well as equity in decision-making, planners must make special efforts to involve all groups in meaningful ways.

My research for the FHWA/FTA-sponsored Innovative Techniques Project and subsequent personal experience and observations shows that it is

possible to involve ethnic and minority groups in meaningful ways, and, indeed, a growing number of communities are reporting success. It takes sensitivity, flexibility, creativity, and determination, but it can be done and the benefits are obviously numerous.

Here's a sampling of recent experience.

- **Target publics should assist in designing the public involvement program.** Transit agencies in Sacramento and Louisville have done this with great success. When asked in the right ways, citizens will tell you how they want to participate and what issues you should focus on. Key person interviews are most often used but there are also other methods for accomplishing this including surveys, telephone interviews, and meetings.
- **Informal, small-group techniques are often most effective.** When planners at Orange County, California's transit agency found all relevant publics except the Mexican-American community were participating in their major investment study (MIS) open houses, they consulted with Mexican-American leaders and held supplementary small-group meetings in their neighborhoods—a more comfortable forum for this public. Transit planners in Sacramento also reported disappointing minority and ethnic attendance at their open houses, and went on to employ other, more informal techniques. DOTs in Alaska, Idaho, and Wisconsin are additional agencies that have turned to small group meetings to involve ethnic populations. The Twin Cities MPO modifies its meeting format to draw out participants by asking each person attending a meeting in a minority community his or her opinion.
- **Community, business and religious organizations and their leaders are often invaluable in building communication links.** The Catholic Church and the Latin Chamber of Commerce are widely acknowledged as key contributors in obtaining the Cuban-American community's acceptance of Miami's initial metro system. Albany's MPO used the Albany Service Corps (a job-training program for disadvantaged groups) to distribute information about ISTEA to low income groups. Sacramento's transit agency provided regular updates in newsletters of Asian, African-American, and Hispanic chambers of commerce, thus developing ties with their business communities. Tucson's MPO involved several Mexican-American neighborhood associations in

updating its long range plan. Virginia DOT distributes materials through NAACP to reach minorities. A cultural bridge was established after planners from the Little Rock MPO met with the African-American Ministerial Alliance on a one-to-one basis. Respecting ethnic traditions, Alaska DOT has found it useful to meet first with Native American elders to establish rapport and gain their approval before discussing projects with entire communities.

- **Financial and other incentives may increase participation.** The New Mexico DOT reports that the Alliance for Transportation Research got a grant for a two-day conference for people not served well by transportation. The St. Louis MPO contracted with the Urban League to pay the unemployed \$100 to participate in focus groups to explore how improved transportation might enhance their work prospects. (Baltimore's MPO had less success paying minorities \$40 to participate in focus groups; it is uncertain whether the low turnouts were due to the insufficiency of the payments or other factors.) Albany's MPO provides scholarships for low-income people to participate in its conferences. Alaska DOT paid airfare for some Native Americans to attend meetings.
- **Non-mainstream media are being used for communication.** Radio is often more effective than print. Sacramento's transit agency featured an interview and call-in show on a Spanish radio station. Seattle's advertises in different languages in minority newspapers to obtain increased participation. The Twin Cities MPO actively cultivates the owners of minority media. They place advertisements, but also receive much free public interest coverage from their personal contacts. Alaska DOT has produced radio spots in indigenous languages. St. Louis' MPO aggressively promotes free public service announcements in minority media.
- **Innovative recruitment techniques are proving effective.** NJ TRANSIT hired drug rehabs to distribute meeting flyers to downtown Newark shoppers. Houston's transit agency puts flyers on the doorknobs of apartment dwellers. In their study of the South Corridor, Sacramento's transit agency used a mix of creative approaches: racks for project information in community grocery stores, ads of upcoming meetings on the backs of benches at 35 transit stops in the study area, and project information enclosed in student report card envelopes. They also sponsored a successful bus tour of a corridor under study, with

attractive invitations and lunch provided by a local business. Finally, unassimilated citizens who were not motivated to show up at meetings they heard about anonymously on the radio responded positively to bilingual flyers placed under their doormats.

During a study of transit options in heavily-Hispanic East Los Angeles, the transit agency's Spanish-speaking staff walked through neighborhoods prior to meetings, personally inviting people to attend-- a tactic which resulted in very high turn-outs. The Arkansas DOT sends staff to churches and field work places. Roanoke's MPO makes personal phone calls to encourage the participation of low income people and minorities. Many transit agencies including those in Miami, Sacramento, and Louisville developed a unique, catchy logo and theme for studies of potential major capital investments.

Sponsors of the Miami East-West Corridor MIS found it helpful to send the project manager to minority and ethnic outreach events, instilling a sense of importance to the meeting and dispelling the common perception that the participants would be getting "second class" attention.

- **Special meeting provisions and supplementary techniques also help.** An increasing number of agencies such as NJ TRANSIT and Portland and Washington's MPO provide child care during major meetings. NJ TRANSIT also holds meetings in many unconventional places including shopping centers, housing developments, senior centers, and work places. The Boise MPO reaches the under-served through group homes and head start centers. At the inception of their long range plan, Georgia DOT had forums for minorities so the planning process could address their concerns from the outset. San Francisco's MPO has a special Minority Citizens Advisory Committee. Many agencies identify one or more seats for minority or ethnic members on their committees including Green Bay and Cleveland's MPOs and Portland and Sacramento's transit agencies. In Sacramento, CAC members from minority communities pitched in as liaisons to their communities, helping to increase meeting attendance dramatically. Wisconsin DOT created focus groups for Native Americans, African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans. Sacramento's transit planners attended special ethnic events and festivals.
- **"Don't use all white men in suits" is a recurring theme.** A number of agencies have minority affairs coordinators and many others including transit agencies in St. Paul and Louisville use minority contractors for special projects, including outreach in MISs. A bilingual, minority public

relations firm in Sacramento proved invaluable in gaining community acceptance of a transit extension because of their enormous community credibility. The Pennsylvania DOT uses an intermediary when addressing the Amish because this is the community's traditional way of dealing with outsiders.

- **Translators and interpreters are essential to reach non-English-speaking groups.** Houston's transit agency prints information in up to five languages. In California, Orange County transit staff wear blue dots on their name tags at open houses if they are bilingual. Florida DOT has a bilingual community affairs staff and newsletter.
- Finally, and most importantly, **the culture of the communities must be understood.** A leading car manufacturer, for example, 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". Dallas' 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 on how to use the transit system. The custom of bus travel was unfamiliar to some participants and practiced very differently by others. In some cultures, it is considered improper to disagree with authority, and agencies must help these groups understand that speaking up will not be interpreted as "making trouble". The Arkansas DOT reports getting a cool reception to its initial attempts at outreach through local churches. They subsequently learned this was because their spokesperson addressed local congregations from the main pulpit—a place-of-honor reserved for the ministry. In later visits, the DOT representative moved to a lower platform, the audience relaxed, and constructive dialogue took place.

This has deliberately been an up-beat presentation to encourage you to make greater efforts to solicit the participation of minority and ethnic groups. In honesty, I have to admit that many agencies are not as successful as they want to be on their first try, or even their second. There are a number of barriers, particularly if you are working with a modest budget. Several agencies have found they need to allocate more for this component midway through their studies.

Another problem facing rail advocates in some cities is the absence of a sizable minority or ethnic population in the corridor under consideration, especially if it is a “starter line”. Thus, it is extremely important for minority and ethnic populations to be drawn in during the early, systems planning and corridor selection activities so that equity concerns receive full consideration at the outset.

In spite of these reservations, there is an exciting amount of experimentation taking place, and less fear of failure. If a technique does not work, more agencies are moving on and simply using something else. If I leave one message with you today, I hope it is the need to try, try again, and then try some more. Eventually things will begin to click.

The experiences of Sacramento’s transit agency and other organizations show that obtaining the effective participation of minority and ethnic populations may require extra efforts, but it can be done. I hope yours will be the next success story I report on.

<p>This paper is dedicated to my distinguished co-researcher, the late Maria Gomez.</p>
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