

Project No. 08-105

MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN TRANSPORTATION

IMPLEMENTATION MEMORANDUM

Prepared for

National Cooperative Highway Research Program

Transportation Research Board

of

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine

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Implementation of Research Findings and Products

This memorandum is primarily focused on overcoming barriers to using the Public Involvement Effectiveness Measurement Toolkit. As such, we have divided the memorandum into four major categories, with some categories further divided into sub-categories. All of the categories are focused on the major goal of promoting the use of toolkit.

Recommendations for how to best put the research findings/products into practice

Emphasize that the purpose is to improve

It is important to convince transportation agencies to welcome and use the “good, the bad, and the ugly,” as part of their continuous quality improvement.

- The use of these tools allows agencies to pin-point those areas where the most improvement is needed, thereby making better use of their resources.
- These tools should be used from the very beginning of a transportation project so you can demonstrate genuine interest in getting public feedback early on and course-correcting as needed to conduct effective public involvement.
- Agencies may be tempted to compare their ratings across projects, especially agencies that have multiple teams and/or projects. The message should be that each transportation project is unique and that the focus should be on improving the public involvement within a specific project over time.
- The fact that the agency version of the survey requires that the agency identify documentation to support their ratings acts as a form of process evaluation and will allow them to further identify ways to improve their public involvement processes.

Emphasize the things that can overcome their resistance to evaluating their public involvement

We know that a big barrier is that transportation agencies will be hesitant to evaluate their public involvement activities and potentially expose their own deficiencies.

- Agencies should be encouraged to consider this tool alongside other data. For example, some clients consider e-list signups and social media activity as “data” for how well their agency did with public involvement.
- The use of these tools can serve to improve relationships with affected communities since they now have a means for providing feedback not only on transportation projects, but also on the public involvement processes.

- The use of these tools allows transportation agencies to demonstrate to the public and funders the seriousness with which they take their responsibilities to conduct effective public involvement.
- The use of the survey results by transportation agencies to improve the public involvement may increase trust by the public and may also lead to a deeper understanding by the public of the reasons behind decisions made by transportation agencies.

Emphasize that the use of these tools can make their jobs easier

There are also barriers in regard to transportation projects already being so complex that transportation agencies will be hesitant to add what they see as more complexity.

- Frame the use of these tools as something that will make their work easier, resulting in increased public understanding, support, and trust.
- Since the field of public involvement is vast and complex, the survey items act as a shortcut to “here are things you really should be thinking about and doing.” This will be especially helpful for agencies for whom public involvement is a relatively new undertaking.
- Using the results of the survey can help agencies understand where the biggest pain points are for the public regarding the public involvement processes. This information can inform how to prioritize and incorporate feedback from the public, resulting in some early “wins” with the public that will have lasting value as new issues emerge.
- These tools can also assist with project management duties. For example, it would be useful to know from a project management standpoint, how much investment in public involvement is necessary to improve public ratings on the public involvement effectiveness, as well as public understanding and support for a transportation project.

Emphasize the ease of using these tools

There may also be concerns about how to program the survey online, how to enter data from the paper survey version, and/or how to use the scoring tool.

- Emphasize the value of the guidelines in providing step-by-step instructions for easy use of the tools.
- Inform agencies of the value and cost savings of using vendors who can scan their paper surveys for data entry.
- Inform agencies about the benefits of using simple/inexpensive online survey tools such as Survey Monkey and Survey Gizmo for the online version of the survey. It might also be useful to explore the possibility of TRB hosting the online survey version so agencies don’t need to recreate the survey.
- TRB might consider providing ongoing technical assistance through workshops at their meetings and conferences.

Possible institutions that might take leadership in applying the research findings/products

How to get the word out about these tools

There are many ways to make others aware of the toolkit.

- These toolkit is best marketed to transportation agencies' Communications teams, not broader transportation agency staff.
- Agencies rely heavily on word-of-mouth and past experiences. High profile testimonials from transportation agencies could help motivate other agencies to try these tools.
- Messaging about using the toolkit should put people's mind at ease about possibly getting lower scores. Very low scores across all indicators are very uncommon. A few low scores for items won't significantly impact their overall indicator or overall index scores.
- Messaging to agencies should give examples of actual course corrections from agencies that used the toolkit so that people can see the value of how getting a low score was beneficial in the end.
- Agencies will benefit from a hands-on demonstration of the tool. The possibility of creating an online interactive demo of the use of these tools could be explored.

Use "champion" agencies to convince other agencies

We recommend using other transportation agencies as a primary messenger for getting the word out about the toolkit.

- Identify early-adopter transportation agencies who can serve as ambassadors for the use of these tools. These ambassadors can serve to allay concerns, as well as provide insights on how best to use the tools.
- The fear that the public or funding agencies may discover that the public is rating the agency 'less than effective' in its public involvement may be countered by the use of case studies in which agencies have used the tools to course correct, resulting in improved ratings over time.
- Engage with firms that specialize in public involvement and encourage them to be ambassadors for the use of these tools.

Agencies that can lend even further support for use of the toolkit

Below is a list of agencies that could be contacted to provide support for the use of these tools.

- State DOTs that responded to the request (during the literature review process) for tools they were using or were aware of to measure the effectiveness of public involvement. These included:
 - Minnesota Department of Transportation
 - Idaho Department of Transportation
 - Nevada Department of Transportation
 - Washington Department of Transportation
 - Florida Department of Transportation
- Agencies that may have more influence because they are seen as more "cutting-edge," and/or are more visible in the public involvement arena. These might include the following (presented in alphabetical order):
 - AASHTO -- American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials
 - APA -- American Planning Association
 - APTA -- American Public Transit Association
 - Atlanta Regional Commission
 - Caltrans -- California Department of Transportation
 - CMTA -- Central Maryland Transportation Alliance

- FHWA -- Federal Highway Administration
 - FTA -- Federal Transit Administration
 - GRTA -- Georgia Regional Transportation Authority
 - IAP2 -- International Association of Public Participation
 - MDOT -- Maryland Department of Transportation
 - Missouri Department of Transportation
 - SDOT -- Seattle Department of Transportation
 - Transcomm
 - TRB Committees -- via communications to applicable sectors and weekly TRB bulletin
 - TXDOT -- Texas Department of Transportation
 - USDOT -- United States Department of Transportation
 - WSDOT -- Washington State Department of Transportation (DOT)
 - WTS -- Women’s Transportation Seminar
- Funding agencies such as FHWA or MPOs (Metropolitan Planning Organizations) might consider using these tools in a pilot study and/or make their use a condition for a specific grant.

Issues affecting potential implementation of the findings/products and recommended possible actions to address these issues

Aside from overcoming the hesitancy of transportation agencies using the survey (as discussed earlier in this document) there are a number of practical ideas that will help transportation agencies during implementation.

Survey layout and content recommendations

- The paper survey should be printed double-sided on legal size paper (8.5 by 11) as a folded, self-mailer with one of the panels used to explain the purpose of the survey and how to complete it. Another panel should be used to provide the business-reply postage artwork so that respondents who choose to take the paper survey with them and complete it later can easily mail it back (without the use of an envelope or paying for postage).
- Surveys should be printed on paper stock of sufficient weight (#28 or higher) to avoid participants tearing the paper as they complete it. This is also important so that surveys mailed back by participants make it through the postal service automated mail handling systems.
- The paper survey could be laid out by vendors who can do the data entry through electronic scanning. This reduces human error in data entry and is less expensive than manual data entry.
- If agencies wish to edit the survey layout, it is important that the survey instructions still emphasize and illustrate how to use the “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” response category scale, as well as the “don’t know” and “not applicable” categories.
- If agencies wish to edit the survey layout, it is important that survey instructions still make clear that the survey should be completed based on the public involvement completed thus far, and not just on the specific public involvement activity/event at which they received the survey.

Survey administration recommendations

- The survey should be available using both paper and online versions, not only because of the increased use of online open houses and other online public engagement formats, but also because some people prefer to complete surveys online.
- Pens/pencils need to be readily available for those completing the paper survey.
- If possible, tablets and/or laptop computers with internet access should be available at in-person open houses for those who prefer to complete the survey online.
- Signage at public involvement activities must be displayed in order to direct attendees as to where to complete the survey and to clearly communicate the benefits of doing so.
- For online open houses, the invitation to complete the survey should appear at whatever point the participant leaves the online open house, rather than only once a participant has submitted a comment. This avoids the problem of only participants who made it to the comment page seeing the survey invitation.
- Public involvement staff should intercept attendees and urge them to complete the survey, instead of hanging back and hoping participants notice the survey placed at event comment tables. This is especially important for those who may leave the public involvement activity without ever seeing the area where the survey is available.
- Transportation agencies should partner with those conducting the public involvement to further communicate to the public the importance of completing the survey and how the results will benefit the public.
- The survey should be presented by the transportation agency as just as important as other surveys and comment forms that may be part of the public involvement process; otherwise the public involvement effectiveness survey is more likely to be ignored.
- Transportation agencies should consider having public members of advisory committees (if applicable to the project) urging attendees to complete the survey. Advisory committee members may be seen as more trusted messengers and may have a bigger impact on the percentage of participants who complete the survey.
- Transportation agencies and/or those conducting the public involvement should consider offering incentives for those who complete the survey. Such incentives do not have to be costly – something as simple as a chance to win one of three \$50 gift cards can significantly increase the response rate. A process in which the sweepstakes entry form is provided to participants *after* they hand in their paper version of the survey will maintain their anonymity in regard to their survey answers. For those completing the survey online, a simple survey redirect link can be programmed at the end of the survey so that their sweepstakes entry information appears in a form separate from the survey itself.

Recommend methods of identifying and measuring the impacts associated with implementation of the findings/products.

Our recommendations in this section focus primarily on ways to measure long-term impacts of implementing the toolkit.

- Agencies can/should use the survey tool to track performance over time within projects, but not across projects.

- By virtue of completing the agency version of the survey, agencies should see improvement in the documentation they keep regarding their public involvement processes.
- An online survey process in which agencies that have used these tools report anonymously on their experience could be established. This data could be aggregated to provide an overall report on the impacts of using these tools. This same survey could be used to also hear from agencies that have not used the tools in order to better understand why not and to identify potential ways to overcome specific barriers to using these tools.
- Round-tables or presentations at conference annual meetings could be conducted for the purpose of reporting back on how the tools are working and lessons learned from transportation agencies.