

FHWA's Livable Communities Case Study Series

U.S. 119 Pine Mountain Road Project, Letcher County, KY

Challenge—Reaching Consensus on a Long-Standing, Highly Controversial Project

Since the 1920s, residents of Letcher County, Kentucky, have been separated by Pine Mountain. The most direct route linking the county seat with the rural, mountainous area of the county is a steep 7.6-mile stretch of U.S. 119 with sharp, shoulderless curves, 60-degree or steeper drops, and unstable rock strata. In several locations, larger vehicles needed to cross the centerline to clear turns. These hazards made it unsafe to travel faster than 10 miles per hour at some points. Bypassing the mountain to reach community destinations adds an hour of travel time.

The solution was not as easy as simply widening the road. The mountain's unique environmental features, including the presence of endangered species, its connection to the pristine Presley House Branch watershed, and challenging geologic features presented obstacles not only in terms of engineering and environmental protection but also public support. Beginning in the 1960s, the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (KYTC) conducted many studies to improve the safety of the mountain overpass, but none were implemented. By the late 1990s, KYTC had determined that two-way travel and the 55-mile-per-hour design speed required under the Appalachian Development Highway System¹ would result in right-of-way disturbances 2,000-feet wide. In 2000, a school bus driver died in an accident with a tractor-trailer truck on the road. With emotions high, tension grew between residents who supported a new widened road and environmental groups concerned about the impacts a larger right-of-way would have on the mountain ecosystem.



A bus navigating a sharp turn on U.S. 119.

Solution—Samoan Circle Public Involvement Technique

In the wake of the bus accident, KYTC interactions with the new, resident-organized Pine Mountain Safety Committee became highly charged. While the state of the roadway was impacting residents' quality of life, KYTC also saw the controversy itself increasingly impacting the community's well-being and rendering the problem intractable. In response, KYTC invited a wide range of residents, environmental groups, and other stakeholders to participate in a series of six monthly meetings as part of the Pine Mountain Public Task Force. Varying meeting formats were planned to help the community approach the problem from new angles.

¹ The Appalachian Development Highway System, authorized by Congress in 1965, was designed to generate economic development in isolated areas, supplement and connect Appalachia to the interstate system, and provide access to the region and to national markets. It is overseen by the Appalachian Regional Commission and receives funding from the Federal Highway Trust Fund. <http://www.arc.gov/adhs>

Creating more livable communities through transportation choices



Following the first two meetings—where past issues and concerns were fully aired and reviewed—KYTC introduced the Samoan Circle public involvement technique in order to re-direct the conversation toward the future. Though its name may be a misnomer in regards to its origins, the Samoan Circle technique is useful for highly controversial issues that concern a large number of stakeholders. After agreeing to the ground rules, participants take turns sitting at a designated table and speaking individually about their perspective. The table includes a set number of chairs (four is ideal), and participants waiting to contribute their viewpoints quietly position themselves to take seats at the table as they are vacated. Those wishing to only listen remain in a larger circle beyond. Because no one person is directing the flow of discussion or has an agenda, the egalitarian nature of the meeting helps to diffuse conflict. The table arrangement enables stakeholders to listen to the individual viewpoints among a large group, and in turn prevents the meeting from hardening into various factions and affiliations or becoming dominated by the most forthright or articulate participants.

The Samoan Circle technique helped supporters of improving U.S. 119 and environmental interests find areas of common ground. Local residents came to understand the impact the proposed widening would have on the mountain ecosystem and the environmental groups' shared concerns about the road's safety. Environmental groups likewise understood that residents cared about preserving the mountain environment and learned how the road's condition impacted their lives. Over the next three meetings, stakeholders agreed upon an approach that improved safety while minimizing environmental impacts, and jointly signed a letter to KYTC outlining their preferred solution.



Funding—Incremental Improvements

Striking a balance between improving safety and protecting the mountain environment, stakeholders recommended a series of immediate spot improvements totaling approximately \$51 million in Federal appropriations and State funds. A longer-term solution is a tunnel through the mountain, which is identified in the [Appalachian Development Highway System \(ADHS\) Corridor F](#). The tunnel is projected to cost \$409 million and would be funded through ADHS.

Results—A Turning Point for a Rewarding Solution

KYTC credits the Samoan Circle technique for changing the tone of a long-running discussion mired in decades of mistrust and disappointment. Participants that were previously suspicious of others' motives were able to finally hear the reasoning behind opposing viewpoints, leading to more constructive interactions with both KYTC and among each other. Ultimately, the completion of the spot improvements in 2004 led to a 75-percent reduction in crashes in the following 2 years and the donation of approximately 200 acres of adjacent right-of-way to State wildlife and land protection agencies. Wider shoulders and curves, passing lanes, as well as enhanced access to a trailhead of the Pine Mountain Trail State Park also serve to increase the potential for economic growth through tourism and truck travel. Aside from the peace of mind the safer route provides, the project improved quality of life for local residents by upgrading connectivity within the county through a process that promoted local ownership, leadership, and cooperation.

