

TRANSPORTATION DECISIONMAKING

Information Tools for Tribal Governments

Public Involvement



U.S. Department
of Transportation
**Federal Highway
Administration**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	2
II. WHAT IS PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT?	3
III. WHEN DO YOU INVOLVE THE PUBLIC?	4
Public Involvement in the Tribe's Transportation Planning Process	4
IV. WHAT IS EFFECTIVE PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT?	6
Identify the Goals of Public Involvement	6
Identify the "Public"	7
V. WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS IN PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT?	8
Audience	8
Using Tribal Events Planned for Other Purposes as Public Involvement Opportunities	8
Measures of Success	9
VI. WHAT TECHNIQUES CAN BE USED FOR INVOLVING THE PUBLIC?	10
Public Hearings	10
Public Notices	10
Mailing Lists	11
Public Information Materials	11
Focus Groups	12
Presentations	12
Other Techniques and Strategies	12
Success	12
REFERENCES	14
PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT TECHNIQUES	14
ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION	14

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Public Involvement

Prepared by:

FHWA Office of Planning

In Coordination with:

Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)

FHWA Federal Lands Highway

FHWA Resource Center

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I. INTRODUCTION	2
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Public Information Materials	11
Focus Groups	12
Presentations	12
Other Techniques and Strategies	12
Success	12
REFERENCES	14
PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT TECHNIQUES	14
ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION	14

I. INTRODUCTION

This module, “Public Involvement,” is one of eight in the series *Transportation Decisionmaking: Information Tools for Tribal Governments* developed by the Federal Highway Administration Office of Planning to assist Tribes with transportation planning. This module explains the importance of getting input from the public when making transportation planning decisions. It also describes how to plan a Public Involvement process and ways to engage the public.

Figure 1 shows all the modules in the series.

1. Introduction to Planning
2. Developing a Long-Range Transportation Plan
3. Developing the Transportation Improvement Program
4. Funding Resources
5. **Public Involvement**
6. Data Collection and Use
7. Safety
8. Project Prioritization



Figure 1. Modules in Series *Transportation Decisionmaking Information Tools for Tribal Governments*

II. WHAT IS PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT?

Public Involvement—sometimes called public participation—is a process to capture the tribal community’s values and needs; to share information; and, in some cases, to reach consensus on planning issues. A variety of techniques should be employed during Public Involvement to ensure all citizens have the opportunity to get involved in the planning process. The Public Involvement process should help tribal members understand the planning process and their role in deciding their community’s transportation future.

III. WHEN DO YOU INVOLVE THE PUBLIC?

At a minimum, tribes are required to do Public Involvement activities before the Tribal Council approves of the IRR Transportation Improvement Program, and should complete Public Involvement during the development of the long-range transportation plan. However, Public Involvement can take place earlier in the process to help tribal planners understand the public's needs, goals, and vision for transportation facilities and services. Additionally, Public Involvement can be used to help understand the community's priorities among the projects identified through the planning process.

Public Involvement in the Tribe's Transportation Planning Process

There are opportunities for Public Involvement throughout the transportation planning process. The techniques to encourage Public Involvement and the type of information solicited will vary based on local demographics, public interest, and the level of input desired in the decisionmaking process. Involving the public early in the transportation planning process enables the community to engage in the transportation planning process from the beginning.

There are opportunities for Public Involvement throughout the transportation process. Figure 2 shows the steps in the decisionmaking process for developing a transportation project. The "feedback" arrow, which spans all of the steps in project

development, shows that Public Involvement is a continuous process. The level of Public Involvement and the techniques used will vary based on demographics, public interest, and the level of input desired in the decisionmaking process.

Navajo Transit System

While developing the Navajo Transit System Plan, the Navajo Tribe successfully demonstrated a comprehensive process for Public Involvement and for consultation with planning partners.

In developing the plan, Navajo Transit System conducted extensive outreach across three States and more than 100 Tribal chapters. This effort brought together transit riders; Tribal leaders; and representatives from both the Navajo Nation and the Bureau of Indian Affairs to collaborate on developing a long-range plan. It includes strategies for expanding mode choices and providing access to healthcare and employment for those living in remote, isolated areas with few transportation options. The Navajo Transit System Long-Range Transportation Plan received an honorable mention through the *FHWA/FTA Transportation Planning Excellence Awards* in fiscal year 2004.

Navajo Transit System Long-Range Plan

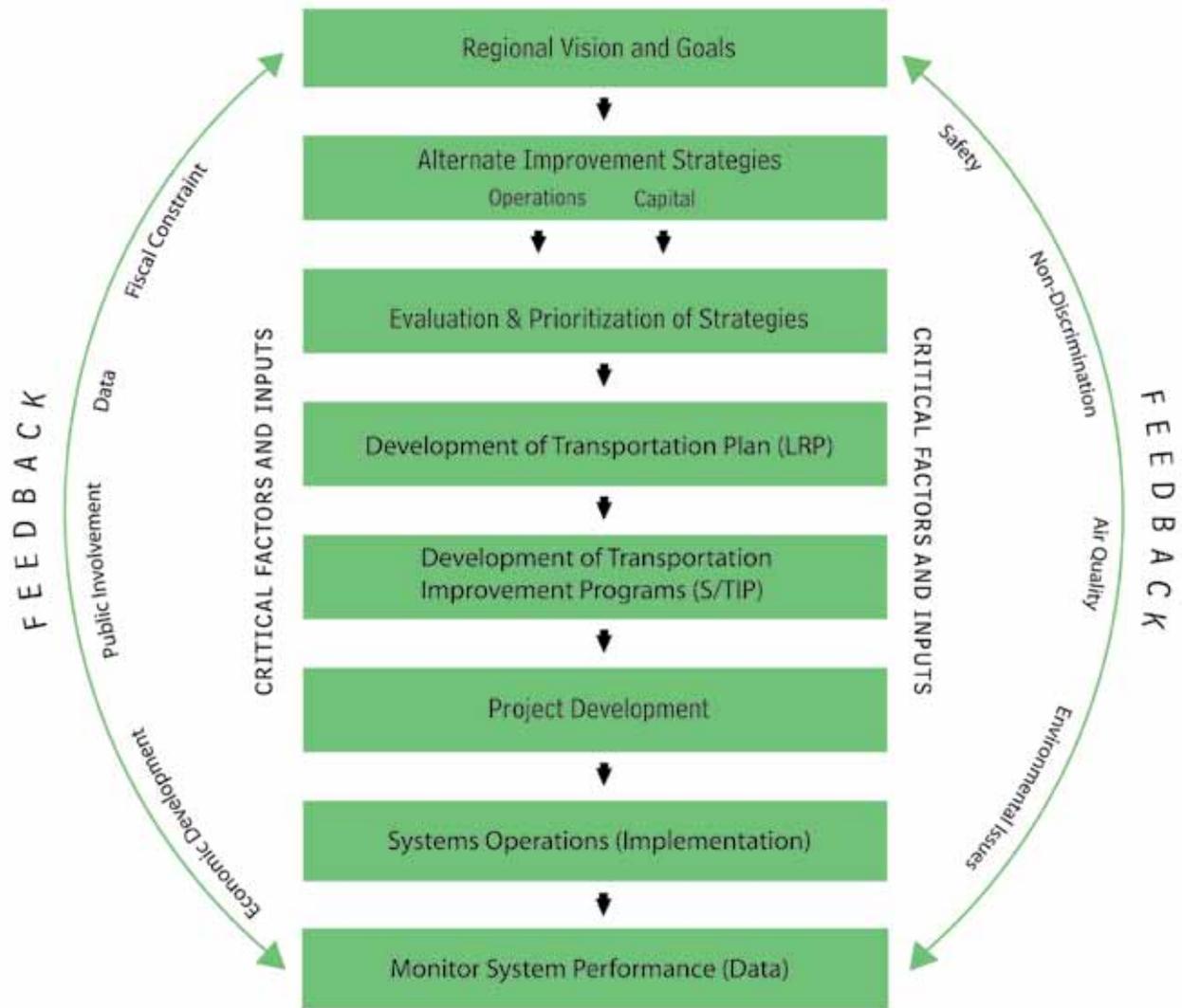


Figure 2. The Basic Steps of the Transportation Decisionmaking Process

IV. WHAT IS EFFECTIVE PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT?

There is no single formula or approach to Public Involvement. Any open Public Involvement process should provide opportunities for the community to be involved during all phases of the planning and decisionmaking processes. For successful Public Involvement, planners should consider the public's comments and demonstrate how they influenced decisions or explain how they were otherwise addressed.

Identify the Goals of Public Involvement

The first step in developing a Public Involvement process is to identify the goals of the process by asking, "What do we want to achieve by involving the public?" At a very basic level, the goal of Public Involvement is to inform the public about transportation planning activities and to

receive input from the community about their transportation-related opinions, concerns, priorities, and needs. Other goals might include:

- Identify transportation needs or problems
- Inform and educate the public
- Formulate and document the collective community vision
- Document community values
- Exchange ideas and share information
- Build consensus

Once the goals are identified, planners should share them with the public so that people understand their role in transportation planning and the expected outcomes of their participation.

Fort Belknap Indian Reservation

The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is located in north central Montana. It is home to the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine peoples. The Fort Belknap Tribal Government has been involved in strategic planning and goal setting since the 1940s. In the last 20 years, the Tribe has conducted seven strategic planning sessions. In 2002, they distributed a survey to the tribal community, asking:

- What goals do you have for the Fort Belknap Tribes for the next three to five years?
- What opportunities do you expect to see in Fort Belknap over the next three to five years?
- What changes or challenges will Fort Belknap face over the next three to five years?
- How well does communication flow within the tribe?
- What type of infrastructure is most important and most necessary?

Based on the responses, a tribal executive committee created strategic planning goals and objectives to guide the tribes' development over the next few years. They then created an action plan that has been carried out by standing and working committees. The action plan spelled out tasks, assignments, responsibilities, deadlines, and follow-up activities.

Transportation Planning Capacity Building Program – Peer Roundtable Report
Long-Range Transportation Plans: The Experiences of Tribal Planners, November 2005

Identify the “Public”

The “public” is comprised of the entire community with all of its diverse interests and points of view. It also includes a range of groups within or adjacent to the community who are likely to be impacted by the transportation decisions that are made. Planners are encouraged to consider a wide range of public groups and individuals, such as:

- Tribe leaders
- Tribe members
- Non-tribal residents living within the area
- School officials
- Health officials
- Neighboring jurisdictions, including the county and State DOT
- Tribal government officials
- Economic development or tourism bureaus
- Major employers
- Tribal Elders
- Individuals or groups who do not drive (pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders)
- Transportation service providers
- Disabled community

It is often not practical to involve each individual within these groups. In these situations, it might be necessary to reach out to representative groups or group leaders who can speak on behalf of these special interests. Often special interest representatives can speak for segments of the population who might not otherwise participate in Public Involvement or those who have difficulty attending meetings or providing comments.

V. WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS IN PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT?

After deciding the overall goal of Public Involvement and identifying the different segments of the public to be involved, the next step is to consider which techniques or activities to use to engage the public. These should be consistent with the needs and abilities of the different segments of the population.

Audience

Perhaps the most important consideration in designing a Public Involvement process is understanding the level of subject-related knowledge the audience has. The techniques and activities used to encourage their involvement need to address the issues in a way that is familiar and meaningful to particular audiences. Written materials and presentations used to engage and inform the public should respect the community's values, reflect their technical understanding of the topic, and highlight their interests in the subject matter. Visual tools—pictures, maps, drawings, charts, graphs—are good ways to help the audience understand the problems and proposed solutions and how these will affect their community.

Using Tribal Events Planned for Other Purposes as Public Involvement Opportunities

There are often community events planned for other purposes that provide planners the opportunity to engage attendees in a discussion about transportation planning. This strategy might draw in Tribe members who are unlikely to participate in meetings held specifically to engage the public in transportation planning. These events might include:

- Tribal pow-wows
- Dances
- Rodeos
- Church events
- Elder community events
- School events
- County fairs
- Casino events
- Health fairs
- Job fairs

Lummi Nation, Washington

When the Lummi Nation was developing its transportation plan, one of the goals was to address people's frustration with the current state of Haxton Way—a major street connecting the city of Bellingham to the Lummi Ferry Dock. Commuters' felt that traffic moved too slowly, while the Tribe felt that traffic moved too quickly and was dangerous for pedestrians. To understand the issues facing the Tribe, the transportation planners spoke with Tribal elders, school bus drivers, the police, and youth groups. They created a chart of the stakeholders' input to identify common issues of concern. They also used accident data from the Washington State Police to map accident locations. Because of this careful and extensive information-gathering process, planners were able to address the concerns of both commuters and the Tribe. The planners identified a roadway location with a lot of crashes and a location where most of the crash fatalities were pedestrians. The key features that led to the success of this planning effort were making personal contact with each stakeholder group and coordinating with adjacent jurisdictions.

Navajo Department of Transportation

The Navajo Department of Transportation identified public participation as one of its planning priorities in its 2007-2008 Strategic Plan. Its goal was to conduct 10 public education sessions to inform the public about transportation projects being planned. It identified a number of other methods to increase public participation. For example, it expanded its public relations effort by expanding the use of a variety of communication technologies; making information exchange between planners and the public easier and more accessible for both the Navajo Department of Transportation and the general public.

STRATEGIC PLAN - Fiscal Year 2008
Navajo Department of Transportation, October 2007

Measures of Success

Before beginning the Public Involvement process, it is important to decide how “success” will be measured.

Examples of ways to measure success include:

- Number of people attending the meetings
- Number of comments received
- Quality of the comments received
- Overall tone of the involvement – e.g., minimal confrontation
- Number of controversies or unresolved issues identified
- Number of conflicts or misunderstandings resolved

At the end of the Public Involvement process, an evaluation helps to determine where the process was successful and where improvements are necessary to meet Public Involvement goals.

VI. WHAT TECHNIQUES CAN BE USED FOR INVOLVING THE PUBLIC?

To participate effectively, people need a variety of ways to receive information from the tribal government and a variety of ways to give their input. Also, different segments of the population require different Public Involvement techniques. This section describes some Public Involvement techniques.

Public Hearings

Public hearings are official meetings held to present information to the public and to get the public's comments on the topic of the hearing. There are two general approaches to public hearings:

- Make a formal presentation of the material in a classroom-type setting.
- Conduct an open-house style meeting with stations on specific topics and staff available to answer questions and receive comments from attendees.

Figure 3 is an example of a public hearing announcement.

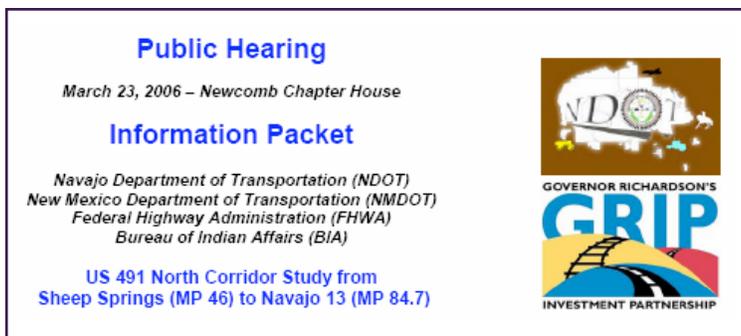


Figure 3. Public Hearing Announcement

Public Notices

Public notices are announcements of upcoming public events, meetings, or hearings. Generally they are printed in a broadly distributed publication such as a newspaper. They might also be provided to community groups for publication in their newsletters, church bulletins, posters, and other special interest publications.

Public notices describe where the public can view event-related materials, when and where the meetings will be held, how to submit comments about the meeting topics, and whom to contact with questions. They should also contain information on deadlines and on activities such as submitting comments, receiving responses to comments, or adding an item to the event's agenda. Figure 4 is an example of a public notice requesting comments on the Tribe's transportation program.

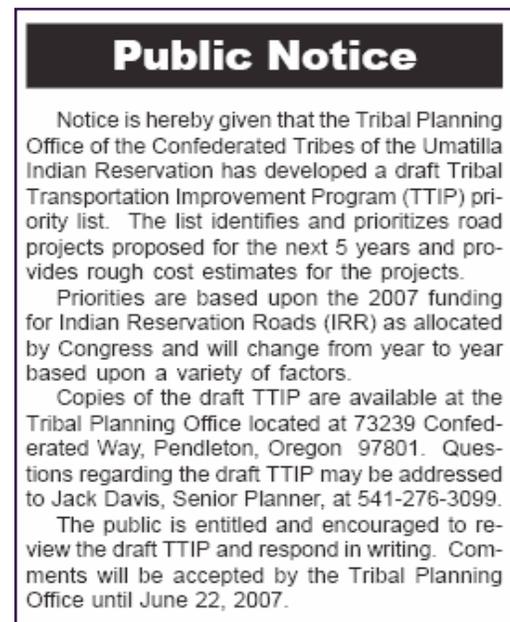


Figure 4. Public Notice Requesting Comments on Transportation Program

Squaxin Island Tribe, Washington

The Squaxin Island Tribe published results of two transportation surveys and asked the public for comments on the Tribe's list of transportation projects. In doing this, the Tribe was able to provide its members and readers of its newsletter the status of its transportation planning activities.

- As part of the long-range transportation plan update, Squaxin Transit conducted a two-week survey of bus riders. The results helped the tribal leaders prioritize projects including future transit operations and improvements.
- The proposed list of improvement projects over the next 20 years was also included in the newsletter. Planners asked readers to comment on this list and on other projects in the community for Tribal Council consideration.
- To help the Tribal Council establish top transportation priorities, a "game" was held at a General Body meeting. At the Transportation Planning table, people learned about Squaxin's long-range transportation planning process and project list. Each participant received three stickers—each representing \$10,000—to use to mark their top transportation priorities. The results of this game will be considered when the Tribe finalizes its transportation planning.

Klah-Che-Min Newsletter, June 2008 Issue, Pages 9-10

Mailing Lists

Mailing lists are a staple of most Public Involvement programs. They include names and addresses of recipients and may also include e-mail addresses, telephone and fax numbers, and other information that make it possible to contact people in a variety of different ways. Mailing lists are used throughout planning and project development to keep the public informed about transportation planning activities by sending newsletters, status reports, and information about upcoming transportation or public involvement activities.

Public Information Materials

Public information materials are a useful form of communication in any Public Involvement process. Below are some other examples of where public information can be provided:

Advertisements	Newsletters
Badges/Buttons	Newspaper inserts
Billboards	Websites
Brochures	Posters
Display boards	Press releases
Electronic media	Progress bulletins
Fact sheets	Public service announcements
Fast food placemats	Report Summaries at the library
Fliers	Utility bill stuffers
Grocery bags	Videotapes
Maps	
News coverage	

Focus Groups

A focus group is a tool to gauge public opinion. Participants usually represent a cross-section of the community. The groups are small, no more than about 15 participants. The format can be an open discussion about specific issues or scripted questions with narrow answers. An important feature of focus groups is that they are convened to address only a small number of specific topics that are determined in advance.

Focus groups are generally used early in the planning process to learn about issues and concerns that should be considered in developing transportation plans. They provide planners with valuable insight into the attitudes and values of the community. This information can help define transportation goals, policies, programs, and services, and help guide the allocation of resources.

Presentations

Presentations can be used to address the unique needs of a specific segment of the community. An individual or group can request presentations or Tribal planners can take the initiative to make presentations to specific affected groups or individuals.

Presentations are used to share information and can help educate the audience about the transportation planning process and key decision points. Presentations can also be used to explain transportation options, provide status updates, and share information about anticipated impacts. This is particularly important for controversial projects or plans.

Other Techniques and Strategies

There are a variety of other techniques and strategies that tribal planners can consider in conducting their community outreach activities:

- Commercial media
- E-mail
- Speakers' bureau
- Public radio stations
- Cable access network
- Newsletters
- Video development and distribution
- Computer forums/social networking, such as chat rooms, blogs, Twitter

Success

Public Involvement is a continuous activity, not a one-time event. A successful Public Involvement process means that the public is well-informed and energized about the transportation planning and decisionmaking processes. The public wants to be both a useful partner and an ally in the transportation decisions that help shape their community. This relationship must be carefully nurtured and maintained with information flowing between tribal planning staff, their constituents and the public on a routine basis, beyond the end of any single Public Involvement event or effort.

Blackfeet Tribe, Montana

In 2000, the Blackfeet Tribe received money from the Indian Reservations Roads Program to develop a long-range transportation plan. The Tribe hired a consultant who spent a year collecting data, holding public meetings, and conducting other activities to understand the Tribe's needs. Initially, the public meetings were sparsely attended. The consultant realized that a non-traditional approach was needed. So, they planned a breakfast meeting and personally extended invitations to members of the targeted audience.

The Tribe was very effective in attracting a large number of people to this meeting, primarily through personal invitations. After breakfast, meeting participants watched the video, "Pathways to Tomorrow." This video, developed by the Kalispell Tribe, helped the participants understand the planning process by showing how transportation improvements can enhance the Tribe's quality of life. After the video, the consultant distributed maps and asked participants to identify what they wanted to see with respect to the Tribe's transportation system. Participants identified issues and then reserved time to meet individually with the consultants.

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Long-Range Transportation Plans: The Experiences of Tribal Planners November 2005

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