

Increasing the Value of Public Involvement in Transportation Project Planning

Final Report

Gary Barnes
Peter Langworthy
State and Local Policy Program
Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs
University of Minnesota

March 2004

Published by
Minnesota Department of Transportation
Research Services Section
Mail Stop 330
395 John Ireland Boulevard
St. Paul, Minnesota 55155-1899

This report represents the results of research conducted by the authors and does not necessarily represent the views or policies of the Minnesota Department of Transportation and/or the Center for Transportation Studies. This report does not contain a standard or specified technique.

The authors and the Minnesota Department of Transportation and/or Center for Transportation Studies do not endorse products or manufacturers. Trade or manufacturers' names appear herein solely because they are considered essential to this report.

APPENDIX A

Summary of Conflict Types and Management Strategies

Summary of Conflict Types and Management Strategies

The following is a brief summary of the five conflict dimensions identified in this research. Conflicts arising in a public involvement process should in general be combinations of these five baseline types in varying forms or degrees of intensity.

Size and distribution of local benefits or costs

What it is: Resistance arising out of negative impacts being imposed on an area or stakeholder group. Can become complex if impacts differ across groups, and if impacts depend closely on particular project characteristics.

How it differs from other types: Here the focus is on the impacts themselves, rather than arguments about what the impacts will be, which is the next conflict type.

What can be done: If there is agreement on what the impacts are and who is suffering them, then it may be possible to develop mitigation strategies, or to offer some kind of compensating investment, assuming the project budget can accommodate this. If strategies that solve one problem tend to worsen others, then it may be appropriate to let stakeholders decide among themselves how impacts should be distributed.

Comments: Complaints about negative impacts may be masking a deeper skepticism about the legitimacy of the project more generally. If this is the case, then compensation or mitigation may not really address the deeper issue. It is important to ensure that the project in general is accepted before discussing implementation details.

Disagreement about the nature and importance of local impacts

What it is: Here the issue is not so much the size of the impacts *per se*, but rather that members of the public do not agree with the agency, or with each other, about what the impacts will be. In one form the dispute is about how big the impacts will be. In another form the dispute is about how important or costly the impacts are.

How it differs from other types: This differs from the first type because in addition to negative impacts, there is the extra problem of lack of agreement on what the impacts are.

What can be done: More precise or understandable information may address some questions about impact size. When importance, rather than size, is disputed, it may be appropriate again to find a way to let stakeholders settle this among themselves.

Comments: Appropriate mitigation strategies can't be discussed until everyone agrees on what needs to be mitigated, and how much needs to be done.

Ability to accurately define and engage relevant stakeholders

What it is: In cases where discussions are formalized through a task force or similar mechanism, making sure that the major points of view have a direct voice in the debate, not just indirectly through political representatives.

How it differs from other types: This type of conflict is less about the project and more about the public involvement process itself. In some cases resistance to a project could be initiated, or magnified, solely because stakeholders feel that they are not being given sufficient opportunity to state their concerns.

What can be done: As major points of view emerge, make sure that they are formally represented in the discussions. If political entities are included, make sure that they do not have more influence than other participants, over the discussions or the outcome.

Comments: Including position-based representatives not only gives them a voice and reduces their incentive to disrupt the process in other ways, but it also forces them to defend their position through the same process that other points of view must be defended.

Perceived legitimacy of the project

What it is: Local residents or other stakeholders do not believe that the project is necessary or of sufficient value to justify the costs being imposed.

How it differs from other types: This is opposition that manifests itself as assertion that the project shouldn't be done at all, regardless of any mitigation or compensation that might be offered. This could be intermingled with other types of conflict as well.

What can be done: Establishing that the project is legitimate in general is necessarily the first step in public involvement, before any more specific options can be discussed. Including stakeholder groups that will benefit from the project in the discussions, so that opponents must directly confront other citizens rather than an anonymous government agency, seems to be an appropriate and effective approach. Bringing in independent planning organizations that have no self-interested stake in the project to discuss its place in the regional long-range plan could also help demonstrate that it would provide value to the region.

Comments: The Institute for Participatory Management has developed a substantial course (SDIC©) primarily around the idea of managing conflict by establishing project legitimacy. Our approach here differs in that we assert that there are also other, independent types of conflicts that require different management strategies.

Degree of ideological issues

What it is: Objections have more to do with general philosophical concerns about issues such as sprawl, city vs. suburb, car vs. transit, and so on.

How it differs from other types: The objections do not necessarily relate directly to characteristics of the project itself.

What can be done: In some cases ideological statements may be masking “simpler” concerns about project legitimacy or negative impacts. It may be helpful to start by assuming that the problem is really one of the other conflict types and attempting to address those before conceding that it is ideology. Again, bringing in regional planning organizations or other neutral groups may help to show that ideological concerns are being addressed elsewhere, even if not in the particular project under discussion.

Comments: Aside from trying to convince participants that these types of issues would be better discussed in other forums, such as voting or regional planning meetings, perhaps the best hope is to reduce this problem to a “lower level” one.