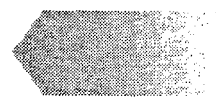


Achieving "Objective Inclusiveness" Through a Virtual Forum



- *True community-based public involvement requires "pushing the boundaries" by seeking innovative approaches that invite and attract diverse community participation. Whether the objective is to build public consensus, gauge approval, track evolving sentiment, or simply to obtain feedback, the effort must be perceived as being fair thorough, and most importantly, inclusive. This paper explores the merging of technology and traditional methods in public involvement through a Virtual Forum to "widen the public participation net" and ultimately achieve "objective inclusiveness."*

Introduction

In light of the many competing priorities facing communities across the nation, achieving quality community-based public involvement is a growing challenge. In crafting public involvement plans there is an burgeoning need to capture and measure the community "voice" and assure that louder voices are not given weight beyond their import (O'Connor, 1997). Usually, these needs are driven by state and federal policies that require reaching out to segments of the community whose voices are not regularly heard in state and national policy debates and in the decision-making process (see Table 1).

One way to respond to these needs is by integrating elements of market research into community-based public involvement process. A critical objective of many public involvement projects is to gain an understanding of the attitudes, preferences, and opinions on the issues from a wide and diverse customer base. This interest typically means targeting populations that are traditionally under-served, non-English speaking, elderly, ethnic minorities and the dis-

abled. Too often, however, other traditionally silent customers go unheard - including young adults, techies, frequent travelers, single mothers and others who are non-contactable via traditional means.

Introducing technology into the public involvement process is a second way to address these needs. Information and communication has invaded all domains of our society; at work, at home and in public places. Recent advances in computers and telecommunications made new kinds of social interaction and cultural transmission possible across previously impossible distances. The way we conduct our lives is changing.

Two points of view illustrate how technology can potentially affect society. Technology optimists believe that technology facilitates pluralism and diversity in society. They further predict that the diffusion of interactive technologies, such as email, WWW and virtual reality, will "enhance the individual and to break down the walls between individuals" (Beckers, 1999). This viewpoint believes that technology can only lead to good outcomes.

Opposite to the technology optimists, the technology pessimists view that technology will make things worse in society. According to the technology pessimists, new media will cause a growing social polarization and can only exasperate current problems. They argue that the wealth of information does not mean that people will have more knowledge.

This paper introduces an innovative public involvement approach, the Virtual Forum, which relies on technology-based, multiple channels for engaging in public dialogue. Offering multiple channels garners the input of "regular citizens," regardless of socio-economic or technological backgrounds, or personal time or mobility constraints. Citizens participate using their preferred input channels, enabling virtually everyone to voice their opinion. "Objective inclusiveness" is ensured during the public participation process.

The general preface of the Virtual Forum is to elicit widespread and diverse public input

Mia Zmud
Research Director

and

Johanna Zmud
Vice President
NuStats Research
and Consulting

the eXperts
report on...

An ARF Week of
Workshops Event
October 2000

43

**Table 1
State and Federal Policies Driving the Need for Diverse Public Involvement**

Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) and its successor, TEA-21	Requires state transportation agencies seek and consider the needs of those traditionally underserved by existing transportation systems
Executive Order on Environmental Justice (EO 12898)	Requires federal agencies to reach out to certain segments of the community.
The Federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)	Stipulates involving the community, particularly those with disabilities, in the development and improvement of transportation and paratransit plans and services.
National Environmental Policy Act of 1969	Outlines minimum standards for obtaining public input regarding environmental documents for transportation-projects.
Title VI of the Civil Rights Act	Heightens awareness and concern for identifying and addressing social and community impacts

through as many input channels as possible, The Virtual Forum supports the technology optimist's view by demonstrating that introducing technology-based input channels increases the number and diversity of participants, and therefore, improves the public involvement process.

Defining a Virtual Forum

The concept of the Virtual Forum is to offer a wide range of participation channels so that citizens can conveniently engage in an interactive dialogue on any issue. The Virtual Forum blends two very important elements that are rarely merged in public involvement: market research and technology.

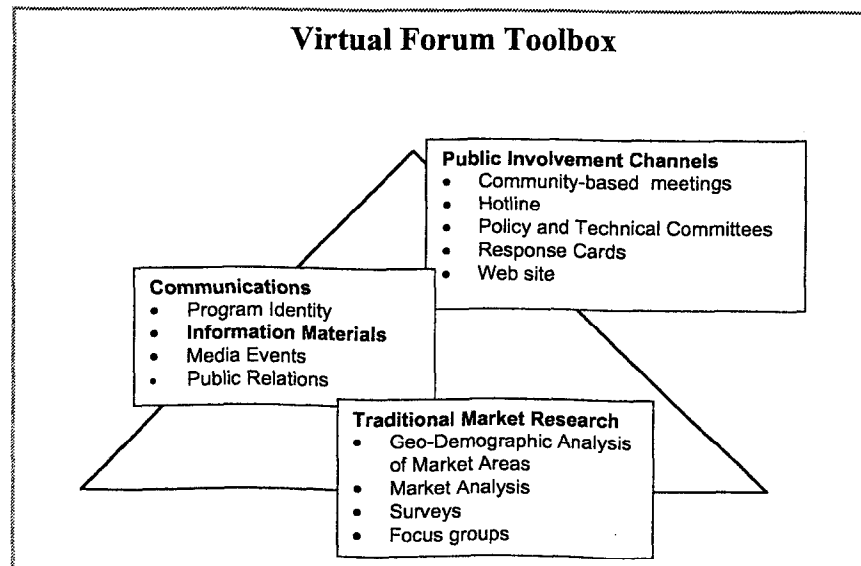
Frequently, scientific objectivity framed as market research does not convey the important iterations of public involvement efforts. In such cases, scientific studies of the market end up as reports with little practical application.

Also, the testing of feasibility and public acceptance is lacking. When applied in a Virtual Forum, market research provides initial insight on a community's profile. Baseline public opinions and attitudes can be measured through surveys, and underlying motivations and attitudes of specific community populations can be explored through focus groups. A market-based approach drives the Virtual Forum and ensures that citizens'

strengths are fully captured by listening and codifying customer attitudes, preferences, and opinions over the course of the project

Most public involvement efforts have tended to attract the loud and repetitive voices of very small and frequently not representative segments of the community. Using traditional and technology-based public involvement channels provide citizens with a wide range of opportunities to engage in public dialogue. These channels ensure that accurate and timely information is delivered back to the public about the project, the status of the public dialogue, and the outcomes.

The Virtual Forum approach eliminates the shortcomings of many past efforts by merging market research and technology with traditional public involvement. The following figure illustrates the market research, public involvement channels and communications tools that can be typically applied in a Virtual Forum (see Figure 1).



How “Objective Inclusiveness” Fits In

The Virtual Forum offers a toolbox of traditional and non-traditional public involvement channels that help to achieving “objective inclusiveness.” Traditional public involvement emphasizes small group meetings, advisory and technical committees, town or public meetings, forums and workshops. These techniques provide valuable “face time” with the public, but take up a great deal of time and resources. These types of meetings also attract a large number of activists or the “vocal minority.”

Engaging in public involvement activities that routinely attract the louder voices leads to the introduction of participant or representation bias in the public involvement process. Communities rarely speak with just one voice. As researchers, we must help community leaders sort out “community voice” by providing alternatives that will attract a wider more diverse range of voices, the “silent majority.”

There are, however, barriers to meet in garnering diverse input. Situational barriers such as meeting times and locations, being too busy, and the need for childcare exist. There may also be language, cultural, mobility, and economic/income barriers (MN/DOT, 1999). Further, the growing trend to require public involvement in decision making in both the public and the private sectors is beginning to overload the public’s ability to respond (O’Connor, Schwartz, Schadd, and Boyd, 1999). While the traditional meeting approach may be valuable in balancing the voice of the “vocal minority,” it should not be relied upon, solely.

Public involvement programs should be “inclusive,” involving decision-makers and all interested citizens. Obtaining wide and diverse

participation in public involvement projects require innovative and technology-based techniques (O’Connor, Schwartz, Schadd, and Boyd, 1999). Doing so responds to stakeholder time constraints, provides information to help people accurately assess the importance of the issues to their quality of life, and attracts and communicates effectively with a broader audience

Providing multiple and convenient opportunities to engage in the process increases participation rates and diversity of input. This ensures that all citizens have an equal influence on public decision making-and that the building of public consensus has been objective and inclusive (see Figure 2).

Application of the Virtual Forum - AIM Project

The Virtual Forum approach was applied, and proven a successful approach, in a major transportation planning project in Austin, Texas, sponsored by the Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Capital Metro). Capital Metro initiated the Austin Area in Motion (AIM) project in order to listen to the community’s concerns about mobility needs in the Greater Austin area. AIM was the critical listening and sharing mechanism for the community to participate in the decision-making process for the area’s transportation future. The Austin area is noted for its diverse community populations. Its growing reputation as a technological hub created a new population base - high tech employers and employees whose opinions and preferences had not previously been captured in recent transportation planning efforts.

Market research and communications were two important elements of the project. A telephone survey of Austin residents to uncover

Objective Inclusiveness

“Objective inclusiveness” broadens the range and reach of the public involvement effort by:

- Seeking individuals that normally do not participate in public involvement activities through innovative and proactive research and community engagement venues.
- Sidestepping barriers that are inadvertently erected by “community gatekeepers” to ensure that the “voice of the market” will be heard,
- Capturing the interest and input of “regular” citizens (the silent majority) rather than just listening to activists (the vocal minority).
- Properly tuning into the important insights and knowledge base that advocates have accumulated.



their opinions about growth, perceptions of Capital Metro, and general transportation preferences formed the baseline data for tracking public opinion. In addition, over the course of the project, a series of 14 focus groups were conducted to obtain insights on transportation from key segments (e.g., riders, non-riders, UT students and employees, employers and employees of major corporations, minority groups, elderly and mobility impaired citizens) of the Austin area.

Communications was essential in creating an identity for the AIM process (e.g., logo "Austin Area in Motion" and slogan "Your Ideas. . . our Transportation Future.") and for providing continual information sharing about the AIM process and updating citizens on public consensus as it evolved. The primary vehicles for conducting communications and media relations was through press conferences, newspaper articles and editorials, an AIM bus wrap, fact sheets and other information materials.

The public "dialogue" component, the Virtual Forum, was the cornerstone of the project. Dialogue is defined as an interchange and discussion of ideas, especially when open and frank. Public dialogue was facilitated through a cycle that began with a invitation for input on a transportation solutions or issues, followed by understanding the priorities of public sentiments on the issues and solutions, and culminated with information that was provided back to the public about the public-driven solution. In addition to relying on traditional approaches (e.g., public and community meetings, workshops, and forums), two technologies facilitated the public dialogue.

At the onset of the AIM project, it was determined that the establishment of a telephone hotline and web site, dedicated to the project's mission, would ensure greater citizen

participation, and allow increased access to information as well as venues for providing their ideas and opinions. Both technologies were developed with both English and Spanish language options.

AIM Web Site (www.aim99.com). The

AIM web site served two key purposes: (1) to provide information and (2) to collect feedback. Specifically, the web site:

- Informed the public about AIM, AIM events, and other transportation links
- Registered the public as participants in the AIM process
- Updated the public on the AIM project progress
- Collected comments from the public about transportation and transit services
- Collected feedback on on-line self-completion questionnaires

Telephone Hotline 637-4AIM. AIM's

multi-tasked hotline was set up to serve the following purposes:

- Inform the public about AIM events
- Provide a forum for the public to request an AIM presentation
- Register the public as participants in the AIM process
- Collect comments from the public about transportation and transit services
- Collect feedback and preferences on specific transportation alternatives

Outcomes of the AIM Project

Before AIM, Capital Metro faced specific customer-oriented issues, in addition to generalized issues facing public transit. Among these were:

- Capital Metro, under the leadership of a new general manager, needed to address issues surrounding deep public mistrust of the agency

because of past efficiency problems. Addressing this mistrust was critical for the agency to achieve significant redesign of its bus system while also possibly committing significant investment in a light rail system.

- Capital Metro, like many other properties, needed to reconcile where and how service is concentrated. They faced the challenge of balancing the level of service for subur-

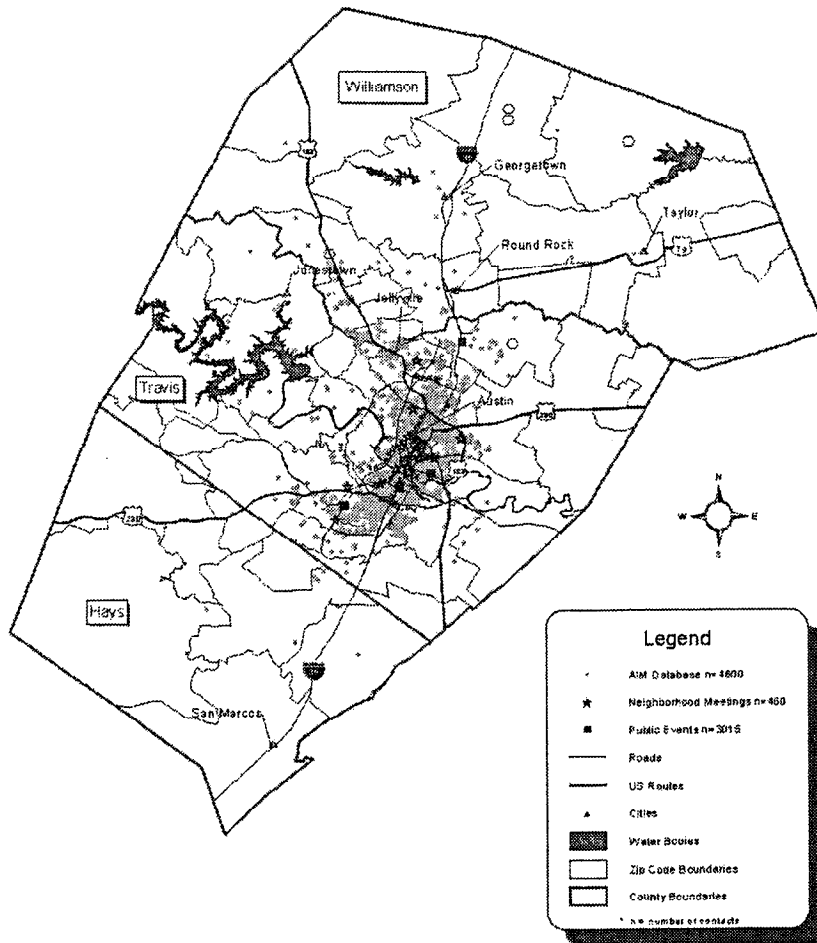
How AIM Reached the Community

- 562 Telephone Interviews
- 11 Focus Groups
- 27 Neighborhood, community and civic group meetings
- 4 Self completion questionnaires (response cards), distributed to over 60,071 persons
- Two public workshops
- 10,000 fact sheets distributed
- 233 AIM Letters to Neighborhood Associations
- 2,294 Web-site visits, registrations, comments, and surveys
- 133 Hotline comments and registrations
- 5000 Direct mailings
- 2 AIM Technical Committee Meetings



AIM Public Involvement Distribution
in Hays, Travis, and Williamson County
as of August 19, 1999

ONLINE
RESEARCH



ban and high-tech commuters and a growing minority population versus service to the traditional, captive market and the more dense transit corridors.

- Capital Metro needed to define and cement its role as a leader in transportation planning. The Central Texas Region was facing unparalleled growth and change. Whether called New Urbanism, Transit Oriented Development, Smart Growth or Traditional Neighborhood Development, community interest was already elevated about the role transit can play in neighborhood development and regional growth.

Designing, communicating, and managing a community-based, consensus-driven public involvement process inherently addressed these and other issues important to Capital Metro. During AIM, Austinites were provided with convenient, interactive, and un-mediated opportunities to engage in the conceptualization of an efficient and rational public trans-

portation system for the Austin area (see Figure 3).

Monitoring the preferred channels for participating in the AIM project was a useful measurement tool. The most popular channel for maintaining involvement in AIM was through the response card forum (66%). However, meetings (19%) and the AIM Web site also offered a convenient venue for some persons (14% each). The hotline proved to be the least used mechanism for voicing opinions (1%). Nevertheless, the combination of virtual forum channels provided a variety of options for citizens to become involved in the process,

The AIM project generated widespread participation and succeeded in fully representing the geographic and social diversity of the Austin area (see Map). At its onset, the process invoked a high level of public interest and was quickly embraced by the public. This contributed to building Capital Metro's credi-

the eXperts
report on...

An ARF Week of
Workshops Event
October 2000

bility among the Austin area community. That year, a Best of Austin poll, conducted by the Austin Chronicle newspaper named Capital Metro as the "Most Improved Government Agency" for giving Austin "the chance to have a genuine, and long overdue, discussion of transportation issues." Further, the AIM project sponsors received the Best of Texas 2000 Silver Spur Award from the Texas Public Relations Association - an award that honors achievement in developing and implementing significant public relations programs.

Most importantly, the AIM project built overwhelming consensus on a transportation solution for the region. The public involvement process demonstrated that residents largely believed that the ultimate transportation solution must incorporate a variety of improvements to the existing transportation system and provide for new, innovative options. Market research provided a profile of Austin citizens segmented according to their transportation preference that was useful in subsequent outreach campaigns to increase Capital Metro ridership and to gain support for future planning efforts.

Two Current Applications of the Virtual Forum

The Virtual Forum approach is currently being used in two other applications:

- Performance Review of the Texas Transportation Department of Transportation (TXDOT). In this application, the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts is sponsoring a Virtual Forum to engage the public and other stakeholders in a performance review of TXDOT. Virtual Forum channels being used to collect statewide input include a series of public meetings, a telephone hotline, and on-line and self-completion surveys.
- MetroMoves. The Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority is sponsoring a Virtual Forum

as part of its public involvement efforts to develop a regional transportation plan. Public input is being collected through a telephone hotline, a series of self-completion response cards, and on-line surveys and comments generated through a MetroMoves web site.

Conclusion

Technology is rearranging our world and is changing the way we work and our daily lives. As evidenced in this paper, technology can play a critical role in public involvement. Introducing technology in the traditional public involvement provides stakeholders with freedom and flexibility in how they can participate in the process. It increases participation rates by attracting a broader audience, addressing time constraints, socio-economic, cultural, and other situational barriers.

Through a Virtual Forum, all citizens have an equal influence on public decision making-and the building of public consensus is objective and inclusive. Past and current applications of the Virtual Forum support the viewpoint of technology optimists-integrating technology into public involvement makes diversity in participation possible and leads to a better public involvement process.

References

- Beckers, D (1999), Research on Virtual Communities: an Empirical Approach, University of Amsterdam, Department of Social Science Informatics.
- O'Connor, Rita (1997). Facilitating Input and Measuring Voice: How the Tools We Choose Make Hidden Value Statements, in: Transportation Research Board Committee on Public Involvement newsletter, fall.
- O'Connor, Rita; Schwartz, Marcy; Schadd, Joy; Boyd, David (1999), State of the Practice: White Paper on Public Involvement, Transportation Research Board
- MN/DOT Public Involvement Task Force (1999), Hear Every Voice: A Guide to Public Involvement at MN/DOT, Minnesota Department of Transportation, June.