

2021 Trends Report



Photo: ButterFLi, Los Angeles, California

nadtc

The National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC)

NADTC is a national program funded by the Federal Transit Administration and administered by Easterseals Inc. and USAging, with guidance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living.

Our Mission:

To promote the availability and accessibility of transportation options that meet the needs of older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers.

The mission of NADTC is to:

- **Serve** professionals in the fields of transportation, aging, disability, human services and caregiving.
- **Provide** resources and training through an information and referral hotline, website, as well as both distance and online training.
- **Empower** communities across the country to implement or improve innovative transportation programs at the local level.
- **Support** older adults, people with disabilities of all ages, and their families to help them find the best mobility options in their communities to reach their destination of choice.

For more information about NADTC and the services we provide, please visit www.nadtc.org/

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Rural Community Engagement

Background

Our lives have no doubt been affected in some way by the COVID-19 virus. For many, work, education, and entertainment look very different now compared to before the pandemic, as are the ways public transportation programs reach out to their customers and community.

As transportation programs continue to adjust to different operating circumstances and needs, it is important, and often required, that the public be allowed input into how transportation services are provided. Public participation can be difficult for any system; however, participation from rural areas can be particularly challenging.

An intentional participation plan which identifies the target audience and purpose for the outreach needs to be in place, as well as the key messages and best method of getting that message across to the community. The continuum of public participation ranges from hosting public comment periods to inform the community, to true engagement that empowers the community in the planning and decision-making process.

Public Comment to Community Engagement

Public comment periods are typically one-way communication designed to inform, rather than to engage. They are often late in the process when changes are not always able to be made. The continuum of public participation goes from informing, to consulting and involving, to collaborating and finally to empowerment. Beyond just informing is where the public is asked to take action such as filling out a survey or participating in community mapping. Such efforts are designed to involve the public in decision-making to receive their feedback on the proposed project or service. Engagement occurs when the community is involved throughout the entire process. The community is actively helping identify issues, planning for changes in service or starting a new service altogether. Engagement is about partnerships and making joint decisions and leads to empowerment of the community in how their public transportation will operate.

Regulations

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) shared planning regulation, found at 23 CFR 450 outlines federal expectations for "statewide and metropolitan planning agencies in effectively engaging the public, including low-income and minority communities." Even for non-planning agencies, these guidelines are good practices when planning projects and engagement.

For meaningful public engagement, an agency should:

- Eliminate participation barriers and engage minority and low-income populations in transportation decision making.
- Develop and implement strategies for meaningful engagement of the community.
- Identify and understand the needs of the community as a whole and incorporate those needs into transportation plans and programs.
- Produce outreach strategies for transportation plans that “describe explicit procedures, strategies, and desired outcomes for” public engagement, which includes low-income and minority populations.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of these outreach strategies.
- Go beyond the traditional methods of public outreach to incorporate innovative approaches that leverage the ever-changing communications environment in which we live.
- Implement varying communication methods including distributing flyers at the local community center, churches, or grocery stores, and posting information on vehicles, at bus stops, transit stations, and other locations frequented by riders. Materials also should be prepared for persons with limited-English proficiency.

“Meaningful public engagement does not mean that every issue or concern raised by the community must be resolved. However, it does require agencies to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the communities impacted by the proposed action, listen to what they have to say, respond to their comments and concerns, and incorporate their comments into the transportation decision-making process where practicable.”

(FTA, “What do we Mean by Meaningful Public Engagement”).



Photo: Utah Transit Authority, Salk Lake City

It is important to recognize the grant under which your program operates may require specific public engagement activities. This is true for Section 5310, Enhanced Mobility of Seniors, and Individuals with Disabilities formula grantees. The Section 5310 guidance requires projects to be included in a locally developed, coordinated public transit-human services transportation plan. That plan must be developed and approved through a process that includes participation by seniors, individuals with disabilities, representatives of public, private, and nonprofit

transportation and human services providers, and other members of the public. This guidance identifies tools and strategies for developing a coordinated plan including hosting community planning sessions, using a self-assessment tool, holding focus groups, conducting a survey and completing a detailed study and analysis. The quality of input received, and the amount of engagement will depend on the plan for public participation and the methods used to hear from those most impacted by these services.

Challenges and Opportunities of Rural Community Engagement

Even before the pandemic, many systems struggled to engage the public in decision making. Systems often reported that no one attended the meetings set up for public comment or didn't respond to the print ads requesting comments or input on programs. In rural areas, these activities can be more difficult as people are dispersed, and those who need the service, may struggle to learn about and participate in these meetings. While there were increases in technology use and virtual meetings to gain input during COVID, those methods also present issues for individuals in rural areas.

Opportunities

A well-planned engagement plan provides an opportunity to honor the lived experience, and knowledge of residents in order to co-create solutions that are practical and effective.

Community engagement can also have other benefits as highlighted below.

- Increase the likelihood that projects or solutions will be widely accepted.
- Improve citizens' knowledge by learning about the issues in-depth. Greater knowledge allows them to see multiple sides of the problem.
- Empower and integrate people from different backgrounds.
- Create local networks of community members. The more people who know what is going on and who are willing to work toward a goal, the more likely a community is to be successful in reaching its goals.
- Create several opportunities for discussing concerns.
- Increase trust in community organizations and governance. Working together improves communication and understanding.

U.S. DOT created the [Every Place Counts: Leadership Academy](#), and was developed to provide the background information and tools for community members to *Learn – Engage – Make a Difference*. The toolkit and facilitator guide can be used to help those with limited experience in transportation decision-making become more familiar with the processes and understand how they can make a difference in their community.

In addition, a well-designed engagement effort allows you to identify and understand:

- Differing values and priorities

- Differing ways citizens view the community or a particular project
- Alternatives and consequences of changes
- Perceptions of and real benefits and risks
- Different ideas and potential solutions and actions

Challenges

Engagement in rural areas was already challenging prior to the pandemic, but when more processes and meetings went virtual and online, existing barriers were exacerbated, and additional barriers were identified that could limit the full inclusion of all community members in the planning process. Lack of knowledge about and interest or ability to be involved in planning processes can stem from a variety of circumstances. These include insufficient outreach and advertising, inadequate messaging about involvement, transportation and mobility challenges, and mismatch of time and place of meetings to members of the community.



Using new technology has greatly expanded online public participation in some situations. Some agencies received feedback from a larger cross-section of the community and more first-time participants. Online engagement can help address time constraints resulting from childcare, shift work or other commitments and can allow participants to remain anonymous which can increase

participation. Being able to participate on one's own schedule and not needing to travel are benefits; however, the lack of broadband in rural areas, lack of a computer or necessary technology to participate, and unfamiliarity with how to use new technology remain significant barriers.

Internally, an agency may lack the expertise to shift to online engagement, new tools may be cost prohibitive, and platform accessibility can vary. It is important to manage your team's expectations for engagement and ensure the methods chosen can be properly implemented. It takes time to learn new platforms and staff roles and duties within the online engagement process need to be assigned to ensure a good experience for the participants.

Strategies for Impactful Rural Community Engagement

Extensive public participation plans written and implemented by consultants or high-tech options for engagement are often out of reach for smaller agencies due to cost and/or staff capacity and knowledge. Traditional lower-tech outreach methods include social media messaging through targeted content and ads, using school system parent notification system, surveys, direct mailing, and printed notices such as flyers or door hangers.

One of the most successful engagement strategies is to work through existing networks of community organizations and identify trusted leaders and community champions from those groups to assist with community engagement planning and outreach.



Other strategies include:

- Attend community meetings to learn about the priorities of different groups. Assess the environment. It may not be *if* the community is ready to talk about transportation, but *how* best to address it.
- Translate materials to other languages spoken in the community.
- Provide interpretation for those who are deaf and hard of hearing or speak a different language.
- Provide handouts in accessible formats to accommodate the needs of people with vision loss and other disabilities.
- Provide childcare, meals and compensation for people who participate.
- Identify barriers to engagement by each community group. It could be the time of day or location of meetings. Find a neutral site for meetings or places where people feel comfortable.
- If doing virtual engagement, partner with a library or school to provide access to computers for those who do not have them at home.
- Host listening sessions, town halls or focus groups to surface priorities and concerns. These can be done in-person, virtually or by telephone.
- Understand past efforts to learn what has been done previously and to uncover pre-existing beliefs that may create issues during the process.
- Create a formal advisory committee to oversee and provide direction.
- Host a walking or bus tour of the community with community members, elected officials, and business leaders.

The question agencies ask themselves is, “How do we know we are reaching everyone?” This is a difficult question to answer, but agencies should work into their planning process performance measures and targets to measure the effectiveness of their outreach efforts. Reaching out to community partners and providing several ways for voices to be heard and as many entry points for feedback as possible are important parts of a community engagement strategy.

Local Examples

Regional Transit Service, Rochester, New York



Regional Transit Service (RTS) has done extensive outreach in both their urban area and surrounding seven more rural counties in advance of facility projects and their system redesign. They learned that the traditional meetings, even pre-COVID, were not attracting the number of people or the cross-section of the community they wanted to hear from. They hired a planning agency to conduct the outreach and worked with elected officials and community leaders to create a Community Advisory Group.

Another key component was getting the meetings in the right places at the right times. A concern over a Wednesday night meeting, when most Black churches in that community also met, led to the involvement of a pastor who joined their advisory committee. Meetings were also held at local community centers, rather than a convention center, to solicit more feedback from impacted populations. The consultants helped facilitate meetings. The involvement of an outside and neutral entity helped defuse contentious situations. The consultants also attended baseball games and festivals to go where the people were already gathering.

In one county, they placed a kiosk, which was a computer set up with the transit survey, at a social services office where people were already going to get their benefits and other assistance. The number of completed surveys from that community was higher than others in part due to this outreach method. Another innovative technique the consultant used was to present the top eight options and give participants ten dollars in “fake” money. Participants were asked to vote with their dollars for the project they wanted to invest in. This allowed the team to determine the priorities of the group.

Not only was outreach conducted prior to the system redesign, but once the final decisions had been made and changes were being implemented, RTS ambassadors were stationed at bus stops and hubs to speak with customers about the upcoming changes and help them navigate the new system. Their award-winning outreach started during the planning stage and continued throughout the implementation of their system changes.

Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency, Urbandale, Iowa

Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA) significantly increased their online engagement by hiring a Community Outreach Coordinator during the pandemic. This staff member is dedicated to engagement through social media, the website, and using other tools. While making connections virtually is hard, HIRTA uses its social media channels to generate interest and excitement about their system. While building their engagement methods, consideration was given to the target audience, branding to ensure consistency, and the content. The

platform they used, and content created was determined by the purpose of the engagement and the intended audience. A system does not need to be present on all social media platforms.

One example of driving engagement is on the HIRTA Facebook page. Different challenges ran monthly including a Wellness Challenge and a Kindness Challenge. These challenges offered suggested activities followers could do and post about. Every comment to a specific post was given an entry to win a prize.

Drivers were interviewed on Facebook Live; a new event, Beyond the Bus, was started virtually in 2021, is posted on their YouTube channel, and will be continued as an online event only. Outreach opportunities are intentionally planned to ensure the audience understands the topic and the message HIRTA is sending.



Summary

Any type of public engagement can be challenging, but by partnering with trusted leaders and stakeholders, understanding the community, and reducing barriers to participation. By using these strategies, transportation providers can increase the amount and quality of the feedback received. In rural areas, there are longer distances to travel, technology and broadband deserts, and building relationships to engage people can be challenging when residents are dispersed. These issues are exacerbated in the time of COVID and social distancing.

When entering the engagement process, do so with a sense of humility that you are not the expert, but that the community members have expertise and knowledge which can improve the process and outcome. Community engagement and public participation do not just begin and end with a new project or service change. It is about building relationships and trust and empowering the community to shape a system that meets their needs.

Resources

Shared Practices for Engagement in Virtual Meetings, Metropolitan Area Planning Council, Massachusetts

<https://www.mapc.org/resource-library/shared-practices-for-engagement-in-virtual-meetings/>

Community Engagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond: A Guide for Community-Based Organizations, The Urban Institute,

https://www.urban.org/research/publication/community-engagement-during-covid-19-pandemic-and-beyond/view/full_report

International Association for Public Participation, IAP² <https://iap2usa.org/>

Virtual Public Involvement, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)

https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/innovation/everydaycounts/edc_6/virtual_public_involvement.cfm

Facilitative Leadership Online Tool Talks, Michigan State University

https://mediaspace.msu.edu/playlist/details/1_eonnyaej

Virtual Engagement Guidebook – National Center for Applied Transit Technology N-CATT,

https://n-catt.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Virtual_Engagement_Guidebook_Final.pdf

Additional case studies of public participation from Minnesota DOT.

<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/publicengagement/case-studies.html>

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<https://www.transit.dot.gov/what-do-we-mean-%E2%80%9Cmeaningful-public-engagement%E2%80%9D>

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Bassler, A. et al., "Developing Effective Citizen Engagement: A How-to Guide for Community Leaders." Center for Rural America, 2008.

https://www.rural.palegislature.us/Effective_Citizen_Engagement.pdf

Why Community Engagement Matters. Penn State University.

<https://aese.psu.edu/research/centers/cecd/engagement-toolbox/engagement/why-community-engagement-matters>

Adapted from the Sustainable Communities Initiative, PolicyLink, Kirwan Institute

https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/COMMUNITYENGAGEMENTGUIDE_LY_FINAL%20%281%29.pdf



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