



RESEARCH SERVICES SECTION

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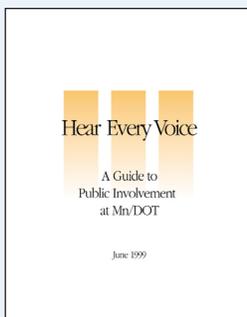
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Principal Investigator:

Gary Barnes, University of Minnesota

IMPLEMENTATION PROJECT COST:

\$24,800



Mn/DOT's public involvement guide, *Hear Every Voice*, is currently being updated with findings from this project.

Putting Research into Practice: Managing Conflicts Arising from Public Involvement in Transportation Projects

What Need Did We See?

Previous efforts to improve public involvement in transportation projects largely addressed strategies to encourage public participation and guidelines for managing discussion. Mn/DOT had not developed standard documents to provide guidance in addressing conflicts that might arise in the course of public involvement. The materials that were available relevant to transportation projects were highly complex and more appropriate for projects where conflict is relatively certain and likely to be severe.

What Was Our Goal?

The objective of this implementation effort was to maximize the value of Mn/DOT's research by incorporating the results of a completed research project into the department's public involvement process, including planning, programming and project development. This would be accomplished by creating instructional materials on conflict management that were simple, applicable to low-complexity projects, and aimed at project managers with little public involvement experience and little time available for training. Establishing a more systematic way of dealing with conflicts would save managers time and foster public good will, making it possible to complete projects more quickly and cheaply without the lingering public resentment that can occur when public concerns are not appropriately addressed.

What Did We Implement?

Completed in 2004, the original research study aimed to understand why public involvement in transportation projects sometimes becomes drawn out or even terminated by conflict, and to modify processes to reduce negative outcomes. By examining newspaper coverage and interviewing participants, researchers studied four examples of public involvement efforts that displayed contrasting types and degrees of conflict.

They then developed an organizational scheme for categorizing conflicts to guide project managers in selecting an appropriate management strategy for each situation, as well as a set of conflict mitigation and resolution strategies based on principles for managing stakeholder relations.

Before the 2004 study, conflict management in low-complexity transportation projects was a largely unexplored avenue of research nationwide. While the results of this research were promising, they required further elaboration to make them systematically useful to practitioners.

How Did We Do It?

To implement this research, investigators at the University of Minnesota created material on conflict management strategies for inclusion in Mn/DOT's public involvement manual, *Hear Every Voice*. To refine and validate the conflict management framework developed in the 2004 research, they examined a large number of additional case studies, with a wider range of situations represented. They gathered information through an additional 20 interviews with public involvement experts, asking questions about real projects: what the project entailed, how public involvement was handled, why a conflict arose, how it was managed, and what did and did not work in managing conflict.

These efforts led the investigators to refine their list of conflict types and to produce much more specific guidance on how to avoid and manage the various types of conflict.

continued

“We are currently revamping our statewide public involvement guidance as Hear Every Voice II in accordance with SAFETEA-LU. This research will serve as valuable information for project managers when HEV II is released.”

—Lynne Bly,
Statewide Transportation
Planning Unit Supervisor,
Mn/DOT Office of Investment
Management

“We were surprised at the extent to which managers looked at nipping conflict in the bud before it got started. Whether public complaints turn into a real problem depends less on the project itself than how it is managed.”

—Gary Barnes,
former Research
Associate, Humphrey
Institute of Public Affairs,
University of Minnesota

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The reconstruction of U.S. 52 at Rochester, completed via this ribbon-cutting ceremony, was cited in interviews as a public involvement success. Managers were able to satisfactorily address highway access and construction impact conflicts. *Photo courtesy of Terry Ward, Mn/DOT.*

Several public involvement practitioners were then asked to evaluate the guidance, and their feedback was incorporated to further strengthen the final product.

What Was the Impact?

The paper “Managing Conflict in Public Involvement,” intended for inclusion in the new version of *Hear Every Voice*, was published as part of the report for this implementation project in June 2006. The paper’s stated objective was to provide basic principles for common situations, and the authors advised practitioners to seek help from experienced professionals if major conflict occurs. The paper describes three categories of conflict—**impact-related**, **stakeholder-related** and **project legitimacy**—and provides strategies for dealing with each, along with general principles for avoiding conflict:

- Project planning and anticipation of conflicts
- Inclusion of all relevant stakeholders
- Support from trusted locals
- Clarity about why the project is necessary
- Flexibility about project aspects not fixed by engineering or budget constraints
- Acknowledging impacts and being open with information
- Breaking large projects into discrete pieces and/or working separately with particular stakeholder groups

This concise framework provides the right level of detail for the target audience, offering managers a guide to improve Mn/DOT’s customer service and to prevent problems that consume taxpayer dollars.

What’s Next?

Though the paper developed in this project constitutes a useful resource, more work is needed to achieve the implementation goal of incorporating the findings of the original study into Mn/DOT practice. The objectives of this project have been taken up by two active projects, totaling a \$185,000 effort: the first full update of *Hear Every Voice* since 1999 and substantial enhancement of Mn/DOT’s public involvement training materials. These tasks are scheduled for completion by March 2009.

This Technical Summary pertains to Report 2006-24, “Developing a Simple System for Public Involvement Conflict Management,” published June 2006. The full report can be accessed at <http://www.lrrb.org/pdf/200624.pdf>.

The research being implemented through this project can primarily be found in Report 2004-20, “Increasing the Value of Public Involvement in Transportation Project Planning,” published March 2004. This report can be accessed at <http://www.lrrb.org/pdf/200420.pdf>.