



How community consultation can help us get transport right

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Abstract:

Involving local communities in transportation projects or the operation of transport has a valuable contribution to make towards getting transport right. Community consultation has a number of advantages in terms of how it can make transport more appropriate to the general public i.e., the people who use the public transport systems, the roads, the airways and the waterways. By involving local communities at various stages of the transport spectrum the community is able to have a better understanding of decisions, operational and planning matters. The paper will look at techniques to involve the community at all stages of the provision of transport. For example the involvement of cyclists in the development of new cycle routes is discussed, how to deal with community input to the operation of public transport and the role community consultation can play in educating the community about transport. Case studies based on the authors' experience are discussed and include:

- Bicycle plans
- RTA road projects
- The proposed upgrading of the Coffs Harbour Airport and the involvement of the local community
- The Parramatta Ferry service
- Land use and strategic planning for transport projects – getting the community to think strategically.

The paper concludes with discussion on techniques to improve the level of community involvement in transport and what to do with the communities input once you have it.

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Community consultation

The focus of this paper is community consultation and how it can assist in getting transport right. Consideration is given to consultation in the context of reform. The paper firstly addressed "What is Community Consultation" and then discusses consultation using case studies. The paper then looks at undertaking community consultation - how to consult communities on strategic landuse issues, strategies for community consultation and how to use the communities input.

What is community consultation?

Community consultation is a process where the views, opinions, concerns and reactions from the community as individuals or groups are sought. Planning for future development and developing strategic plans and policies, all involve consideration of the potential effect on the community.

Community consultation enables the community to understand issues and often to have a sense of ownership in a project; the quotation below encapsulates this:

Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand

- Chinese Proverb

A clear distinction between public relations community consultation and information

A distinction that needs to be made early in a project or study is the difference between community consultation and public relations (PR) or project advocacy. PR and advocacy are utilised when a project needs to be 'sold' or pushed. This differs from community consultation which is about involving the community and gaining their opinions. You need to be clear about what it is you need - the community's opinion or a sell job for the project.

Another distinction needs to be made between community consultation and community information. In a number of cases information giving is what is being undertaken. This is most likely when decisions have already been made and the aim is to advise the community i.e. community information.

Advantages: Consultation has a number of advantages when undertaking transport projects:

- it gives the community a greater understanding and sense of ownership in the project and the processes; and

- it allows local knowledge to be tapped and allays suspicion about projects and the process.

Effective consultation can also assist the proponents (and we mean proponents in the broadest sense - a government agency, developer or the person seeking community input) and decisions makers of the project in the following ways:

- it can narrow the issues in dispute;
- it can be used as a measure to identify the real issues of concern to the community - often these are quite different to the issues the proponent has originally identified;
- it can help allay community fears and suspicions - in some cases original antagonism can be turned into active involvement in the design of development such as road projects and sometimes even ultimate support for the proposal through an increased sense of ownership; and
- it minimises the potential for unexpected issues to manifest at the last minute in the assessment process - thereby minimising potential for delay.

Disadvantages: This is not to say that from a proponents perspective there are not disadvantages. A number of disadvantages have been suggested by proponents, community consultation practitioners and government agencies:

- the community is demanding;
- the community can become very educated about the project and engage experts to counteract proponent;
- people will never appear to be ready for a decision and will want to "keep discussing";
- community consultation is expensive;
- consultation has to occur when the community are available, most likely to be evenings and weekends;
- consultation can be difficult in culturally diverse areas;
- the community are often cynical and suspicious;
- the community perceive they have a decision making role; and
- the community can be very emotional.

Case studies

To illustrate community consultation in transport a number of case studies are useful.

Inner West Bicycle Plan

A consultation program with a number of different techniques was employed on this project, which featured a small budget and tight time frame. Newsletters were mailed directly to all Bicycle NSW users living in suburbs adjoining the route with a comment

form that could be returned via reply paid mail, fax or email. Newsletters were also letterboxed and dropped to all homes and businesses along the route. Advertising in local newspapers and maps showing the route with copies of the newsletter were placed in all local bike shops. Individual meetings with local bicycle user groups and a display and workshop on a Sunday afternoon were the main features of the program.

Albury Wodonga National Highway Route

A personalised approach to involving the local community was the key feature of this community consultation activities for this project. The personal contact was particularly focussed on directly affected land owners. Meetings with individual land owners whose properties were potentially affected by the route were held in small groups or on an individual basis. Community newsletters were sent to each directly affected property owners to inform them of the proposal, describe the environmental impact assessment process and to invite them to discuss with the project team issues and concerns.

Consultation with the broader community included media coverage, discussion days in shopping centres, a telephone line, newsletters and focus group meetings.

This project had unique characteristics because of its location on the NSW Victorian border and the fact that the project was to be Federally funded. Three different governments had a role to play in the project and the consultation needed to take this into account. Further the local media played a large role in disseminating information (and misinformation) about the project. The most effective tools to involve the local community were the personal contact with directly affected property owners, shopping centre display, newsletters and the local media. Recently the project construction and funding was announced and a CD Rom showing the details of the project and changes from the EIS made because of community input. The interactive CD Rom was an effective tool to provide information to the community.

Coffs Harbour Regional Airport

In 1997 a comprehensive EIS was prepared to assess the proposal of Coffs Harbour City Council to upgrade the Coffs Harbour Regional Airport to cater for 767s. The project included a comprehensive community consultation programme that included a number of techniques:

- Free call phone line
- Newsletters
- Fact Sheets
- Media
- Advertising
- Community Liaison Group
- Special Interest Group Meetings

- Community Workshops
- Discussion Days - Shopping Centres
- Submissions
- Displays
- Report for EIS

Again the most effective techniques were the shopping centre display, newsletters and the toll free phone line. In Coffs Harbour another useful technique was for members of the project team to present to special interest groups such as the Senior Citizens, Chamber of Commerce etc. By presenting to these group members of the general community who may not have had the time to participate more fully in the consultation process were able to learn about the project and provide input. The Coffs Harbour project was also interesting because of the issue of aircraft noise. The precedent set by the third runway in Sydney meant that the community were more educated about noise, had a number of misconceptions and were more sceptical about the issue. Involving our aircraft noise expert was critical to the community understanding of the noise issue and the community debate on the issues was enhanced.

City West Link

This is a major arterial road being constructed through Sydney's inner western suburbs on the outskirts of the CBD. A design and construct project, consultation is still required on detail design such as noise walls, lighting and landscaping, and communication with the community regarding construction impacts, road closures and traffic diversions are essential. The area currently experiences significant traffic flows during morning and evening peak hours and managing traffic during the 18 month life of the project will be a major issue. A permanent display centre, fact sheets, newsletters and a Community Working Group are the major consultation mechanisms. Once the final design issues have been agreed, a shopping centre display will explain the construction and traffic issues to the local community in more detail.

Maitland Integrated Transport Study

Not all transport research that involves community consultation centres around a proposal. The Maitland Integrated Transport Study was a study that considered transport in the Maitland region and in particular the integration of different forms of transport. The key elements of this community consultation was the involvement of the various transport providers and users in a facilitated workshop. The workshops focused on issues identification and solutions to ensure that the findings of the study reflected community view. Members of the workshops included representatives of taxi drivers, bus drivers, commuters, bicycle groups, truck drivers, school children, people with disabilities, strategic planners and environment groups. One of the achievements of the workshop was the enhanced understanding of the issues that affected individual groups within the 'transport community'. For example truck drivers were able to discuss issues

with cyclists and people with disabilities. This sharing of information was critical to the integration of transport and future transport initiatives in the area.

Parramatta River Ferry Service

When GHD did the EIS for the Parramatta River Ferry Service we had to develop a community consultation program that included the people of Parramatta, people who lived along the river, likely users of the service and special interest groups such as environment groups. To do this we employed a number of techniques:

- newsletters distributed to householders along the river to people using the existing Meadowbank Ferry Service and left in community locations in Parramatta
- media in the Parramatta, Hills District and North West areas
- focus groups held in Parramatta and Meadowbank
- a questionnaire targeting people in Parramatta and those using the Meadowbank service
- a toll free line and reply paid address
- meetings with special interest groups

Table 1 provides a summary of the case studies, the community consultation approach and an evaluation.

Table 1 Transport Projects and Community Consultation

Project/Case Study	Characteristics	Community Consultation	Lessons Learned/ Comments	Did Community Consultation help get the project right or at least nearly right
Inner West Bicycle Plan	Small budget and short time frame for a much needed commuter route to the city	Variety of techniques to maximise participation & comment	The internet could have enhanced our project considerably; highlight project end date more clearly	Yes. Consultation resulted in a good awareness of the project and identification of all major traffic & parking issues.
Albury Wodonga National Highway Route EIS/EES	Long standing complicated project with lots of "baggage"	Variety of techniques focus on personalised contact for those directly affected	The length of time the decision making process takes impacts negatively on communities and trust. Community has a good understanding of the project.	Consultation meant that the community understood the project. A sense of ownership was developed.
Coffs Harbour Regional Airport	Controversial projected linked to general controversy surrounding Coffs Harbour City Council	Broad range of techniques. Objectives include education about technical airport/aircraft issues	Shopping centre displays useful for consulting the general public. Education component was important because of technical issues	Consultation changed the project. Hasn't been determined yet. Community understanding enhanced.

Project/Case Study	Characteristics	Community Consultation	Lessons Learned/ Comments	Did Community Consultation help get the project right or at least nearly right
City West Link	Controversial inner city project	Community Working Group, fact sheets, displays	Community Working Group needs to be representative & accountable to constituency	Consultation has allowed the community to feel they have influenced a major piece of infrastructure within their locality.
Maitland Integrated Transport Study	Strategic Planning Project	Facilitated workshops with a broad spectrum of participants	Participants appreciated opportunity to hear other views. Increased understanding of need for integration	Consultation definitely contributed positively towards study outcomes.
Parramatta River Ferry Service	Politically environmentally sensitive area.	Needed to be broad. Difficult to consult potential users	General community not adequately consulted	Consultation contributed to outcome of EIS, however could have been more comprehensive to encourage more rigorous debate about the proposal.

Key issues to identify when consulting on transport projects

Before undertaking community consultation it is useful to ask the following questions:

- Is the project particularly contentious?
- What sort of area is it (rural, urban, rural residential?)
- How much do the community know about the project?
- How experienced are the community in being involved with transport concepts or proposals?
- How many properties are likely to be affected?
- Do people live adjacent to the route, station or terminal?
- What is known in terms of the existence of established interest groups?
- How technologically skilled are the stakeholders?
- How environmentally sensitive is the area?
- What are the socio-economics of the people involved?

Answers to these questions will assist in determining the level and type of consultation that is appropriate.

Set objectives

It is important that objectives for a project are developed at the beginning

The broad objectives for a large consultation program (eg EIS for a transport project) might be to:

Consultation

- gain the co-operation and support of the community for consultation program and activities;
- gain insight into the needs and expectations of the community and any issues likely to impact on the project;
- maintain open and two way communication with all stakeholders through the program

Education

- provide a medium in which to educate the community on the need to undertake the study and the works;
- provide a medium in which to evaluate the community in issues relevant to the works and the consequences (social, environmental and financial) for decisions made;
- highlight to the community any problems, issues and limitations facing the proponent regarding the proposal; and
- communicate both the preliminary and final findings of the study to all stakeholders

Issues management

- proactively identify and manage issues that arise
- establish stronger rapport between the proponent and the community, particularly vocal interest groups

Use a variety of techniques

Listed below are some techniques commonly used in community consultation:

- newsletters
- letter box drops
- mailing lists
- toll free phone lines
- fact sheets
- questions and answers
- open days
- discussion days
- static and staffed displays
- comment forms
- media material
- paid advertising
- community liaison groups
- public meetings
- site visits
- school projects
- workshops
- focus groups
- information kits
- presentations to special interest groups
- reply paid addresses
- consultation report
- sausage sizzles

The list of techniques is really only limited by your imagination (and of course your budget).

Some comments on recent trends in community consultation

Stakeholder consultation

One of the common current trends is to establish a Community Reference Group (CRG, also known as a Community Liaison Group, a Community Advisory Group Community Advisory Panel etc). CRG's are established as representative of community stakeholders. Implemented as the only consultation technique they can be at risk of representing the views of only a few people. The key question here is "Do selected stakeholders represent all the potentially affected and interested public at the decision making table, in every situation and all the time?" An important consideration should be the development of stakeholder CRGs as only one of several techniques. In fact the comment that has often been made is particularly relevant - 'By holding a CRG don't exclude the largest stakeholder group of all: the public'.

Public meetings

Often the first thing that the community and proponents alike call for when they think community consultation is needed is a public meeting. Community consultation practitioners will tell you that a public meeting does not equal community consultation. Public meetings generally mean that the vocal minority have their say and people leave the meeting feeling like they did not have an opportunity to put their view point across. Many stories go around the community consultation traps about disastrous public meetings that went out of control etc. Public meetings should not be necessary if other community techniques are utilised. They are however sometimes unavoidable and can be useful when issues and stakeholders are completely unknown. If there is an absolute need to have a public meeting the best advice is to use an experienced and skilled facilitator.

How to consult the community on strategic landuse issues

Getting communities to think strategically or to be even interested in strategic landuse issues can be very difficult and requires different techniques and approaches than consultation on a particular project.

Issues such as community values often need to be determined for strategic studies. Community values can be defined as the attributes of a particular thing which lead it to be considered highly by the community. Values represent what is important. There is

much interest in transport in the general community and when undertaking a strategic planning project the involvement of the community needs to include harnessing this interest to ensure that strategic transport decisions include the community view.

The Maitland Integrated Transport Study referred to earlier is an example.

How to use the communities input

Reporting

In the past reporting on community consultation activities has not been particularly good. It is important however that all consultation activities are documented and reported on. All material such as newsletters, mailing lists and media articles as appendices should be included. Well documented reports are very useful to accompany technical reports to approval authorities, management etc.

It is also essential that the community participating in a consultation process receive feedback - reporting back during and at the end of the project is very important.

Reports on community consultation need to show the who, what, why, where and when.

Approaches to consultation

Possible elements of winning and losing strategies in relation to community consultation are presented below (in no particular order).

Some community consultation strategies:

Winning Techniques	Losing Techniques
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A person/team who is keen to liaise with and involve local community• treats community as partner• holds activities when community are available• includes a number of activities• highlights limitations and constraints to community• changes proposal on the basis of community suggestion• lets the community decide its representatives for committees etc.• realise the community has experts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• avoids local community and is scared• treats community as nuisance• holds activities during the day• only advertises once in local paper• says 'yes' to every community request, knowing they can't be achieved• refuses to take on community ideas• dictates who is invited to activities, to be on committees etc• thinks the community are uneducated and stupid

Winning Techniques	Losing Techniques
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• records all activities, invitations, attendances and results• tries to learn about and understand who the community is• thinks the process will be two-way at best• thinks about project, consultation and other activities in light of their own community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• keeps no records• jumps straight in with no background knowledge• thinks they are there to tell the community• doesn't think of the community as a dynamic group

In summary the keys to successful community consultation are:

- anticipate what the issues may be; do some background research as part of the project feasibility;
- don't ignore or avoid the local community;
- be prepared to amend or change proposals;
- involve the local community; and
- use a combination of techniques

The fundamental key to community consultation is to ensure that the information is consistent. This will minimise misinformation, rumour, innuendo etc.

The final comment is in relation to community consultation - you won't please everybody, but you must give them the opportunity to have their say if you are going to have a successful community consultation programme and ultimately a successful project. Remember the Chinese Proverb!

Community consultation might be tough, costly and at times frustrating. It will also be fun, rewarding and enlightening.

Conclusion

Just because a community is involved in the strategic transport planning process and the planning for specific projects such as the examples outlined in this paper does not mean that we will always get transport right. The involvement of the public does however contribute to a higher level of understanding in transport issues and is an important contributor to getting transport right.

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