



## An Assessment of Public Involvement Strategies: Summary Report

Transportation agencies at all governmental levels are engaging in more active public participation than ever before. The increased level of activity is due in part to the more specific requirements for consulting the public during the transportation decision-making process, but it also reflects an understanding by transportation officials and professionals that involving the public in the process—at the earliest point possible—results in better projects.

The need to consult with the public early and often presents the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and other transportation agencies with major challenges. Effective public involvement requires responsive processes that are executed by professionals who are well prepared to interact effectively with the community. Project O-1875 provides TxDOT employees with suggested approaches and tools to execute

a more efficient public involvement process.

Recommendations and observations resulting from the project, taken with the public involvement training modules developed by the TxDOT Environmental Affairs Division, prepare both new and experienced staff to better deal with public involvement.

### *What We Did . . .*

Researchers concentrated efforts in three areas, working closely with TxDOT personnel to produce results that would have the greatest potential for impact in public involvement activities. A major subject of research was the process of conducting public hearings. Researchers also addressed incorporation of new technology and techniques in executing public involvement, as well as suggestions of techniques for specific public involvement situations. In addition,

researchers reviewed TxDOT manuals and training programs, looking specifically for changes that might be necessary should TxDOT use the recommended public hearing process changes and new technology.

Researchers conducted case studies of the public hearing process in several state departments of transportation. These case studies and a review of existing research that documents processes in other states resulted in findings that point to a modification in the manner in which TxDOT conducts official public hearings on transportation projects.

A survey of transportation Internet sites and review of literature on development of Internet sites yielded suggestions for incorporating use of the Internet and other visualization techniques into traditional transportation community outreach.



The researchers reviewed the TxDOT policy manuals and training modules and developed some minor recommendations for improvements or refinements to better communicate with the public.

The department is poised, with the newly drafted manuals and training modules, to more consistently prepare its staff to plan and execute effective and responsive public involvement programs.

### What We Found . . .

While TxDOT is executing more extensive public involvement programs—with more one-on-one public interaction—the department is hampered by an official public hearing process that appears to be less effective than a more open process that has been adopted by the majority of state departments of transportation. The open forum public hearing concept (see [figure 1](#)) has found wide acceptance. Some state departments of transportation, such as the Georgia DOT, use only the open forum public hearing process, while others offer the open forum hearing as an option. Research documents, for a variety of reasons, that the public is more comfortable participating in open forum hearings versus the traditional public hearing format. The open forum hearing format generates up to five times the number of participant comments than received in the traditional format. TxDOT districts widely use

the open forum concept in public meetings, and experience points to more productive results for all parties involved. Extending the use of the open forum concept to public hearings appears logical based on both TxDOT experience with the open forum public meetings and the experiences of departments around the country.

Because most of the public involvement workbooks and manuals were developed prior to

the explosion of Internet use, researchers gave special attention to the ways in which websites are being incorporated into public involvement efforts. While Internet websites can be helpful in enhancing the outreach to and communications with the public, they should never substitute for public meetings and other personal interaction. They can, however, be valuable tools for providing detailed information and documentation of planning and

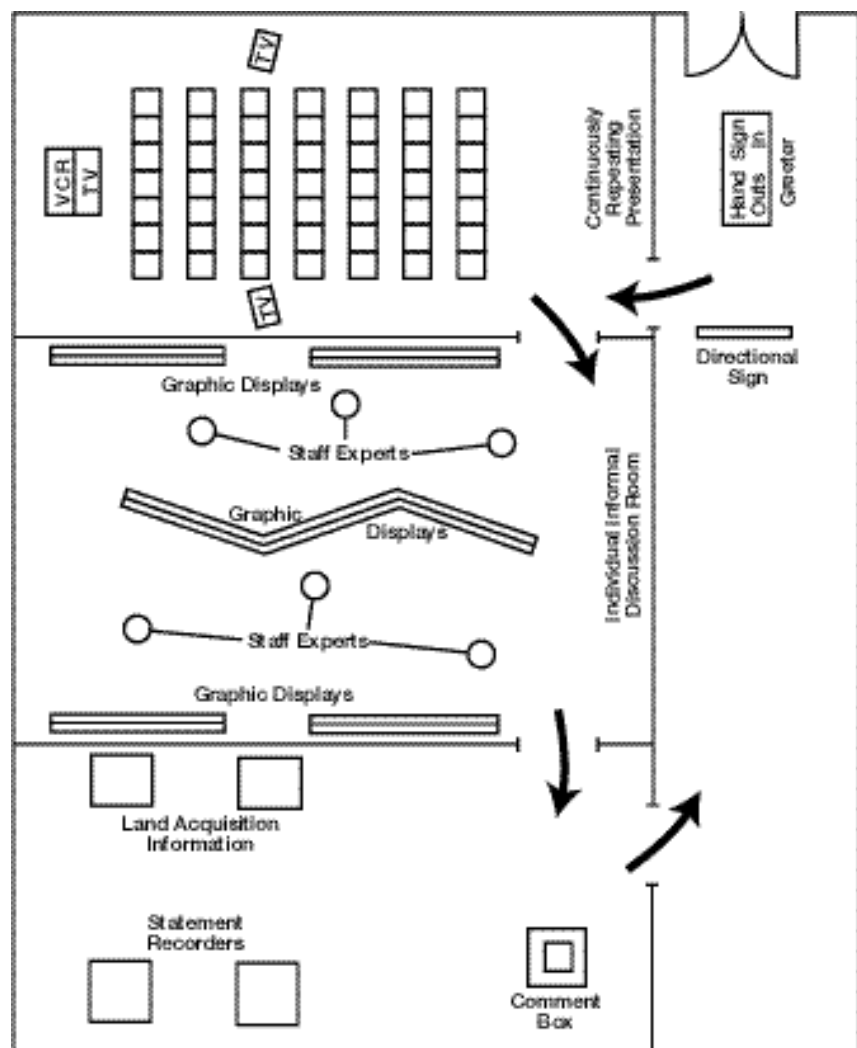


Figure 1. Open forum format (Illinois example)



design, as well as the public involvement process itself. The websites are also helpful because they are available to the public around the clock. The project report includes the process TxDOT adopted for using the Internet as well as the State of Texas requirements for website development. Researchers also outline suggestions for developing effective websites and provide samples of existing transportation websites (see figure 2).

Through the literature review and contact with transportation public involvement professionals around the country, researchers compiled a substantial number of recent documents that thoroughly describe public involvement techniques and tools. Using the experiences of other state departments of transportation, TxDOT districts, and literature, researchers suggest the use of public involvement techniques and tools for specific applications, including: planning, scoping, pre-design and environmental study, detailed design and right-of-way acquisition, and construction or operations.

## The Researchers Recommend...

Based on the findings in this project, the researchers recommend:

- changes in TxDOT official policy and administrative code to allow the option of using open forum public hearings;

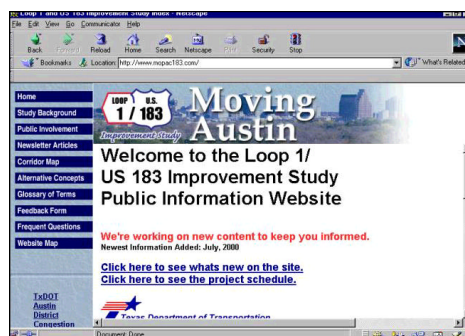
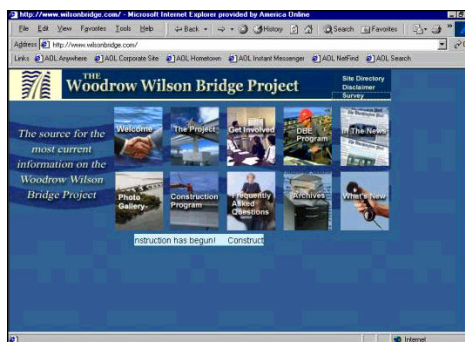
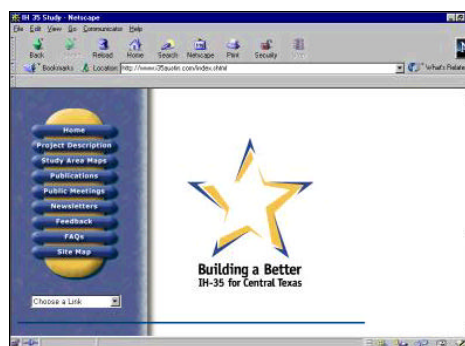


Figure 2. Example websites

- continued enhancements to and use of TxDOT public involvement training modules;
- use of the Internet and other evolving technology to better communicate with the public, including the TxDOT official website and those developed by consultants to the department;

- increased coordination of district staff to make the best use of skills and talents to benefit the public involvement process—using a team approach that includes advanced planning, public information, environmental, and design representatives; and
- recognition of the benefits of a robust public involvement process, including: improved decisions that take into account the concerns of diverse interests; more timely and early collaboration that allows better decisions and fewer delays in subsequent project development; more effective public and agency collaboration in the future; support from decision makers for continued public involvement efforts; broad-based and ongoing support for transportation decisions; and decisions that are generally more acceptable and, therefore, more easily implemented.



## *For More Details . . .*

The research is documented in Report 1875-1, *An Assessment of Public Involvement Strategies*.

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**To obtain copies of the report, contact Dolores Hott, Texas Transportation Institute, Information & Technology Exchange Center, (979) 845-4853, or e-mail [d-hott@tamu.edu](mailto:d-hott@tamu.edu). See our on-line catalog at <http://tti.tamu.edu>.**

## *TxDOT Implementation Status May 2001*

One product was identified as a deliverable for this project: information to guide a project manager in the selection of an appropriate public involvement model and strategies and to help assess the effectiveness of public involvement.

This information is being implemented on three fronts:

1. Revisions to the Environmental Division (ENV) training module for public involvement. To accomplish this project the project director and research supervisor attended the pilot course and made recommendations for revisions consistent with this project's findings.
2. Revisions to the Texas Administrative Code regarding the conduct of public hearings. The Director of ENV will meet with the Office of General Counsel to discuss this matter. This project's program coordinator has been involved in this discussion, and there is general support to implement the research findings into TxDOT rules and practice.
3. Revisions to the ENV manual. This is ongoing, but is dependent upon item 2.

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***YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS WELCOME!***

## *DISCLAIMER*

This research was performed in cooperation with the Texas Department of Transportation and the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). The contents of this report reflect the views of the author, who is responsible for the facts and accuracy of the data presented herein. The contents do not necessarily reflect the official view or policies of the FHWA or TxDOT. This report does not constitute a standard, specification, or regulation, nor is it intended for construction, bidding, or permit purposes. Trade names were used solely for information and not for product endorsement. The researcher in charge of this project was Ms. Cynthia A. Weatherby Gilliland.