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Ten Ways Transportation Agencies Can Improve Public Engagement with Diverse Communities

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Transportation agencies are recognizing the importance of undertaking robust public engagement, especially with historically disadvantaged communities. Many of these communities have been subject to redlining, division and demolition from highway construction or redevelopment efforts, and other forms of institutional discrimination perpetuated by civic agencies, including transportation departments. This history has fostered distrust, which makes current public engagement efforts challenging. This challenge is exacerbated by a lack of networks that might aid transportation practitioners in connecting with local residents.

Transportation agencies have begun to address this issue by partnering with local community-based organizations (CBOs). These organizations often have strong connections to residents and the capacity to connect them with planning efforts. However, transportation agencies can encounter many challenges in forming and maintaining these partnerships. Researchers at UC Davis interviewed agency staff, consultants, and community members involved in four successful community engagement processes with historically marginalized communities in San Francisco, Oakland, Fresno, and Los Angeles to distill best practices for transportation agencies to engage with these communities. The top ten findings are as follows:

1. Trust is crucial for achieving meaningful engagement.

Residents showed up and engaged in transportation planning processes because people or organizations they

trusted invited them. This trust did not extend to the public agency leading the process, due to years of neglect and mistreatment. Building and maintaining respectful partnerships with CBOs can offer public agencies access to historically marginalized communities, which over time may develop into trust.

2. Treat community-based organizations as equal partners rather than consultants acting on behalf of the agency.

CBOs represent a strong public constituency with different expertise than most government agencies. CBOs often have strong local leadership and significant collective power. An attitude of humility will aid planners in recognizing and honoring this expertise.

3. Compensate community partners fairly for their contributions and expertise.

CBOs provide transportation agencies with an invaluable service: access to hard-to-reach residents and sophisticated local cultural knowledge. They should be paid as experts, and community members should also be incentivized for their participation.

4. Let community-based organizations decide what good community engagement is.

CBOs know their constituencies and what they will respond to. Transportation agencies should let CBOs take the lead in planning engagement processes and events.

5. Translate technical jargon to make information more accessible.

Translating bureaucratic processes and technical details is crucial to maintaining transparency and ensuring that communities have full information to inform their decisions. Agencies can think creatively with CBO partners about how to make information and processes accessible.

6. Engage in community concerns beyond the scope of the project.

Transportation is a thread that connects many other areas of people's lives. Planners should be willing to engage in conversations on topics beyond transportation, such as other public services or housing. Agencies and consultants can use their power and relationships to help address other community concerns, such as by inviting representatives from other agencies or departments to join meetings. These actions will help build trust.

7. Address major community concerns such as displacement, policing, and youth development.

Transportation challenges within historically marginalized communities are intimately connected with issues of displacement, policing, and youth development. Researching these issues ahead of time and being prepared to address them in a meaningful way will help transportation goals.

8. Know local histories of transportation injustice.

Virtually every community in the U.S. has a history of transportation infrastructure and planning causing harm to Black communities and communities of color. Agencies should enter public engagement processes knowing this

history and should talk about it up front. Agencies should also consider how new projects can make amends for these past harms.

9. Include the community in the final reporting process.

The final plan or report should document the community engagement process and give credit for community members' contributions. Community members should have an opportunity to contribute to or provide feedback on report drafts.

10. Follow up planning with implementation in a timely manner.

Many historically disadvantaged communities have been waiting for improvements for a long time. While involvement in planning process means a lot, immediate follow-through on community recommendations means even more. Potential strategies include setting aside funds for quick-build or pilot projects and updating CBOs regularly on the status of implementation plans.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the report "Answers from the Margins: Participatory Planning with Disadvantaged Communities" prepared by Sarah McCullough and Rebecca van Stokkum with the University of California, Davis. The report can be found here: www.ucits.org/research-project/2019-06.

For more information about findings presented in this brief, please contact Sarah McCullough at smc@ucdavis.edu.

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