

A GUIDE TO PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PLANNING

Options to meaningfully involve the public

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National Capital Region
Transportation Planning Board

What is Public Participation? It's trust-building.

USDOT defines public participation as... *a process that proactively seeks full representation from the community, considers public comments and feedback, and acts on that feedback to incorporate into a project, program, or plan.*

It's involvement in the process of making a decision.

Public Relation Activities

Activities directed at maintaining or promoting understanding and favorable relation with the community or public.

Public Involvement Activities

Activities that solicit and consider input or feedback from members of the community or public and/or help build durable community relationships and understanding of community wants and needs outside a specific project.



Public Involvement at TPB

Our Approach

TPB is a planning agency which does not own or operate public facilities, so TPB's approach to public involvement is fundamentally different from state and local jurisdictions.

How TPB involves the public:

- Monthly TPB meeting public comment under Agenda Item 1
- Meeting federally required public involvement requirements, such as for the Visualize plan
- Larger-scale public engagement and outreach projects EXP: Voices of the Region
- Public-facing committees (CAC and AFA)
- Social media and TPB News



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We get a lot of public comments. Why?

[The Powerful Role of Convener.pdf](#)



Photo courtesy : Deutsche Welle

5 Steps to Public Involvement

1. ID the interested and affected public
2. Determine the promise to the public
3. Fit the Forum to the Fuss
4. Use input as promised and provide feedback
5. Evaluate and Improve

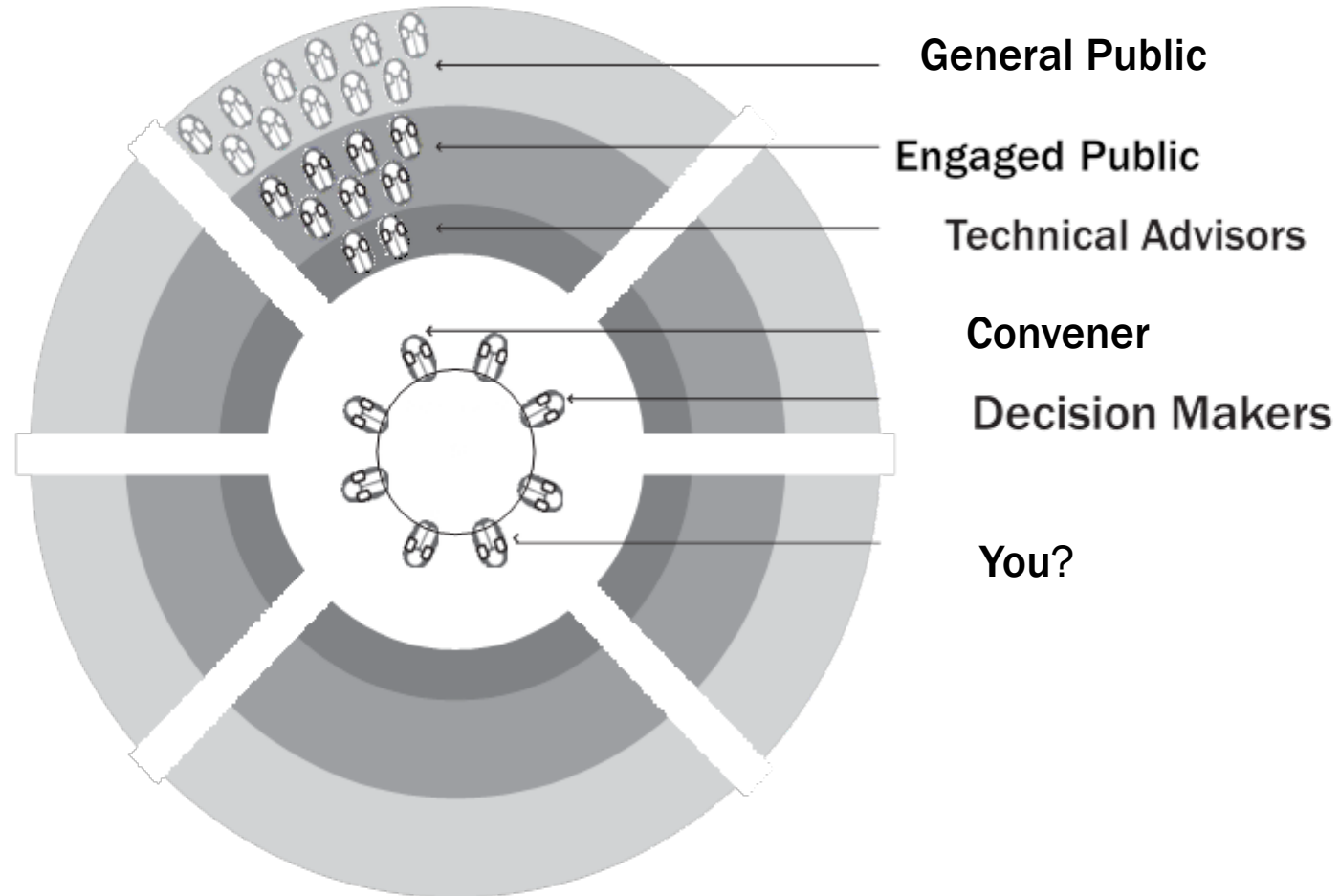


Metro Access Independent Review 2004. TPB Archives



1. Who do you need to involve?

The Wedge of Interests



1. Who do you need to involve?

Consider Completing a Situation Assessment

A process used to understand the current nature or status of a program or condition.

- Hold a series of conversations with people who know something about the topic.
- Use the same questions with everyone you talk with.
- Always ask them-- “Who else should I talk to?”
- Summarize what you heard by topic without attribution.

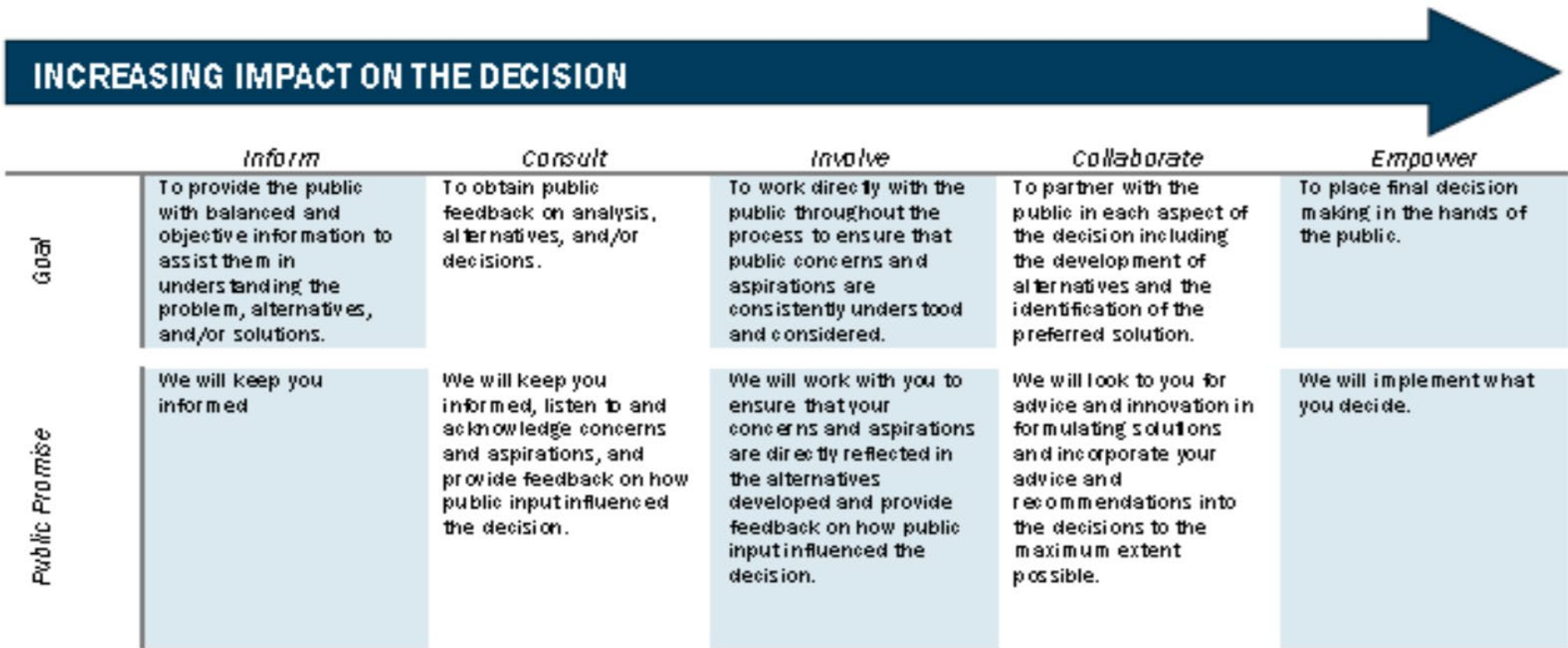
Outcome: A clear picture of the people, process, and aspects of your topic.

Example: Access for All Advisory Situation Assessment Questions

- *Describe how you currently engage with the AFA committee.*
- *If the AFA committee didn't exist, how would your plan or program be affected?*
- *What would you need to do differently to implement your plan or program?*
- *How would you describe your satisfaction with the current manner of engaging with the AFA? Is it sufficient? Could it be improved?*
- *Can you indicate what your engagement with the AFA, or the communities identified above, will need to look like over the next 4 years?*
- *Anyone else I should talk to?*



2. Determine the promise to the public



Most common levels at TPB

IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum



2. Determine the promise to the public

Inform

A promise to keep the public informed.

Example: Information shared to members during regular meetings.

Consult

A promise to keep the public informed, listen to, and acknowledge concerns, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.

Example: Access for All Committee Refresh

Involve

A promise to work with the public to ensure that concerns are considered in the alternatives developed where possible and provide feedback on how input influenced the decision (or not).

Example: DMVMoves

Collaborate

Look to the public for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate advice into the decision to the maximum extent possible.

Example: Long Range Plan Task Force

Empower

Implement what is decided.

Example: Referenda



3. Fitting the Forum to the Fuss

6 ways (and counting...) to create trust

- Adequate time to provide the input
- Advanced notice of public meetings
- Clarity on how input will be used
- Easy access to provide the input
- No jargon, acronyms
- Follow-up



I-66 public meeting (VDOT/[Flickr](#))



3. Fitting the Forum to the Fuss



(Laura Bachle)

Nuts and Bolts

- When will it start and when will it end?
- What's your budget?
- What engagement techniques will be used?
- How will the plan be executed?



3. Fitting the Forum to the Fuss: Engagement Techniques

Inform

- Publications
- Briefings
- Press releases
- Website
- Information hot line
- Multimedia platforms
- Information kiosk

Consult

- Public comment opportunities
- Public meetings
- Listening sessions
- Interviews
- Focus Groups
- Workshops
- Visioning/Appreciative Inquiry
- World Café
- Charettes
- Availability sessions
- Surveys and polls
- Opinion research

Involve

- Training
- Advisory committees
- Scoping sessions
- Policy dialogues
- Task forces
- Joint fact-finding



4. Use Input and Provide Feedback

You are successful if you can demonstrate to the public how your promise was achieved.

How did they influence the outcome of the decision?

Want to know how you did?



(Anacostia Watershed Society)



5. Evaluate and Improve

Measuring outputs

- How many clicks?
- How many survey responses?
- How many briefings?
- How many people keep showing up?

Bottom line: Just count

Six Key Indicators of a Successful Outcome (NCHRP. Brown, et. al., 2019)

- Influence and impact
- Transparency and clarity
- Timing
- Inclusionary
- Targeted engagement
- Accessibility

Bottom line:
Was there an increase in trust?



Key Takeaways

Public input makes decisions better.
It's trust-building.

Public involvement is a process, not a single event.

Never promise to do one thing and then do another. Don't overpromise.

A participation plan can have more than one promise to the public at different stages of the activity. Just be very clear what the promise is.

Sources:

- Better Decisions through Consultation and Collaboration, USEPA Conflict Prevention and Resolution Center, c. 2010 Dalton and Harter
- Promising Practices for Meaningful Public Involvement (USDOT, November 2023)
- Public Participation Guide (USEPA, Updated July, 2024)
- IAP2 (International Association for Public Participation) Public Involvement Spectrum
- TPB Participation Plan (2020 Update)
- A People's Guide to Transportation Decision-Making in the National Capital Region (January, 2024)



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