Bringing New Participants into the Planning Process

Research sponsored by the Federal Transit Administration
Office of Research, Demonstration and Innovation
U.S. Department of Transportation
Making communities more walkable in cities and towns across Massachusetts since 1990
Research focus

Develop and test techniques to broaden transit users’ participation in planning by:

• Identifying transit users who do not typically get involved in formal planning processes
• Develop techniques to engage these non-participants
• Test the techniques and elicit opinions on public agency plans
How do we know people are missing from the planning process?

- Looked in detail at a study area with a number of projects – both recent and still underway
- Jamaica Plain - 38,000 people
- 38% use public transit and get to transit by walking
- 11% of JP residents walk to work
- During 6 recent planning efforts only 15 – 20 regular participants
- Demographic, economic and cultural mix of the neighborhood was not represented
Public participation can unintentionally exclude many community members.

- Meetings are too frequent & too demanding of continuous participation
- Information can be too technical and too difficult to follow for occasional participants
- May be difficult to attend for affected transit users (evenings, requiring long transit trips)
- May be uncomfortable for non-English speakers
Who do we want to reach to understand how to improve transit?

- Current, frequent users of transit
- Mix of income groups
- Mix of ages and cultures
- Riders wanting better access
- Businesses that depend on transit service
When in the transit planning process can participation make a difference? And, when are people likely to participate?

- When a planning process is underway for imminent changes
- When an issue is well publicized
- When there is heightened public interest in planning due to differences of opinion

WalkBoston coordinated the research effort with two ongoing studies
MBTA Route 39 Study Goals

• Consolidation of bus stops
• New bus shelter program
• Curb extensions
• Improved speeds on whole route
Centre/South Streets Study Goals

- Bus stop improvements
- Reconfiguration of 2 local business areas
- New street furniture
- New crosswalks
How we looked for new participants

- Targeted transit users where they are
- Looked for people willing to listen a few moments
- Deliberately included non-English speakers
- Deliberately drew out those less sophisticated about the public participation process
- Went to people where they work
What we tested

1. Bringing transit planning questions to existing meetings held by neighborhood organizations
2. Inviting neighborhood groups to participate in transit-related walking audits
3. Short on-street, in-person surveys of bus riders
4. Door-to-door merchant and business interviews
5. Walk-By Visioning – an interactive process
Interactions by Time of Day
1. Presentations at neighborhood meetings

- Professional or business organizations, neighborhood groups, outdoor community events

Conclusions from presentations

- Community meetings attract the “regulars”
- Neighborhood meetings do not represent all residents
- Business organization meetings do not attract all merchants
- Little interest in discussing process issues
- Participants tend to focus on service issues
2. Walking Audits

- Invited professional or business organizations, neighborhood groups, attendees at community events

Conclusions from walking audit invitations

- On-street audits require active participation of community groups – very difficult to obtain
- Consolidation of bus stops and the condition of walking routes not sufficiently compelling to generate interest
- Adding basic audit questions to interviews with local merchants was very useful
3. **Short on-street, bus stop interviews**

- Tested both paper interview forms and iPads for novelty
- Very short interviews – the “bus was coming!”

**Conclusions from on street interviews**

- Lack of interest – people may not see interviews as useful ways to register opinions
- Some people are threatened by forms
- Non-English speakers are most wary, very few participated
- Bus riders are in a hurry, distracted
- iPads were of no interest
- Bus stops do have promise to reach new participants
iPad Survey

- Location
- Gender
- Age
- Race
- Language
- Whether or not they ride Route 39
- Level of knowledge about the study
- If they own a car
- What other transit routes they use
4. Door-to-door business interviews

• 100% sample in Centre/South corridor
• Informal, unscheduled, drop-in interviews.
• Spoke with any representative of the business, not necessarily the owner
• Minimal questions: are you aware...?
• Open ended conversation
• Illustrations from city’s planning process
**Recommended Alternatives**

**CONCEPT 1**

**PRO:**
- Creates active pedestrian areas adjacent to existing commercial buildings
- Equally allocates sidewalk to all corners of the square
- Shortest pedestrian crossings
- Opportunity to divide pedestrian zones by use
- Retains existing traffic pattern

**CON:**
- Loss of parking in the intersection
- Potential for congestion during peak hours
- Limited accessibility to abutters on the southeastern frontage
- Potential difficulty for bicyclists to navigate the roundabout

**CONCEPT 4**

**PRO:**
- Prioritizes through movement on Centre Street
- Provides space in most usable locations
- Maintains majority of parking throughout the square

**CON:**
- May require signalization
- Access to Day Street

*Informational plan used in business interviews*
Conclusions from business interviews

• Positive response from almost every business
• Inclusiveness appreciated
• Business hours respected
• Many suggestions for improved crosswalks; few for improved street furniture and landscaping
• Some get info from informal network
• Great opportunity to tell people what’s going on
Lessons in business interview techniques

• Targeted effort can reach merchants and business people
• Reached a mix of managers, owners, staff
• Merchants cannot leave businesses for meetings – so going to them is necessary to include them
• Interviews that take place at stores/businesses get great responses
• Low-cost, no scheduling issues because these were drop-in interviews: 2 two-person teams could do 20 interviews/afternoon
5. **Walk-by-visioning – hands-on interaction**

- Interactivity is novel and generated a lot of interest
- Low cost, low tech
- Simple to administer
- Easily replicable in other settings
- People can be randomly selected if desired
- Livelier displays attract more participants
- Non-threatening, easy to vote
- Anonymous, no record of participants’ names
- Reaches many people and diverse participants
- Illustrates possible civic improvements
Walk-By Visioning in action
Questions used in Walk-By Visioning

• Your personal preferences for types of improvements
• Your thoughts about city improvement proposals
• Your vote for preferences
Walk-By Visioning: Votes on elements
Walk-by Visualization at the Green Roots Festival in Jamaica Plain
June 7, 2009 - 12:00 pm

83 people were approached by WalkBoston staff

Observations:
52 Female; 31 Male
58 White; 11 Black; 7 Latino; 4 Asian; 4 NA
7 Teens; 21 20s; 23 30s; 15 40s; 15 50s+

75 people spoke English
8 people spoke Spanish*
15 people declined to participate

68 people participated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Responded yes</th>
<th>Responded no</th>
<th>Total* responses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rides #39 bus</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows of MBTA study</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows of City of Boston study</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owns car</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other public participation experience</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>51</td>
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</tbody>
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# a Spanish-speaking staff person was available
* Totals vary because of crowded conditions at the event

Walk-by Visioning: Sample results
Each participant was shown the posters with photos, and given 4 sticker votes, red, yellow, and green for the top three preferences, and a black sticker for least attractive. Stickers were tallied as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>&quot;Top 3&quot; votes</th>
<th>Last place votes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enclosed bus shelter</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Snow clearance</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posted bus schedules</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidewalk repair</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trash cans</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedestrian signs at crosswalks</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transit tracker signs</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street lights</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count-down signals</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-sided bus shelter (just a roof)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crosswalk markings near bus stops</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transit curb extensions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posted route numbers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News stands</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Walk-by Visioning: Sample results**
Conclusions from Walk-By Visioning exercises

- Brings in new participants
- Low-key politically
- Low costs (primarily staff), easy set-up
- Many willing participants
- No commitment, no threats
- Participation is anonymous
Evaluation of the techniques

Neighborhood meetings
• Relatively few individual participants were reached

Walking audits
• Few groups or individuals were willing to devote time to field work

Bus stop interviews
• Relatively little new information or opinion emerged

Merchant interviews
• Reached all local merchants and brought in new voices

Walk-By Visioning
• Reached many new people, bridged language gaps
Key lessons learned

• Informal interviews and walk-by-visioning are less exact than surveys, but they reach many more people and a more diverse population.

• Informal techniques and walk-by-visioning can be more enjoyable for people than formal surveys and were enthusiastically received.

• Multi-lingual materials should be created to reach non-English speakers.
New tools for participation

- Informal interviews and walk-by-visioning can be carried out with limited staff time.
- Informal interviews can be undertaken anytime to supplement a planning study – before, during or after a study, and prior to final decisions.
- Techniques can evolve from fieldwork. The Walk-By Visioning exercise emerged to address some of the limitations of the bus-stop interviews.
New tools for participation, cont.

- Informal interviews are non-threatening
- Not much time required of participants - no more than 15 min
- No special equipment, technology or training is necessary
- Less expensive than formal meetings and surveys
- Preference/priorities obtained with photos, maps, brief discussions
- Limited number of questions is essential for clarity
Conclusions

• Go to participants in the field – don’t ask people to come to you
• Make participation fun and visually interesting
• Keep things informal – much more comfortable for many people who do not usually participate in the formal processes
• Do not ask people to speak up in public – let them express opinions one-on-one
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