

# Appendix G

## **Public Participation Policy**

# PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN THE PLANNING PROCESS GASTON URBAN AREA

## *Study Area Profile and the Planning Process*

Gaston County is within the Piedmont crescent of North Carolina and is part of the Charlotte-Gastonia-Concord MSA. The county is rural in character but has a large sprawling urban center that includes seventy-five percent of the persons living in the county. One of the unique features of this urban area is the number of incorporated municipalities. Including Gastonia, which is the largest, there are 11 governing boards in addition to the Board of County Commissioners.

The United States Department of Transportation, through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) requires:

"...each urbanized area, as a condition to the receipt of Federal capital or operating assistance, have a continuing, cooperative and comprehensive transportation planning process that results in plans and programs consistent with the comprehensive planned development of the urbanized area"

These federal regulations require that a single agency responsible for the implementation of the urban transportation planning process in each urban area. This agency is designated as the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the urban area. In the Gaston Urbanized Area this function is filled by the Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) and is advised by the Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC). The TAC members are elected officials appointed by their board or council to serve as the town's representative. The TCC are members of the individual cities' staffs that review the technical aspects of planning - particularly highway planning.

Among its various functions the TAC ensures that a continuing, cooperative and comprehensive (3C) planning process exists in the urban area. The element most closely associated with this process is the highway planning process. The Federal Register states that: "The urban transportation planning process shall include the development of a transportation plan consisting of a transportation systems element and a long range element. The transportation plan shall be reviewed annually to confirm its validity and its consistency with current transportation and land use conditions."

For the Gaston Urban Area, the North Carolina Department of Transportation has historically conducted most of the technical work of the Thoroughfare Plan. However, the Gastonia Engineering Department is performing a larger amount of technical work for the MPO. This involves computer models which can take months to calibrate. These models are used to evaluate the various alternatives proposed during the planning process. The local planners provide demographic information and alternatives needed for the modeling. However, for this 2030 Long Range Transportation Plan revision, the Charlotte Department of Transportation is handling the lion's share of technical modeling work for the entire region. The decision to have one agency, CDOT, to perform this work is to better provide the uniform and consistent data collection and output analysis necessary for regional compliance for the 8-Hour Conformity Report for Ozone Non-Attainment as established by USEPA.

The State Transportation Engineer brings the proposed alternatives for the MPO to review. After additional comments from the MPO, the recommended plan continues to the final and formal public hearings.

There is no known federal law or regulation stipulating how the general public should be involved. There is also no known state or local policy guiding public input or hearings except the Open Meetings Law. This law requires 48 hour public notice if there is going to be a public meeting. The Transportation Planning Branch of NCDOT strongly encourages local hearings before the adoption of the Thoroughfare Plan, but has no regulation requiring such a hearing.

Since the TAC is a Board of Elected Officials making public policy, it follows that public input is appropriate. Lacking regulations or laws to guide staff, there appears to be great latitude for the local area to develop a meaningful method for involving the citizenry.

### **Transportation Agency & Citizen Involvement**

The best interest of the community as a whole should be the ultimate goal of transportation planning. In a democracy, the citizens have a right to know what government is doing, especially if it effects them directly. Planners may have the technical expertise to decide possible corridors for future roadways, but the citizens have the right to say if a proposed roadway is what they want. However, private and public transit agencies and citizens have an obligation to make an informed decision on road planning. The highway system of an area is an intricate web. When one section is affected there are repercussions throughout the community. Road planning is not just a matter of whether a road will go near one neighborhood. Economic development could be negatively affected by a poor road system. It can also have far reaching impacts on travel among neighborhoods in a city.

In Gastonia there is a highway project that has been proposed by state and local staffs for 20 years. The neighborhood it would go through is very vocal and has kept this project from being approved. The roadway would ease traffic at several major intersections, preventing the widening of several

roads impacting other neighborhoods. Because the average citizen does not understand the impact of his or her silence, the elected officials have yielded to public pressure, and this highly important road has never been constructed.

The planner cannot properly plan without the active cooperation of the community. As trained professionals, it is their duty to instruct the public why they, as planners, are making a particular recommendation. This educational process should treat the citizen as an equal partner in the development of the community. Grassroots support is critical if the plan is going to be a success. When the plan goes before the policy boards it should have already gathered community support. After all, the thoroughfare plan is the community's plan, not the planners. The planner acts as the interpreter of data and gives this information to the public. The final decision always belongs to the people. The planners often blame angry citizens for the defeat of a plan. If the planners would do more homework, involving the community earlier it would reduce the chances of a project failing. At a minimum, planners would at least reduce the risk of being surprised at a public hearing.

There are those who say the public's consent is not necessary. The average citizen cannot really make an informed decision on such a complicated process. It is true the entire community cannot be trained in transportation planning, but they can be taught at least the basics. Most people can understand patterns of change in a community - they see it every day. They usually do not want to know how to arrive at the detailed figures that are shown to them. But they generally know whether the patterns of development make sense, particularly in the areas that they live.

### **Orienting the Planning Process**

At the beginning of the report, the federally mandated 3C planning process was described. The TAC plays an important role in ensuring the involvement of the citizens in the planning process. The federal government looks to these officials to ensure citizen involvement in the process. The redirecting of the planning process must begin with this board. They are the community leaders most involved with transportation planning. They must also be the guiding force in the involvement of the citizens.

The task of educating the public is ongoing. It is the responsibility of the MPO and the local planning staff to educate the community. General information concerning road projects, demographic changes, new or proposed thoroughfares must be given to the community on a routine basis so that it is not a surprise later. The local policy boards must involve the area planners on a more frequent basis so a professional relationship is maintained.

Along with this general education a new review process for proposed thoroughfares should be considered. A three-tiered process involving the MPO and the general public on three levels should be created. The three tiers can be summarized as:

1. The area study group is made up of private and public transportation providers, members of the municipal planning boards, and their TAC and TCC representatives;
2. A series of walk-in public hearings centering around the area's six high schools; and
3. Formal public hearings before each affected municipal planning board and city council.

This aims to build grassroots support for the Thoroughfare Plan as it is developed. The first tier would be the creation of study groups made up of planning board members from the area. The groups would be made of about 12 individuals appointed by the TAC representatives for that particular township. The study group would be made up of one or two representatives from each of the existing Planning Commissions.

Careful development of the makeup of the committees is important to maintain a broad cross section of the community. The TAC members would appoint board members with a good knowledge of the area and an interest in the project at hand. Elected officials and the public would be encouraged to participate with meetings advertised by newspaper. A monthly newsletter to each study group member would keep them informed of the activities of the other study groups.

The study group would become the center point in reviewing and recommending Thoroughfare Plan amendments. The study group members would remain on the study committee as long as they are members of a planning board or at the pleasure of their respective policy boards. However, TAC members should try to keep re-appointments to a minimum due to the large amount of training involved and the need for continuity in the program. Meetings would be held regularly and would be attended by the TCC and TAC from the area being reviewed. The staff would take steps to educate these groups in the more complex areas of transportation planning. Each study committee would appoint a chairperson who would speak for the group. The chairpersons would make the recommendations to the MPO. Disputes between the various study committees would be settled by the TAC. Minor changes to the thoroughfare plan could be handled through the study group. This group would also make the decision whether additional public hearings are necessary.

### *Public Hearing Process - Final Phases*

After a consensus has been reached by the study groups, the chairperson of each group would forward the recommendations to the TCC for review and comment. After the TCC review, each study group would present their recommendations to the TAC. If approved at this level the next phase of the hearing process would begin. This would consist of a series of walk-in public hearings where people could come and make informal comments. This would be chaired by the study group for the township with staff present for technical assistance. Recommendations would then go to the MPO for final approval.

The final phase of the process would be the formal public hearing process. This would be

a series of hearings held with each individual municipality following the procedure set down by that particular city. At each hearing the study group members appointed by the municipality would present the study assisted by staff. Individual changes would go back to the study group and the MPO.

### Minor Updates to the Long Range Transportation Plan (amended November 2001)

For updates to the Long Range Transportation Plan which do not include a change to the horizon year nor significant changes to thoroughfare cross-sections or alignments, the following opportunities for public comment should be offered:

1. The revised input data be made available to the public in the MPO offices at Gastonia City Hall for a period no less than 30 days;
2. A website will be utilized to make input data available to the public;
3. At least one public hearing will be held.

Any comments received through this process will be addressed and incorporated as appropriate.

### **Summary**

The ultimate goal of transportation planning is to promote the best interest of the people. Planning, to be effective, must involve people early in the process. The proposed method of involving more citizens in the decision making process is three-tiered. Early involvement in each municipality at a study group level would be established through the existing planning boards. Responsibility for the presentation and promotion of recommendations would shift from the staff to the study group, though there would be, by necessity, active participation by the staff. This proposal would allow active participation at a local level while educating the study group in the process. Grassroots support could be developed early in the process with meetings involving the public as the alternatives are being considered.

The advantages of using the existing planning board members are several, the principle one being that there is less lead time in educating the study groups since they will already be familiar with the planning issues in their community. The disadvantage to this process is the increased staff time needed to work with the study groups and the slow down of the process because of the increased citizen involvement. However, if we are to take the active participation of the public seriously these problems are unavoidable. Furthermore, since there were often delays in projects because of lack of public consultation early-on, the difference in the amount of time should be negligible.

Overall the new public involvement policy would have the support of both the staff and the community. By effectively using the process, citizens would have frequent, full use of the process with a minimum amount of delays in projects