

Chapter 1. INFORMING PEOPLE THROUGH OUTREACH AND ORGANIZATION

C. PROVIDING SUBSTANTIVE INFORMATION AND ESTABLISHING METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

Public involvement is a two-way street. In order to participate effectively in transportation project development and planning, people need ways to both get information from an agency and give information back to it.

On the one hand, then, agencies need to provide attractive, eye-catching materials that convey the appropriate “message.” Desktop publishing and ever-changing communication technologies offer agencies new, faster, and more varied ways to capture the public’s interest and give them the information they need to understand what is being proposed. This variety allows agencies to tailor public information pieces to specific purposes, media, audiences, projects, or plans and to update them quickly and easily.

On the other hand, agencies need to offer people effective, easy ways to communicate so that the ideas and concerns of the community are heard and attended to.

The following section describes some techniques that help agencies provide information and establish communication with the public:

- Mailing lists;
- Public information materials;
- Key person interviews;
- Briefings;
- Video techniques;
- Telephone techniques;
- Media strategies; and
- Speakers’ bureaus and public involvement volunteers.

MAILING LISTS

What are mailing lists?

Computer technology has revolutionized the process of compiling and updating mailing lists—a staple of most public involvement programs. Simplicity, ease, flexibility, and speed now characterize the once-cumbersome process of maintaining and using collections of names of those affected by or interested in a project or plan—including organizations, residents, media, elected officials, abutters, agency personnel, interest groups, and others. Agencies use mailing lists throughout planning and project development to keep a thumb on the pulse of the community and other key people. Lists include addresses but may also include telephone and FAX numbers or other information to aid in contacting people in a variety of ways. Using mailing lists, a transportation agency reaches an audience with announcements of upcoming events, meeting invitations, newsletters, summary reports, and other information about its activities.

List size is affected by a number of factors, including stakeholder population and the scope of the project, study, or plan for which names are being collected. The Atlanta Regional Commission's Family of Partners has 1,200 names. Some organizations maintain larger lists; Portland, Oregon, Metro's list comprises 60,000 names. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) retains an outside list-management firm to handle its large master list, while smaller, more frequently used lists are maintained in-house.

Why are they useful?

Mailing lists help an agency organize its public communications, particularly when lists are kept up-to-date on computer. New Jersey Transit, with approximately 1,000 names on its Monmouth–Ocean–Middlesex Counties mailing list, identifies names and addresses, group affiliation, municipality, county, facsimile number, and committee membership. It can assemble a mailing to specific groups or committees by using computerized search and sort capabilities. The master mailing list of the Portland, Oregon, Metro includes names gathered by several of its divisions. These lists are combined and sorted by computer to avoid duplicates when the agency wishes to contact the entire group.

Mailing lists demonstrate an agency's outreach efforts. A large mailing list shows that an agency has tried to reach many people. A list demonstrates that an agency has worked diligently to justify funding for a project or to involve or interest the public in its work.

Mailing lists allow agencies to provide updated information quickly. As agencies become more active in reaching out to communities, people expect to receive continual updates on meetings.

Mailing lists can focus on a targeted group of people. Those most affected by a proposal want to receive information on an agency's intentions and on the progress of the work. Special efforts should be made to include names of those who should be interested in what the agency is doing.

Computerization maximizes the flexibility and usefulness of mailing lists. From a database list, computers can generate mailing labels or customize the greeting in form letters. This "merging" of names with form letters allows personalization of each letter, rather than addressing a generic "Resident" or "To Whom it May Concern." Computers generate lists and sort according to specific criteria, such as zip codes. They also facilitate updates of information.

Computerized mailing lists form records of persons an agency has contacted. They can contain information gleaned from sign-in sheets, phone-call logs, and correspondence. New Jersey Transit uses its list as a record of meetings and events attended by individuals, as well as of their individual issues and concerns.

Agencies analyze mailing list information to evaluate programs. Agencies examine the effectiveness of a public involvement program by comparing the names on its mailing list with the names of people who have responded or participated. Areas where the population has not responded can be targeted for special attention.

Do they have special uses?

Mailing lists provide an off-the-shelf pool of potential committee and task force members, particularly if they comprise names of people who have signed in at meetings, called in to a hotline, or expressed interest in an issue—in other words, people who may want to serve in an advisory capacity. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#); [Collaborative Task Forces](#); [Citizens on Decision and Policy Bodies](#); [Hotlines](#).) In Georgia, the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC)—a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)—developed a Transportation Resource Bank of over 1,200 names of people who signed in at its planning meetings. For a subsequent major investment study, ARC contacted people on the list to develop a set of committee representatives with a variety of perspectives.

Agencies can reach all property owners who are affected by a project or program. New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) uses tax maps to identify holders of property within a certain distance of a project. The DOT then sends them mailings about the project and associated hearings.

Mailing lists are used as a basis for surveys. Larger lists are better in this respect, since they take a larger sample of a population. Lists comprising registered voters provide a random sample, while lists of people who are interested in a project define a self-selected group. A survey to this type of group is still useful, since the respondents are more likely to be well-informed. However, such a survey should not be regarded as statistically valid (i.e., it does not represent the opinion of a representative sample of the population). (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).)

How are mailing lists compiled?

Agency staff develops a list of people who want to receive information. A small, active list of people begins the process and then grows over time as more people become involved. Additions to a list are often keyed into agency actions or specific milestones in a project or planning effort.

People get on a list by signing in at a meeting. People also participate when they phone in comments or suggestions to an agency, if the agency makes a record of the caller's name and address. Agencies offer mail-in coupons in newsletters or local newspapers to encourage people to get information by joining the mailing list.

Mailing lists can and should be shared among offices within an agency and perhaps with other agencies and organizations. Outreach is enhanced as the number of names increases, and sharing information helps keep the costs of list maintenance reasonable. The Capital District Transportation Committee (CDTC)—the Albany, New York, MPO—has assembled lists from other groups, including New York State DOT, New York State Thruway Authority, freight industry organizations, the Women's Transportation Seminar (WTS), the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE), the American Planning Association (APA), and Delta Nu Alpha (a fraternal organization of transportation professionals). For 10 projects along San Francisco's waterfront, the City established a shared mailing list of more than 3,000 participants with interests of individuals coded by project.

How are they organized and maintained?

The most basic task is to assess needs and expectations for the list. What information does an agency want to distribute? What methods will be used to package the information? How frequently will the list be used? How much effort can be put into its maintenance? What resources are available?

A second step is to structure the information to be maintained. On computer, each individual's information constitutes a separate record, which is organized in categories called fields. A basic set of fields might include:

- Name
- Street number
- Street name
- Post office
- State
- Zip code
- Municipality (often different from Post Office)
- County
- Phone number
- Facsimile number

Optional information could include:

- E-mail address
- Occupation
- Household size
- Adults in household
- Affiliation (government official, interest group, etc.)
- Meetings attended
- Mailings sent
- Statements or other responses made
- Membership on committees
- Source of information if names are an assemblage of other mailing lists

Some fields may remain blank for some individuals. Most records include only names and addresses. A new field may be added at any time when a mailing list is used for a specific purpose, such as keeping track of attendance at a particular meeting.

A third step is to gather names and addresses. A variety of information-gathering methods allows an agency to reach a large portion of the population. Organizations use hotlines to build their mailing lists by having callers leave names, addresses, phone numbers, and other useful pieces of information. (See [Hotlines](#).) Agencies might work with an organization that reaches most or all of the population via services such as motor vehicle registration, voter registration, tax returns, or utility billing. The Minnesota DOT cooperates with utilities to send mailings out via utility bills. Albany's CDTC used the local phone book to identify stakeholders and interest groups for a survey of the freight community. The Portland, Oregon, Metro linked tax assessor's information and addresses for all property owners in the region to its geographic information system (GIS). Metro uses this program to inform people within a specific geographic area, municipality, street, or census tract.

A fourth step is to enter the data onto the list. This is a continuous process as new people attend meetings or use hotlines, addresses change, or an agency takes steps to broaden its constituency. Again, computerization greatly facilitates this process. Albany's CDTC and the San Diego Association of Governments send out return-mail postcards to people on its list. Recipients are asked to return the cards, updating the information if they wish to remain on the list. Those who do not return the card are dropped from the list, thus making it more cost-effective.

A fifth step is to use the list for mailings. A list can be printed out directly on envelopes or on labels for newsletters, announcements, and flyers. It can be merged with a form letter for personalized contact. Specialized lists may be developed from a master list by sorting the records according to a parameter within a single field. To conserve expenditures in agency staff time and energy, private services such as mailing houses can handle large mailings.

These steps constitute an ongoing process. As the list expands and changes, it can be reassessed for its value to the agency. New names and information are added to keep a list up-to-date. The Alaska DOT has kept a mailing list for 30 years. It includes members of the public but changes over time to reflect new elected officials and representatives from neighborhood and Alaskan native groups.

How are they used by agencies?

Agencies send out information in a variety of ways. General information, such as newsletters, meeting announcements, or invitations, can go out to an entire list. (See [Public Information Materials](#).) When sending specialized reports and other documents, the Central Puget Sound RTA, the Southwest Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission, the Atlanta Regional Commission, and Albany's CDTC all sort their lists to target specific stakeholders. For a transportation improvement program, an agency may send a summary to an entire mailing list, along with a notice that the complete report is available, while sending the full document to a selected group.

Agencies disseminate information and keep a record of interested parties. Agencies can keep records of comments received as well as personal profiles. Records of comments give agencies access to the opinions of a segment of their constituents. The San Diego, California, Association of Governments uses its mailing lists to keep track of the memberships of over 40 committees.

Agencies maintain a master list, with subsets to contact on specific issues. Agencies add names collected during all outreach activities and sort the list for people interested in a particular issue for a targeted mailing. In Washington State, the Central Puget Sound RTA maintains a master list of all names and a priority list of people with a greater level of responsibility. If an agency is about to make a presentation to the governing body of a town, people from that town can be selected to receive notices or invitations.

Who leads?

Agency staff leads in setting up a mailing list. The effort of building and maintaining mailing lists is often significant and requires the support and commitment of an agency's senior management.

Mailing lists need an organizer and caretaker to determine the fields to be included and to keep the list up-to-date. A skilled and creative clerical person with good computer skills and attention to detail can easily execute the work. Organizers of meetings and other public events can be enlisted to collect names and addresses of participants.

What are the costs?

Building and maintaining a large mailing list is a labor-intensive process that can be fairly expensive. Albany's CDTC allocates about 5 hours per week to maintenance of its database (approximately 900 names). Additional time is needed during peak periods when a large number of names is received or if a large mailing is underway. The San Diego Association of Governments dedicates approximately 10–15 staff hours per week to administration of its list (approximately 11,000 names). A Portland Metro staff person dedicates virtually all of her time to maintaining its 60,000-name mailing list.

Mailing lists are labor-saving devices, particularly if computerized. They allow an agency to contact many people at one time with individualized letters or other materials. They save staff time on phone calls. A well-organized, computerized list simplifies clerical tasks related to correspondence, which can lead to a reduced clerical workload and an associated cost reduction.

Equipment requirements are fairly modest. Most data management software packages can run on a desktop computer and are available for under \$300. Data storage is an issue if a list becomes especially large, but a large list can be stored on a computer's hard drive or cartridge and backed up on floppy disks. Mailing labels or envelopes can be printed out on most standard printers.

Large lists incur significant mailing and printing costs, but there are economies of scale. A typical newsletter is cheaper to print after the first 1,000 copies. Bulk mail costs vary, depending on the number of pieces sent to each zip code. If an agency wants to blanket a community, newspaper inserts are a good alternative to bulk mailings. New Jersey Transit recently used newspaper inserts to distribute 50,000 newsletters to key communities in the Burlington–Gloucester major investment study area and 25,000 newsletters to its Monmouth–Ocean–Middlesex major investment study corridor. For smaller mailing lists, other options may be more attractive. Bulletins from San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) reach a list of about 500–600 businesses via facsimile machines.

How are mailing lists used with other techniques?

A mailing list is a basic building block of a good public involvement program. It allows an agency to stay in direct touch with people who have an interest in its planning and projects. Used periodically throughout a process to distribute information, mailing lists require and contribute to a record of people interested in transportation.

Mailing lists are used to structure information from other techniques for gathering names. These include hotlines, other telephone logs, and communications logs. (See [Hotlines](#).)

Mailing lists are used to send out newsletters or other publications. Newsletters, pamphlets, or other printed matter update people on the progress and major milestones of a project or planning process. Announcements of public meetings, open houses, and other events are facilitated by a well-maintained mailing list. (See [Public Information Materials](#).)

Mailing lists are a basis for on-line contacts with participants. Kansas City, Missouri's MPO, the Mid-America Regional Council, is developing its mailing list into a civic advisory network to reach people on the Internet as well as through postal services. (See [On-line Services](#).)

Mailing lists help set up civic advisory committees or other groups. The New Jersey DOT, the Atlanta Regional Commission, and the Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission in Pittsburgh use mailing lists to look for potential members of Community Advisory Committees, focus groups, or ad hoc task forces. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#); [Collaborative Task Forces](#); [Focus Groups](#); [Citizens on Decision and Policy Bodies](#).)

Mailing lists help in administering community surveys. Washington State DOT has used its mailing lists to distribute surveys. The Portland, Oregon, Metro mailed a survey to 400,000 people (60 percent of households in the metro area) and received 20,000 returns, a 5-percent response rate. As part of its Transportation Policy Plan Study, Pennsylvania DOT sent out a survey attached to its newsletter and received approximately 400 responses. It should be noted that mailing lists are usually not a statistically valid method of surveying. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).)

Mailing lists help in setting up speakers' bureaus. The Atlanta Regional Commission has used its mailing list to develop a speakers' bureau that consists of a number of volunteers who meet with interested groups to discuss transportation issues. This "Family of Partners" (a concept also being explored by Georgia DOT) was developed using ARC's list of meeting sign-ins. (See [Speakers' Bureaus and Public Involvement Volunteers](#).)

What are the drawbacks?

The principal drawback is the amount of time needed to set up a list. This time commitment entails a significant labor cost. Postage and printing costs for large lists also put great strain on a budget.

To be cost-effective, mailing lists must be kept current. Albany's CDTC and the San Diego Association of Governments send return postcards to help weed out names of people who are not interested in being kept on the lists.

Mailing lists can exclude a segment of the population. Traditionally-underserved populations, such as immigrants or poor people, are particularly vulnerable to being excluded. These people frequently do not come into contact with an agency until a direct impact becomes an issue. Special efforts can broaden the reach of an agency's mailing list. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#); [People with Disabilities](#).)

Trading names and addresses with other agencies is an issue. Some people are concerned about their privacy when agencies trade their addresses. Agencies need to inform people that lists will not be used for commercial purposes but for keeping people abreast of recent developments.

Mailing lists are not a statistically-valid basis for surveys. Agencies should be cautious when using data received from surveys, particularly those from small lists. A list built from sign-in sheets and committee memberships represents a self-selected group, not a methodically-selected random sample of the population. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).)

Sometimes agencies rely excessively on mailing lists to maintain contact with the public. Often, the public treats bulk mailings as junk mail and ignores them. Agencies need to remember that mailings cannot replace direct contact through meetings, focus groups, drop-in centers, etc.

Are mailing lists flexible?

Mailing lists are applied to a multitude of tasks, including the building of committees, focus groups, and task forces, distribution of surveys, and of course the distribution of notices, newsletters, and reports. They can be tailored to contain virtually any informational category. Lists can be sorted to make sub-lists of people based on location, occupation, issues, interests, or other criteria.

When are they used most effectively?

Mailing lists are used throughout a process and for many purposes, but they should be linked to other public involvement activities. A mailing list is meaningless unless an agency has newsletters, announcements, invitations, or other printed materials to send to the public. (See [Public Information Materials](#).)

For further information:

- Alaska Department of Transportation, Juneau, Alaska, (907) 465-6971
- Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2575
- City of San Francisco Chief Administrative Office, (415) 554-5782
- Mid-America Regional Council, Kansas City, Missouri, (816) 474-4240
- New Jersey Transit, Newark, New Jersey, (201) 491-8077
- San Diego Association of Governments, San Diego, California, (619) 595-5300
- Washington State Department of Transportation, Olympia, Washington, (206) 705-7958

PUBLIC INFORMATION MATERIALS

What are public information materials?

Public information materials are materials that provide information about a transportation investment that is underway or in the planning stage. They are usually printed but sometimes are video or tactile. Public information materials are an essential form of communication in any public involvement process. The substance of the materials can be factual, present a point of view, or in some instances be legally required and thus need special drafting.

Public information materials communicate quickly. They are often visually appealing, and many need not include a great deal of detail. Some materials are quite small and contain a single item of information, like a logo for a metropolitan planning effort or a telephone number for more information. Some are geared to individual recipients, while others such as billboards reach out to a mass audience. Public information materials can summarize large amounts of information simply and in straightforward fashion. A sample range of public information materials includes:

- Advertisements—display and legal notices
- Badges and buttons
- Billboards
- Brochures
- Display boards
- Electronic media
- Fact sheets
- Fast-food placemats
- Fliers
- Grocery bags
- Magnets
- Models
- News articles
- Newsletters
- Newspaper inserts and articles
- Notices
- On-line home page
- Posters
- Press releases
- Progress bulletins
- Public service announcements (paper, video, radio)
- Slides and overheads
- Summaries of reports
- Utility bill stuffers
- Videotapes

Why are they useful?

Public information materials provide basic information about a process, project, or document in a fast, concise, and clear way. They often summarize or capsule the overall thrust of a process. They provide information on what to do to respond, comment, get more involved, or get on a mailing list for a project or study. (See [Mailing Lists](#).)

Public information materials are an easy way to update information periodically for people who aren't actively involved in an issue but who are curious or interested about its status. Often this is a very large group with fewer information needs than those who are intensely involved and need information frequently and in more depth.

Public information materials make it easy for people to find information. They are widely distributed to many people for maximum effect. Public information materials increase the chances that people actually get the information, because distribution can be extensive and less reliance is placed on press releases, word of mouth, or memory.

Information can be presented in graphic, non-technical, and non-verbal ways. Renderings, simplified diagrams, models, and cartoons communicate information different ways. An Idaho Department of Transportation (DOT) poster featured a cartoon map of a construction project. San Francisco's Municipal Transit System (MUNI) used models to show how key stations would be adapted to accommodate disabled people.

Public information materials target a broad public beyond those who attend meetings. They expand the number and geographic distribution of those who can become informed and participate. (See [Media Strategies; Improving Meeting Attendance](#).) The city of Worcester, Massachusetts, distributed pin-on buttons saying “Route 146 and a Piker, too!” to promote a new turnpike interchange and highway expansion project; the pins were distributed throughout the region. As part of its “Open Market Plan,” the Rochester, New York, Telephone Company inserted information and a survey with a billing to all of its 340,000 residential customers.

Public information materials can be tailored to a specific aspect of a project or plan. They can focus on a geographic area, a particular mode of transportation, or one element of a plan, such as evaluation criteria. The Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Council of Governments produced brochures on specific transportation modes, including one on bicycle access.

Public information materials can be fun, interesting, and attention-getting. They engage people casually. Under its “One Percent for the Arts” program, the Regional Transit Project in Seattle, Washington, used a host of amusing, non-technical materials during its planning process, including posters, badges, public service announcements based on interesting conversations, transit music, and video art performances. TV and newspaper ads highlighted the transit planning activities underway by using a character called “avoidance man,” an everyday citizen who attempted to ignore messages about the worsening state of transportation in the Puget Sound Region.

Do they have special uses?

Public information materials help people decide to participate. Attractive, well-illustrated, easy-to-understand materials make it easy for people to comprehend a process or a proposal. If they highlight ways for people to participate, community members may decide to get involved.

Public information materials get children involved. Games, placemats, and posters have been used to attract children to transportation projects. The Denver, Colorado, Regional Transit District created coloring books to teach children about light rail and safety. Amtrak and the Chicago Rapid Transit Authority prepared paper engineer’s hats for children. Amtrak distributed placemats with drawings that challenged children to find an engineer and other rail personnel hidden in a crowd. The Federal Aviation Administration prepared a connect-the-dots game and an activities book highlighting the life of the first black airplane captain, August Martin. For Portland, Maine, Comprehensive Transportation Study, materials were sent home with elementary and junior high school children.

Public information materials can be multilingual. Extensive or even moderate use of multilingual materials can create goodwill and demonstrate that an agency is trying to reach out to all groups. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#).) In Denver, Colorado, billboards in English and Spanish were used to inform people about an upcoming light rail project.

Public information materials encourage people to seek more information. The design of a piece can attract attention and encourage questioning. It can become a symbol of a process or project.

Who participates?

Nearly everyone can use public information materials. An emphasis on visual presentations makes it possible to reach people who are busy and have only a few moments to catch the message; they appreciate concise informative messages. The visual element makes it possible to reach people who may have difficulties in reading, such as the elderly and children. Visual information should be supplemented by materials designed to reach those with sight impairments. (See [People with Disabilities](#).)

Even technical and planning staff can benefit from the brevity of public information materials. In the New England Transportation Initiative (NETI) regional study, a newsletter describing alternative investment scenarios was often used and cited by the Policy Committee. Although the full document of the scenarios was relatively short, the two-page description had icons for visual cues, making it easier to read and comprehend.

And how?

People read or view public information materials in a variety of locations. They read it in print, see it on television, or hear it on radio. They review brochures or other printed material at home. They view displays in public buildings or at meetings. Libraries, state DOT offices, transit stations, or city halls are good locations to lend videotapes, provide summaries of reports, and distribute other public information materials. In San Francisco, information on transit service and joint development activities was placed in prominent locations on turnstiles.

People request information materials. In instances where wide distribution is impractical, agencies can make materials available on request. This is particularly true of reports, report summaries, slide shows, or videos. Pennsylvania DOT produced several videotapes to lend to residents on request. (See [Video Techniques](#).)

Community residents can participate in preparing public information materials. Members of the Citizen Planning Committee of the San Francisco, California, Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) wrote articles for a newsletter for a joint development planning study newsletter.

Public information materials reach people at restaurants and stores. Restaurant or fast-food placemats with information about a project are seen by people who may not read news articles about transportation projects or listen to public service announcements. The Portland, Oregon, Tri-Met combined grocery shopping with information about transit. Working with a grocery vendor, Tri-Met printed messages on grocery bags, printed its logo on grocery advertisements, stuffed a flier in each grocery bag, and handed out magnets printed with a logo at the cash register.

Public information materials show that an agency understands and values communication with people other than technicians and bureaucrats. For the Central Artery North Area project in Boston's Charlestown neighborhood, the Massachusetts Highway Department produced a two-sided color poster, "Charlestown in 1999." The poster described community development goals, illustrated by an artist's view of neighborhood development after the highway was depressed. This poster touched lightly upon the engineering feats needed to depress the highway, reflecting the interests and concerns of the community about the future.

Who leads production of public information materials?

Experienced staff with communication, public involvement, desktop publishing, graphics, and writing skills lead the production process. Staff members need knowledge of community issues. The leader must be able to translate technical information into terms that lay people can easily understand. Denver, Colorado's transit district uses non-engineering personnel to direct the public information process to be certain that technical issues are stated in simple, easy-to-understand language.

Other agency staff get involved, including the public relations staff. Policy staff members review material for consistency with an agency's mission and other activities. People skilled in graphic design and production are key to well-prepared information materials. To save money, people skilled in desktop publishing can make changes and updates quickly and efficiently. A desktop-published product usually is more effective than a simple, word-processed piece, because it incorporates graphics, columns, and illustrations in an attractive and easy-to-comprehend way.

Private companies and institutions can assist in the production process. This may involve donating billboard or exhibit space, paying for printing, producing public service announcements (PSAs), or helping get editorials printed or aired. During the Atlanta, Georgia, Regional Commission's Vision 2020, local business and civic leaders wrote seven guest editorials for the area's biggest newspaper.

How do agencies use public information materials?

Public information materials can test concepts or policies for agencies. A fact sheet on a proposed policy position generates comments and objections. Agencies use public information materials to explain a policy position or invite public comments. By presenting information in an uncluttered way, without a great deal of detail and technical information about options and alternatives, an agency's message becomes clearer. The NETI Policy Committee issued a newsletter asking people to comment on potential policy shifts in transportation infrastructure investment, airport planning, and growth management planning, among other issues, before it voted to adopt any new policies.

Public information materials can focus on issues that affect a given area or subarea, highlighting concerns about alignment, noise, travel time, etc. For Boston's Central Artery/Tunnel project, a project-wide newsletter included neighborhood-specific news bulletins to keep people up-to-date with local happenings.

Public information materials improve awareness of a planning process. They provide information on how to get involved. The Texas State Department of Highways and Public Transportation updates people on the North Central Expressway reconstruction project through a quarterly newsletter.

Public information materials offer opportunities for private-sector involvement. Public-private partnerships are forged through donations of billboard spaces, newspaper inserts, or utility bill stuffers to help reach more people with information about a process.

Agencies form useful links with the media. Newspapers, especially those in local communities, are not as constrained for space as radio and television and are thus more likely to print articles, graphics, newspaper inserts, and calendar listings. Progress bulletins and press releases give reporters ideas and factual information for articles about a project. (See [Media Strategies](#).) In Boston, a neighborhood newspaper periodically printed articles and graphics submitted by the Massachusetts Highway Department to prepare people for upcoming meetings.

What do they cost?

The cost of public information materials varies widely, depending on complexity and volume. Small ones, such as brochures, fliers, or newsletters, are relatively inexpensive to produce, even on a large scale. Materials are expensive to produce if they require four-color printing, large display panels, models, or billboards. Costs are less per unit in volume printings: not counting staff time, printing 1,500 copies of a newsletter might cost 35 cents each, while 5,000 copies might cost less than 20 cents each.

Desktop publishing produces public information materials relatively inexpensively. Brochures, one-page progress bulletins, and fact sheets with simple graphics can be produced on a personal computer. Use of color grabs attention and enhances the attractiveness of a public information piece but also increases the costs to produce it. The Maryland DOT produced a five-page booklet describing the State's approach to a program of transportation enhancements. In a simple, straightforward way, the booklet provides details on a relatively new and unknown program, along with telephone numbers for more information. The Iowa DOT's "Need Answers?" pamphlet has staff names and telephone numbers accompanied by a map of districts.

Private-sector donations cut costs, as do cooperative efforts with other agencies. Private organizations may distribute printed information materials in grocery bags or utility bill inserts. Media organizations may run meeting notices and PSAs free. Transit agencies may display free advertisements

in transit vehicles. Literature might be distributed at toll booths. Billing agencies might include information materials with their mailings.

Costs are incurred for staff time spent in production. Written information, such as PSAs and news articles, takes time to produce. Designing and developing graphics can be expensive, and the process from concept to development to camera-ready can be lengthy. Outside consultants are sometimes needed for major items such as displays or models.

Costs are closely related to the visual quality of public information materials, but quality is crucial. A piece that is visually bland, cluttered, dull to read, or otherwise unattractive obscures the message. As in advertising, attracting people and getting them to read or look at materials requires eye-catching, good-looking designs. The Arizona DOT's Mt. Lemmon highway reconstruction project in Tucson used the slogan "Lemmon Aid" in bright yellow on black in its eye-catching brochures and posters.

Costs are incurred in distribution. Bulk rates are available to help reduce mailing costs. An alternative is door-to-door distribution by volunteers. (See [Speakers' Bureaus and Public Involvement Volunteers; Drop-in Centers](#).) The Houston, Texas, transit agency reaches apartment dwellers by hanging materials on their doorknobs.

How is production organized?

Public information materials are conceived at the beginning of a plan or project. They can be oriented to support key goals and milestones of the participation and technical planning processes. A time line for production and distribution is prepared. Materials are planned to coincide with major events and give periodic updates throughout the program. It is often a good idea to schedule periodic communication throughout the process for general updating or "keeping in touch" with people in the community. Scheduled dissemination helps remind agencies of activities that should be communicated to the public.

The target audience is identified. In most cases, the general public will be the recipient. However, an agency may need to target and customize materials to different groups. A local community heavily affected by a proposed project may need special publications or explanations to address its concerns. Soliciting funding for specific purposes requires materials targeted to business or industrial interests.

General information about a process or project is made available. Information that will remain constant throughout a process or project is made available for repeated use. Pennsylvania DOT videotapes illustrating the planning process are shown at meetings to newcomers who need to know the overall background before they know the details.

Public information materials highlight an event or milestone, such as the start-up of process, a major meeting, the release of a report, the start of a new phase, or the conclusion of a project. The Wisconsin DOT's first newsletter at the start of long-range planning introduced the in-depth study process and the people involved. The Puget Sound Regional Council in Seattle, Washington, mails a newsletter several times a year to review events and announce upcoming dates of meetings.

Public information materials can survey a wide audience. Typically used in printed materials, survey materials describe facts and include a tear-off sheet to be sent to an agency. They also may list a toll-free or local telephone number to call with comments or a FAX number to encourage immediate response. (See [Public Opinion Surveys; Media Strategies](#).) The Little Rock, Arkansas, Metroplan MPO issued its report summary as a newspaper insert and included a tear-off form for reactions and comments through phone, mail, or FAX. Dallas, Texas, Area Rapid Transit mails comment cards to people in the community to solicit input on how DART is doing in a number of areas.

Updates and progress bulletins can be disseminated periodically. The Little Rock, Arkansas, Metroplan used progress bulletins to keep people informed of current issues. San Francisco's BART

periodically sent FAXes to 500 to 600 businesses to keep them abreast of happenings in its joint development planning process. The Orange County, California, transit district sent “Fast FAXes” to 100 companies for immediate information. New Mexico’s Middle Rio Grande Council of Governments updates information in an annual report it distributes to the public.

Press releases serve as input to future media coverage. Reporters who are following the process may use each new detail of a proposal as the basis of a story. Basic facts are provided to help reporters assemble articles and avoid mistakes or misleading information that could cause difficulty or awkwardness for an agency. (See [Media Strategies](#).)

How are they used with other techniques?

Public information materials are used with almost any other technique of public involvement. They give basic information for open houses and open hearings, media strategies, on-line services, drop-in centers, and briefings. (See [Open Houses/Open Forum Hearings](#); [Media Strategies](#); [On-line Services](#); [Drop-in Centers](#); [Briefings](#).) They are used to announce meetings, charrettes, conferences, workshops, and retreats. (See [Charrettes](#); [Public Meetings/Hearings](#); [Conferences, Workshops, and Retreats](#).) They contribute names for mailing lists by soliciting interest from community residents. The Seattle area’s Puget Sound Regional Council produced a videotape that was made into a public service announcement and shown repeatedly. (See [Video Techniques](#).)

Transportation fairs are excellent places to distribute public information materials, particularly fun items such as buttons, magnets, posters, and literature. (See [Transportation Fairs](#).) A Washington, D.C., ridesharing organization supplied many giveaways at its transportation fair.

Games and contests mesh with public information in creative ways. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) held an art contest for children on the theme of “Flying Saves Lives.” The FAA also published a bilingual book, “A Visit to the Airport—Un Viaje al Aeropuerto,” that included several games, some also in two languages. (See [Games and Contests](#).)

Public information materials reach out to minority, ethnic, and low-income groups. Reaching out with basic information and facts presented with visuals brings people into the process who might otherwise feel uncomfortable participating. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#).) The Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission prepared illustrated glossaries of transportation terms to help people understand the planning process. Boston’s Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority prepared a transit design kit that showed drawings of different transit vehicles, answered basic questions about the study, and was printed in Spanish and English.

What are the drawbacks?

Public information materials require wide distribution to reach a maximum number of people. They are an essential part of any public involvement program. Failure to provide periodic basic information can severely hurt a public involvement program and could cripple a project.

Finding ways to get information out takes creativity. Demand on staff time and resources can be intensive. Staff members must know ways people can obtain information about a variety of topics. They should be skilled in examining needs and producing appropriate materials to meet them.

Published or written materials are not usually interactive. Public information materials cannot substitute for other forms of public involvement, because they are one-way communication, unless a mail-back coupon is included. People who see them must take further, individualized steps to get more information or to participate. An agency should make the steps simple to take, and respond promptly when community people call. (See [On-line Services](#); [Computer Presentations and Simulations](#); [Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks](#).)

Events can overtake public information materials. Needs can be determined by default, even with prior planning. An agency might have to prepare public information materials to respond to editorial criticism, counter negative publicity, compensate for difficult-to-read technical reports, or respond to issues that have arisen naturally during the project. In Denver, Colorado, the transit agency broke its long-standing rule of not allowing advertising on shuttle buses in order to promote businesses affected by the transit line construction and inform people about the project.

Production time is significant if materials are to be done well. Production costs can be high, depending on levels of detail and numbers of illustrations to be included. Increased volume of printed matter also raises costs, but unit costs diminish as volume increases. Producing a small number of customized materials is expensive and labor-intensive.

Public information materials may be perceived as public relations and not public involvement. Materials that are too general and add no new substantial information are often regarded negatively or ignored. Public suspicions may also result from high-end advertising agency slickness. Many people feel it is inappropriate for public agencies to spend a lot of money on fancy public information material when other efforts or programs are being cut back. To gain optimal response, materials should be straightforward in design and content, especially if input from participants is desired and if it needs to be made clear that plans or projects are not yet finished.

Public information materials may fall flat if the information is too technical and difficult for lay people to grasp. Where possible, agencies should avoid intimidating or technical language and formats. If materials are not comprehensible to an average person, good will is lost, and potential participants may become suspicious about an agency's motives. An outside person can be asked to review the piece to make sure it is understandable to the average person and not too technical or obscure.

Information is prepared in a form that will reach the target audience. Press releases might not reach the intended audience, because they have been placed in an inappropriate section of a newspaper or relegated to a "lame duck" spot on a newscast. Pamphlets containing technical material may not be read by local residents. Brochures or flyers that are discarded as litter could have a negative effect on the community's perception of an agency. To counter these problems, an agency designs materials for specific uses and audiences and chooses the appropriate distribution technique.

Are they flexible?

Public information materials can be sent through the mail to a project mailing list or an acquired list, or be inserted in another group's mailing. They can be included in bills sent out by public or private organizations. (See [Mailing Lists](#).)

Public information materials can be sent electronically. They can be put on a home page to be available on-line. (See [On-line Services](#).) Public service announcements provide information via radio or television. They can include announcements of meetings, due dates for comments, recent activities, upcoming events, and more. (See [Media Strategies](#).) The Atlanta, Georgia, Regional Commission's Vision 2020 process used PSAs to inform people of the opportunity to voice their opinions through questionnaires inserted in Sunday newspapers.

Public information materials can be used in displays. They can be positioned to be seen from a sidewalk, highway, or rail line—for example, on a billboard. They can be illustrations on window cards. They can be posted in interiors of transit vehicles on car cards. The Houston, Texas, Transit Authority uses cards in its buses to announce upcoming events.

Public information materials can be distributed at meetings. They help get a meeting started or as a basis for a presentation or discussion. They can be exhibits, videos, fact sheets, slides and overheads, models, or progress bulletins. (See [Video Techniques](#); [Computer Presentations and Simulations](#).)

Timing is flexible for most public information materials, except meeting notices, newspaper deadlines, and materials relevant to public hearings and official comment periods, where exact timing is crucial. Staff commitments for producing public information materials is flexible except for deadlines for production, printing, mailing, or presentation.

The format for producing public information is flexible. Options relate to individual budgets, information dissemination needs, topics, and audiences. A variety of types of public information materials can be selected. Many public involvement programs mix and match materials.

When are they used most effectively?

An overall strategy for public information materials is developed early in a process, before beginning to involve community residents. At that point, an agency can strategize about what audiences need to be targeted, what types of materials are needed, and when they will be most effective. General materials on, for instance, the nature of the project serve as background information that remains relevant throughout the process. Materials can highlight important events or decisions. Timing must be carefully considered, and materials scheduled so they are available in advance of an event, meeting, close of comment period, or articles in the media. (See [Media Strategies](#).)

For further information:

- Arizona Department of Transportation, Phoenix, Arizona, (602) 255-8143
- Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, Georgia (404) 364-2575
- Boston Central Artery/Tunnel project, Boston, Massachusetts (617) 973-7000
- Denver Transit Authority, Denver, Colorado, (303) 299-2401
- Iowa Department of Transportation, Ames, Iowa, (515) 239-1137
- Maryland Department of Transportation, Baltimore, Maryland, (410) 859-7367
- Puget Sound Regional Council, Seattle, Washington, (206) 464-7090
- Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, (412) 391-5591

KEY PERSON INTERVIEWS

What is a key person interview?

A key person interview is a one-on-one talk about a specific topic or issue with an individual recognized or designated as a community leader. A key person might be an opinion leader, a spokesperson for the community, an elected official, the head of an organization, or a representative of local media.

The main purpose is to obtain information. While basic information is provided to set the stage for discussion, interviews are designed primarily to elicit the interviewee's reactions and suggestions. The goal is to learn about the person's views and constituency, and his/her perceptions of the agency, the planning or development process, and the political setting in which work is being done. Key individuals are likely to have knowledge, wisdom, and insight that can help an agency. In Texas, during the South Oak Cliff study by Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART), key person interviews led to a delineation of significant issues within the community. A bond issue that had major support was being implemented slowly. Though not directly related to DART's work on the transit proposal, it was clearly identifiable as an issue.

Interviews start early in the process to learn about the area and the issues and concerns to be addressed. An agency may ask for names of other individuals who should be contacted for interviews or be involved in the participation process. It may want guidance on organizing a public involvement process that includes essential, interested people, and that reaches out and includes people traditionally underrepresented.

Key person interviews also are held just prior to decision-making. The Maryland Transit Administration found that positions evolved from beginning to end of a study and thus began to hold interviews near the end of a process but before decisions were made.

Customarily, interviews are face-to-face events. Frequently, a key person feels more comfortable if an interview takes place on "home turf" such as his/her office or neighborhood. Although usually conducted in person, key person interviews are also done on the telephone. (See [Telephone Techniques](#).)

Why are such interviews useful?

Information is transmitted informally outside of a larger meeting that may be inhibiting. Key people often provide more detail on political or emotional aspects of an issue that are difficult to discuss in a public meeting. Liaison staff for a master plan study in Boston's South End interviewed community and business leaders to learn about potential developments that would not have been revealed in a large public setting. Interviews also elicited input about ongoing concerns to help create a vision of the character of redevelopment for the area.

Interviews help identify issues, concerns, and desired agendas. They are helpful in rapidly getting details on the community and in understanding residents' priorities. They also help establish points that must be covered in meetings.

Key person interviews help target potential participants in the process. They identify stakeholders who may be involved and interested in a project or proposal.

Interviews elicit ideas for structuring a public involvement program. They help set a framework for discussion by identifying potential members for an advisory committee or meeting places perceived as neutral. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).) The Atlanta, Georgia, Regional Commission received advice on structuring its public involvement program from its key person interviews. For a Newark subway rehabilitation project, interviews led New Jersey Transit to set up several station task forces

rather than a single advisory committee, as originally proposed. The Newark interviews also identified safety as the overwhelming issue of community concern, which led to changes in the work undertaken by consultants.

Key person interviews enhance an agency's credibility. They show interest in the community and in understanding the concerns of a leader's constituents. Conducting interviews sets a positive tone for subsequent public involvement activities.

Do they have special uses?

Key person interviews are useful when a project affects a small group in a unique way—for example, a block of businesses, a neighborhood, or a specific institution. The group may be concerned about impacts of a proposal and welcome early contact. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#).)

Interviews are a good way to introduce agency personnel to the community before beginning a public participation process.

One-on-one interviews can defuse a potentially confrontational situation. Parties to disagreements want to be heard. Listening to key individuals' views is rewarding to both parties, as well as to the larger community. This is particularly important if the key person has been antagonistic in the past, since it enhances an agency's understanding of opposing viewpoints and gets them stated more clearly for the record.

Who participates? And how?

Key people are individuals who work with or represent other people. They are crucial in understanding a constituency. Key people include community group presidents, officers, former officers, and representatives. They can be elected officials, respected people involved in community activities, and officers or active members of clubs, agencies, organizations, and interest groups. Key people can be active business people and practicing professionals, or representatives of professional societies, such as chapters of the American Institute of Architects and the American Public Transportation Association. The Metropolitan Council in Minnesota interviewed the Minority Media Coalition by telephone to find out key issues in the minority community prior to a larger meeting to discuss overall media strategy. It is important to note, however, that in some areas such as minority communities, American Indian areas, small towns, and rural settings, opinion leaders are likely *not* to be office-holders. In these areas, an agency should pay special attention to finding out who the real leaders are. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#).)

A key person meets with an interviewer via telephone or face-to-face.

Usually, the key person chooses the interview site. This may be a home or office, or the location may be neutral to both parties. Informal interviews can be held over coffee or lunch. The choice of setting should reflect potential issues of security and confidentiality.

An on-site interview helps people point out specific issues. In the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's (MBTA) Replacement/Transit Improvement Study, agency staff talked with key community people on-site in Dudley Square, a busy transit node and the focal point of the study. Community leaders pointed out specific locations of concern about traffic, pedestrian crossings, and land development. (See [Site Visits](#).)

How do agencies use these interviews?

Interviews demonstrate that an agency wants to learn about the issues. This is particularly true if an agency seeks out key people early in a process. Credibility is also enhanced if an agency seeks advice on design of a public involvement program. For the State Route 15 Vision Study in San Diego, California, the City Heights Community Development Corporation conducted interviews with agency officials, opinion leaders, residents, and others to help plan the highway's future. The interviews were useful not only for finding out about the issues but also for broadening the list of potential contacts.

Key person interviews are a quick, personal way to learn a neighborhood's concerns. They help identify players such as elected officials, other agencies, opinion leaders, and other groups, as well as revealing issues and interests in a project or plan.

Interviews help identify the "real" actors in a process. Often, they are the fastest way to find out who in the community is perceived as credible, who is difficult to communicate with, and who is a potential ally.

Through interviews, an agency finds out what key people think of its policies. The Little Rock, Arkansas, Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) used interviews to discover the degree to which past policies were out of favor. As a result, its Vision 2020 plan reflected the need to replace past policies with proposed new strategies.

Key people help develop a list of contacts who can distribute information. Interviews help build a network of critical people to contact. (See [Mailing Lists](#).) They even assist in locating the best bulletin boards for advertising meetings and opportunities for participation.

Interviews with key people establish lines of communication between community members and agencies. Local people contact their leaders to obtain information or to register opinions, concerns, and complaints. This may fit with traditional methods of quick and easy communication. (See [Improving Meeting Attendance](#).)

Making one-to-one contact helps break down barriers that might prevent sharing information and opinions. The Dane County Regional Planning Agency in Madison, Wisconsin, learned about the concerns of many groups through individual key person interviews.

Who conducts key person interviews?

Staff members usually conduct key person interviews. The staff person conducting a meeting should be comfortable with one-on-one contact, personable, open, a good listener, good at probing for details, and able to respond to key questions.

Sometimes senior staff are more appropriate. On certain occasions, senior agency personnel need to meet with key people. For example, it might be more appropriate and effective for a senior official rather than a junior-level staffer to meet with the vice president of a major corporation. The head of the Atlanta, Georgia, Regional Commission talks with key business leaders on a regular basis. The director of the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, MPO holds regular visits with key people in the media.

Sometimes a well-briefed outsider is the appropriate person to contact ethnic or minority members or polarized groups. The interviewer must be well-briefed on issues important to the community and to the person being interviewed. (See [Ethnic, Minority, & Low-income Groups](#); [Negotiation & Mediation](#).)

What do they cost?

Costs vary, but interviews can be relatively cheap if the work is local. Staff time is intensive and the most expensive item. It is particularly significant if a large number of key people from various locations are involved and travel is extensive. Also, long-distance telephone calls add quickly to the costs.

Costs are closely tied to the number of interviews conducted. A sampling of 10–20 leaders is effective for certain purposes, while a more broad-based outreach may necessitate 100 or more interviews.

How are they organized?

An initial step is identifying the key people in a community. It is important to undertake a wide range of efforts to learn who the real leaders are, particularly in minority and ethnic communities. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#).) One approach is to use indirect methods; for example,

- Review old and current mailing lists;
- Review newspaper clippings;
- Review meeting notes from related projects or earlier planning processes;
- Review impact reports, environmental documents, and project-related testimony;
- Get copies of sign-in sheets from meetings held by others;
- Observe neighborhood meetings for other issues/projects;
- Talk to people knowledgeable about local leadership; and
- Ask around at professional association meetings.

A more direct means to build a list of names is linked-chain research or personal contact and networking. In this approach, people are asked to name leaders, and the process continues until nominations repeat earlier names and the agency is reasonably confident most key participants have been found. Some initial ways to do this by telephone include:

- Contacting local officials;
- Asking action groups and churches who the respected leaders are;
- Asking neighborhood groups and agencies who the respected community leaders are;
- Contacting friends who live in the area or consultants who have done work in the area; and
- Sending out a “community audit” survey that includes a question on community leadership.

Interviews are arranged in several ways. To set up an interview, an agency staffer can establish initial contact by telephone. Ideally, an interview is face-to-face and at a time convenient to the person. This may be after work hours, since many people find it difficult to meet during the normal work day. In Dallas, DART always conducts key person interviews as informally as possible so that the person feels comfortable. A letter of invitation may be sent if someone is particularly difficult to reach or if a formal tone is desired. Often, a follow-up confirmation call is useful and courteous.

It is often important to meet key people in their own community. Frequently, key people view their neighborhoods as neutral, comfortable, and non-threatening places. (See [Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events](#).) The Portland, Maine, Area Comprehensive Transportation Study (PACTS) conducted interviews in key people’s offices on the impacts of a proposed connector on a school and county jail along the alignment.

Many interviews are conducted by telephone. Phone interviews are very informal and immediate, but less personal. They sometimes are done while the key person is at work and can be very focused. (See [Telephone Techniques](#).) Although phone interviews lack the personal contact of face-to-face talk, they are easier to do impromptu. They are often revealing, because the call seems more casual, immediate, and unrehearsed. A face-to-face meeting encourages better preparation, perhaps by consulting with others. During project development on the I–93/Route 1 interchange in Charlestown, Massachusetts,

agency staff regularly called key people in the community to report project events, then to converse about their activities and reactions to the highway project's current status.

The purpose and topic of the interview is communicated in advance. The general topic is introduced immediately. The interviewer stresses the importance and goal of the interview and states that several key people are being interviewed. This lets the interviewee know that his/her ideas will be considered along with others. It is useful to explain that the agency wants to listen and learn rather than lecture on the proposed project or process. A short description of the planning effort with maps, drawings, or photos is useful, along with brief written materials.

An interview begins with stating a specific proposal or issue. Details should be available in case the interviewee requests them. A series of questions prepared by the agency might be the next step. An interview may be informal and free-form, with a brief statement of a proposal, followed by questions and answers that guide the interview. The interviewer makes it clear that the opinions expressed are primarily for the agency's internal use in planning and project development.

An interviewer should be able to piece together connections and links that make up the mosaic of relationships within the community. An agency should avoid alienating potential participants or people who have views that might not be fully understood.

The interviewer documents the interview in writing. Documentation frequently maintains the anonymity of the interviewee. At times, it is important to be able to cite the interview as authoritative, but permission should be obtained before quoting people who have been interviewed. To maintain anonymity, individual interviews can be summarized with other interviews. In summaries, the key people's names may be listed, but most comments are not attributed to specific individuals. Interviews for the Portland, Maine, I-295 Connector were summarized according to several themes: comments on transportation issues in general and pros and cons about the proposed connector. Only when it was essential to identify the person who made a statement—such as a concern about the alignment's effect on a specific property—were ideas attributed to individuals.

Telephone numbers are exchanged. The key person should be made aware of the desirability of frequent contact and an agency's willingness to respond to calls. To enhance contact, an agency can compile a list of interviewees' work and home phone numbers and FAX numbers, if available and if people are willing to take calls at home. The goal is to demonstrate accessibility and the need for key people to call when they want to deliver opinions and comments.

Follow-up is essential. Depending on the intensity of the planning process and schedule, weekly, monthly, or bi-monthly follow-up contacts, either by telephone or face-to-face, are critical. Follow-up keeps key people and agency staff up-to-date on what is happening. Follow-up can be based on initial interviews early in the process to create and maintain a channel of communication. In Dallas, the DART community affairs staff regularly contacts key people—by visiting, telephoning, or sending information—to keep them up-to-date and knowledgeable about the agency's work.

How are they used with other techniques?

Key person interviews help identify participants. Interviews with leaders help identify potential members of a neighborhood planning council. They help increase and improve outreach to traditionally underserved groups, ethnic groups, minorities, elderly, and children. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#).) A civic advisory committee or task force can grow from suggestions made in leader interviews. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#); [Collaborative Task Forces](#).) In a transit study in Burlington, Vermont, representatives of a new civic advisory committee were identified through interviews.

Interviews can help set goals and objectives for a task. A civic planning committee working with San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) on a joint development project conducted interviews with the

heads of newly-formed groups to help determine the extent and goals of the organization and its constituency.

What are the drawbacks?

Key people may not represent the total range of community values. Interviews must be used with other techniques that help validate the information gleaned from the interviews. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).)

A variety of methods to reach people are essential to obtain a full range of opinions. Heavy reliance on meeting notes and sign-in sheets from public meetings tell an agency who the visible public leaders are, but key people who work behind the scenes are easily missed.

Key person interviews do not replace direct talks with interested or affected groups. Such interviews do not substitute for direct public involvement.

Community members may be alienated if their key people are not interviewed. If some people are misidentified as key people, community residents may accuse the agency of ignorance or malice. In Portland, Maine, a school principal identified as a key person turned out not to be as knowledgeable and helpful as had been anticipated. In Dallas, certain community groups felt that the transit agency gave equal credence to comments from individuals and from their organizations. DART then encouraged the individuals who were outspoken to join others in forming a new organization or to join an existing group.

Interviews should include a full range of people, including opponents. The Sioux City, Iowa, MPO used its district directors to help identify people to interview. It was careful to include people who in the past had been critical of some of its activities or policies.

Many agencies interview only public officials such as the town manager, aldermen, or planners. Although these interviews represent one segment of key people to contact, they must be done in combination with interviews and talks with representatives of interest groups, opinion leaders, neighborhood associations, individual residents, users, and more.

Are key person interviews flexible?

Timing and structure of key person interviews are flexible. They can take place at any time, cover a variety of topics, and be structured or open-ended. However, it is best to do interviews before negative news gets out. Staffing is flexible, but interviewers must be good listeners, open rather than defensive, and knowledgeable about whom to probe and how.

When are they used most effectively?

Key person interviews are useful both at the start of a process and just prior to decision-making. Of course, it may be necessary and desirable to continue the contacts throughout the process. Follow-up interviews are done in the same manner as initial interviews. To save time and staff resources, follow-up may be done by phone. If an agency does not follow up the interviews or maintain contact with key people, credibility suffers.

Interviews help evaluate projects or proposals or the process itself. In many cases, key people are well aware of a former process that went awry. Their willingness to discuss it saves an agency many steps. In addition, they have a sense of how a project or proposal will be received within their community. This information aids an agency in modifying plans to be more responsive to community concerns and to present to the public.

For further information:

- Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2575
- City Heights Community Development Corporation, (619) 584-1535
- Dallas Area Rapid Transit Authority, Dallas, Texas, (214) 749-2581
- Little Rock Metroplan, Little Rock, Arkansas, (501) 372-3300
- Portland Area Comprehensive Transportation Study, Portland, Maine, (207) 774-9891
- Sioux City Planning Department, Sioux City, Iowa, (712) 279-6344

BRIEFINGS

What are briefings?

Briefings are information meetings with a community group or leader. Elected officials, business leaders, the media, regional groups, or special interest groups can participate. Briefings usually involve issue-focused communication between agency administrators, project managers, board members, or other staff and a specific group or part of the community. They are organized in several ways:

- **Some briefings are one-on-one meetings with key individuals**—for instance, between an agency representative and a specific community representative or leader.
- **Others are held for key groups** to help establish rapport between agencies and the community and lead to a free discussion to clarify issues. The Burlington, Vermont, Tri-Center Transit Study held a briefing for local business leaders to discuss their concerns about alternatives for transportation improvements, including high-occupancy vehicle lanes, transportation system management, and a new light rail system.
- **Briefings are held at critical times** in a program application or project schedule—either at the beginning of a project or planning effort or at regular intervals to keep leaders or the media informed.
- **They are used for either one-way or two-way communication.** Often, agencies use them solely to convey information, but the format can include a question-and-answer session or two-way discussion as well. If an agency chooses two-way communication, it should organize the briefing accordingly. Notices should make clear what format will be followed. For its Regional Blueprint for Growth and Development, Minnesota’s Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) met with government associations to brief them and generate feedback.
- **Either an agency or the public initiates briefings.** When communities or individuals want information, they may request that an agency hold a briefing.

Why are they useful?

Briefings provide immediate opportunities for focused communication. They can be scheduled quickly to allow project leaders to communicate with key community groups or leaders. Portland, Oregon, Metro tailors its presentations to the interest of the group at hand, whether students, a chamber of commerce, or a homeowners’ association.

The community gets advance notice of an important event. By providing an opportunity for questions, briefings help allay doubts or fears. An agency can “test the waters” with a subset of the community concerning a specific issue. Within the narrow focus of a briefing, community residents give an agency the feedback and direction it needs to be fair and equitable. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection held a series of briefings for companies to inform them how to comply with new employee trip reduction regulations. The three-hour meetings provided a range of information about requirements such as surveying employees and implementing ridesharing programs.

Briefings are a good way to establish communication links with affected groups. They help clarify issues and demonstrate an agency’s sensitivity to local concerns. Because any project affects different segments of the public, an agency should discuss the impacts and services with the people most affected. The Portland, Oregon, Metro holds periodic briefings for geographic areas and neighborhoods that are affected by a specific alternative.

Briefings help get candid feedback from the community. Community people can comment off the record. Since they are not recorded, these comments are relatively unrestrained—and therefore may provide a truer picture of people’s opinions.

Do they have special uses?

Briefings break through temporary barriers to full public participation. In circumstances where the communication process is difficult or complicated, they help an agency reach specific groups. In Wisconsin, the Dane County Regional Planning Commission held a series of briefings with representatives of each town to discuss the preparation of its 2020 Plan.

Briefings give critics a better understanding of a project. They also give critics a chance to respond in detail, away from larger meetings that dilute their participation.

Briefings repair damage. A misunderstood or misrepresented agency uses briefings to get back on track. Briefings on critical portions of a proposal are useful to open discussions. An agency may signal its need for advice from community groups on ways to build greater understanding or future cooperation. Poor communication is improved if agency staff talks briefly and then listens attentively to the responses.

They demonstrate agency initiative. Opening a process with a series of briefings shows that the agency is organized and eager to get the word out. When an agency targets specific groups, it shows that it both recognizes their existence and values their participation. To get more people involved, the Twin Cities Metropolitan Council in Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota, recruited other agencies to serve as co-hosts during its series of briefings.

Briefings help establish trust and credibility between an agency and community groups. In Newark, New Jersey, elected officials attended the Newark Transit Agency briefings on rehabilitation of the light rail system to demonstrate their support.

Who participates? And how?

Briefings can involve any interested group—elected officials, organization heads, appointed officials, community groups or associations, business leaders, or professional associations. When an agency initiates a briefing, it asks for participation by specific individuals. When a community group requests a briefing, an agency should ascertain the group’s interests and send appropriate, knowledgeable staff. Community groups may want a personalized presentation of a proposal in relation to their neighborhood.

A briefing is usually a simple gathering held around a small table, in an office, or in a conference room. Alternatively, it is a conference call between appropriate people to discuss a particular issue. Agency representatives should be well-informed about the issues to be addressed, particularly as they affect the participants.

Participants ask questions. The format should address their communications needs. Often, a briefing includes a presentation on a plan’s status, followed by a discussion. Its design should facilitate communication between an agency and participants.

How do agencies use the output?

Briefings reveal whether an agency is effectively communicating with stakeholders. Agencies get feedback on the effectiveness of their public involvement program. Before formal announcement of an event, input from briefings helps agencies assess its potential effectiveness and adjust plans accordingly to better meet the needs of the community.

Briefings help prevent misunderstandings by the public by supplying accurate information and helping to get a message out. They also help prevent agencies from misunderstanding the viewpoints of the target groups.

Briefings allow an agency to convey a message to the community. By briefing a specific geographic, social, or professional group, an agency reiterates a message or clarifies an issue. Planners for New York's Long Island Expressway high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane held briefings with local businesses to assess different elements of the design.

Who leads briefings?

Well-informed, articulate agency staff people lead briefings. Since a briefing is an opportunity to improve communication, agencies send senior staff or others who know the project or program thoroughly and are aware of participants' interests or concerns. For discussion of technical aspects, experts may be needed as well.

Agency staff may share responsibility with a community leader. The agency need not lead a briefing alone. Community groups may participate more freely if a community leader leads the discussion. In such an instance, an agency representative participates both to satisfy the group's need for information and to get its input. Agency representatives should be prepared to lead a briefing if a community group has no designated leader. In some situations, elected officials or agency board members may take charge.

What do they cost?

A briefing is relatively inexpensive. The primary cost is preparation time, travel (if necessary), and the meeting itself. Research or presentation materials may be needed.

Special preparation costs may be limited. It is often possible to use pre-existing presentation materials. An agency may use project-specific presentation materials to maintain continuity. Staff may offer refreshments at a small meeting as an icebreaker.

How are they organized?

Arrangements for a briefing are initiated by either party. An agency offers a briefing to improve communication, or a community group requests a meeting with the agency.

An agency must respond quickly to a request for a briefing. Response time reflects an agency's commitment. Having to wait several months to meet with staff seriously damages a group's trust in the agency's sincerity. Every effort should be made to provide a timely response. If an agency has no time to organize a briefing, it may share documents, videotapes, or phone calls as a substitute strategy. (See [Video Techniques](#); [Telephone Techniques](#).)

Briefings are customized for each specific situation. The particular characteristics or concerns of a group suggest the best structure. An agency must be sensitive to the group's needs, nature, and purpose, and identify key people. (See [Key Person Interviews](#).) As a sponsor of the briefing, an agency determines where the group would be most comfortable and what approach should govern the meeting. Any good public involvement program includes constant monitoring of the press, meeting feedback, and other sources of intelligence about the community. When an agency knows a community group well—why it exists and where its interests lie—it can prepare well for a briefing and organize it accordingly. New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) officials met with owners of local newspapers and broadcast stations to generate media interest in an HOV lane project.

An agency sends its best representatives to briefings—perhaps a team of people with complementary presentation skills. A high-ranking staff member or technical specialist can answer questions and demonstrate an agency’s commitment to participation. An agency should exercise care in appointing briefing staff. Not all staff members make good public speakers, and good speakers may not function well in small discussion groups.

Agency leaders make certain that unanswered questions receive a response. Such records also help form the basis for subsequent meetings with other groups or the community at large. Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority representatives met with municipal officials in each of eight cities and towns through which its proposed New Bedford/Fall River Commuter Rail Project would pass to inform them about the project and flag local concerns prior to holding a series of open public meetings.

Communication between an agency and the community is continuous. While either party initiates a briefing, an agency should continue the communication process beyond a single session. An agency may approach a briefing as the first in a potential series of meetings. The Portland, Oregon, Metro has a policy of returning periodically to neighborhoods to report on changes or findings since the initial briefing.

How are they used with other techniques?

Briefings are only one part of a larger public involvement program. They supplement official and public interaction between community groups and a public agency. Briefings should not be the only means of communication, nor should they result from a group’s frustration due to lack of other opportunities for dialogue. Briefings are very important supplements to larger public meetings, but they cannot replace them. (See [Public Meetings/Hearings](#).)

Briefings augment other public education efforts. Briefings are a good way to introduce a new program or delineate project principles to a community already familiar with an existing project. They also help assuage concerns about a project.

Briefings generate additional public involvement. After a briefing, a community group may be willing to work with an agency as the project or program advances. A community may want to participate in subsequent meetings to safeguard its own stake in an agency’s proposals.

What are the drawbacks?

Over-reliance on briefings lends an appearance of “back-room deals” and therefore should be strenuously avoided. Holding small, seemingly controlled briefings only in times of crisis or when actions are critical to an agency may alienate a community.

Briefings may be viewed as an agency tool of little benefit to the community. Community people may perceive that agencies do not listen and do not absorb feedback.

Extensive use of briefings can consume agency staff time.

Are briefings flexible?

Briefings are held at nearly any time. Good timing helps make a briefing successful. Agency staff must be flexible, since community groups may request briefings on the spur of the moment. An agency may find it beneficial to hold briefings at specific points in a process of planning or project development; for example:

- Immediately before a major event or decision;
- After a crisis;
- After an especially unsuccessful agency effort; and
- Before introducing new strategies.

For further information:

- Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2575
- Dane County Regional Planning Commission, Madison, Wisconsin, (608) 266-4317
- Orange County Transportation Authority, Orange, California, (714) 560-5725
- Portland Metro, Portland, Oregon, (503) 797-1746
- Twin Cities Metropolitan Council, St. Paul, Minnesota, (612) 291-6423

VIDEO TECHNIQUES

What are video techniques?

Video techniques use recorded visual and oral messages to present information to the public, primarily via tapes or laser disks. Although many people now prefer video as a means of getting information, public agencies are just starting to tap its potential use. During preparation of its statewide transportation plan, the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) opened its regional forums with introductory videos.

Why are they useful?

A video is worth a thousand words. An easily-understood video is more useful to some people than reading or hearing about transportation. With the nearly universal availability of television and the emphasis on visuals in today's society, videos have a role in transportation planning and project development that has yet to be fully explored.

Videotapes provide an additional medium for reaching people. Although videotapes are widely used in this country for entertainment, they are also used for education and the dissemination of information about transportation. Videos can describe the steps in a process. They are geared to a group or an individual, depending on an agency's purposes, and enliven the presentation of a potentially dull subject. The Connecticut DOT, for example, prepared videos to enhance public understanding of incident management on an interstate highway. Agencies make videos available through local television stations, public libraries, and video stores or distribute them door-to-door, as has been done in recent political campaigns. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) produced a short video at each major milestone during development of its regional transit ballot proposal and sent it to public libraries as well as interest groups.

Videos are used to introduce people to meetings and hearings. Set to replay endlessly, videos present the same message each time without variation. Because these repeated messages are "canned," they should be presented in an informative, lively, and friendly manner. This may be extremely important when used with, say, a formal public hearing. (See [Public Meetings/Hearings; Open Houses/Open Forum Meetings](#).) The Virginia DOT, for example, used videotapes to introduce and describe an open house public hearing process.

Agencies use videos to document a planning process. They can document proceedings of events in a public participation process. Viewers are thus exposed to a wide range of participants and their concerns. Focus group proceedings are frequently recorded on video for later replay and analysis.

Videos illustrate different planning scenarios or project alternatives and help people visualize a situation before, during, and after construction. Many incorporate computer simulations, such as a ride on a transportation facility before it is built. (See [Computer Presentations and Simulations](#)) For example, a New York State DOT video illustrating the impacts of high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes was shown to elected officials, the business community, and the general public. A separate video simulated the experience of driving a car on both 10- and 12-foot-wide HOV lanes.

Videos help ensure that a consistent message is conveyed during a series of meetings or other events, particularly when different staff members are in charge. San Francisco's Metropolitan Transportation Commission and Regional Planning Commission both produced videos on their long-range plans and showed them at meetings to make sure the same information was provided to all participants.

How do agencies use the output?

Videotapes reach a broad audience for participation. People who cannot be reached in any other way often respond to videotapes. Presentation software is now available to provide viewers with information they can play on their VCRs. Currently, this technique often uses stationary images similar to slides, but in the near future video presentations for television will include live action as well as stationary and animated material.

Dry runs of presentations are often videotaped. Presenters rehearse a presentation, review it on tape, critique elements such as substance, voice modulation, posture, body language, jargon, and use of visual materials, then make changes accordingly.

Agencies often distribute videotapes over a large geographic area and in more than one language. They frequently clarify a complex process to supplement an oral presentation. For example, Boston's Central Artery/Tunnel project uses videos to simulate driving through a tunnel and along a surface street during various stages of the project. Videos also update the community on construction staging plans and mitigation proposals.

What do video techniques cost?

Costs of producing videotapes vary. Simple videos produced in-house are inexpensive but may not be successful in reaching the target audience with the right message. An amateurish production may alienate people from an agency's approach or goals, because its unprofessional quality reflects on the caliber of the project itself. A more professional production is expensive initially but more cost-effective in the long run. Reproduction of tapes is relatively cheap.

Length varies in accordance with the message to be delivered: videotapes are prepared with a brief message or with more substantive content. For example, in Missoula, Montana, a four-minute videotape was used to introduce people to the principal issue of a meeting—the improvement of a single, complicated intersection.

Video production demands a high level of staff expertise. Even with donated video equipment, it is often difficult for agency staff to produce a good video. Staff may be available to record highway or transit rights-of-way, but these rudimentary skills fall short when a video must be credible and informative about complex issues. If the in-house staff does not have sophisticated production skills, outside assistance is required to produce a high-quality, cost-effective videotape.

Who develops these techniques?

Video usage requires a lead person within an agency—a creative and adventuresome person interested in trying new techniques for involving the public in transportation. This can be an existing staff person or a staffer hired for the purpose. Agency staff people are the best resource to draft a video script and ensure that it is consistent with written materials and the particular goals the agency is aiming to achieve.

Production frequently requires outside assistance. Although personal recorders are widely used, videotapes to portray public activities should be professionally and competently produced, using professional-quality equipment.

How do they relate to other techniques?

Video techniques are often part of a media strategy. A video can be released for use on television as camera-ready copy. An agency thus provides the news media with an accurate portrayal of a process or

project to be shown as part of regular programming. Videos are a good means of providing information about meetings or ongoing planning processes. (See [Media Strategies](#).) Seattle's Regional Transit Project, for example, used videotapes for 30-second advertising spots broadcast more than 300 times on five local television stations.

Videos reach people who would not otherwise participate in transportation processes, including people with disabilities. Special efforts should be made to accommodate hearing disabilities. TDD (Telephone Devices for the Deaf) phones are available with small screens and keyboards to aid people who are deaf or have hearing disabilities. (See [People with Disabilities](#).)

A video is always part of a larger process and closely related to other techniques. Because a videotape is a one-way device, suitable for disseminating information, it has many potential applications. It can be an element for discussion in a focus group or charrette. (See [Focus Groups](#); [Charrettes](#).) It can record the points of view expressed at public meetings and hearings. (See [Public Meetings/Hearings](#).) It can document positions established at civic advisory committee meetings. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).) It can report on agency progress at a transportation fair. (See [Transportation Fairs](#).) A video should not be used in isolation from other techniques. It cannot replace face-to-face encounters with other participants and agency staff. Public involvement participants should always be fully informed if they are being recorded.

Videotapes can substitute for field trips. A video can illustrate the characteristics of a region or a corridor, alternative modes of transportation, alignments and adjacent neighborhoods, potential impacts, mitigating measures, and methods of participation. (See [Site Visits](#).)

How are they produced?

Videotapes incorporate a variety of technologies such as live action, computer images, graphics, maps, and charts. They can be produced incrementally. Slide shows can be augmented by scripts. Scripts can be recorded and slides shown at pre-determined intervals. A finished script and storyboard (picture sequence) can be developed and turned into a video. Special equipment and processes are required to transfer computer information onto tapes, and the level of quality varies.

Who participates? And how?

Any community member can use videotapes. The only requirements are a television set and a playback machine. Printed materials such as brochures often complement the information presented graphically in a video. It is also important to provide telephone contacts for access to agency personnel for further information.

What are the drawbacks?

Videotapes are not two-way. Unless special provision is made for an individual to respond, the viewer watches a message without being able to give feedback and without hearing opposing views. Thus, a tape should include a means of contacting staff or obtaining additional information. Some cable television stations use interactive techniques, including playing a video and allowing responses from viewers by telephone. (See [Interactive Television](#); [Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks](#).)

Video viewers are basically self-selected. Access is limited to viewers with a playback machine. Special attention should be given to the needs of people with disabilities. Interpreters may be needed to make the information available to individuals with hearing disabilities. Text must be sufficiently large so people with sight disabilities are able to read it. For the blind, narration should be sufficient to explain the material even though it cannot be seen.

Video techniques are rapidly changing. While videos are available now principally via home rentals or scheduled programming, in some localities it is already feasible for viewers to call in to view non-scheduled material immediately or at a viewer-chosen hour on a specific channel. Increasingly interactive techniques are being developed in the media. For example, in a few years, it will be possible for agencies to compose videotapes with information about specific processes to be broadcast on television, with community residents able to register opinions in a poll immediately following the presentation.

Agencies sometimes over-estimate viewers' attention spans, making videos too detailed or too long. A good norm is probably 5 to 15 minutes. Agencies should seek sound professional advice about how to define their message succinctly and with an appropriate level of detail. For easy comprehension and retention, a good video strikes a balance between substantive information and simplicity.

For further information:

- Central Artery/Tunnel Project, Boston, Massachusetts, (617) 951-6448
- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1357
- Missoula, Montana, Department of Transportation, (406) 549-6491
- New Jersey Department of Transportation Long-Range Plan, (609) 530-2866
- New York Department of Transportation Region 10, (518) 360-6006
- Puget Sound Regional Council, Seattle, Washington, (206) 464-7090

TELEPHONE TECHNIQUES

What are telephone techniques?

The telephone offers a unique, two-way medium for public involvement. It can be used to obtain information and to give opinions. Its use has entered a new era of potential applications to community participation, going beyond question-and-answer techniques toward the evolving new multi-media connections with television and computers.

Telephones have long been used for community involvement. However, innovations are available for expanding telephone use. For example, Iowa City, Iowa, offers telephone contact to an information television channel, which includes bus routes and transit information, a route finder to specific streets and points of interest, transportation for the elderly and persons with disabilities, and a “tow list” of all license plate numbers that have more than \$15 in accumulated parking fees.

Potential telephone techniques for public involvement include:

- **Auto attendant**—a series of tiered recordings leading an inquirer to a recorded answer or the appropriate staff person;
- **Information bureau**—a staff person responds orally to a broad variety of standard queries, such as bus schedules or meeting dates;
- **E-mail**—a staff person responds to computer queries; (See [On-line Services](#).)
- **Hotline or voice bulletin boards**—a staff person or recording answers questions about a specific project or program; (See [Hotlines](#).)
- **FAX-on-demand**—a recorded message provides a menu of documents available by FAX and how to obtain them;
- **Telethon**—a telephone call-in for comments during a television program; (See [Interactive Television](#).)
- **Electronic town meeting**—a telephone call-in combined with a scheduled television program, which shows results of public calls; (See [Interactive Television](#).)
- **Interactive voice response system**—information retrieval from a main computer using telephones or terminals; and
- **Interactive cable television information**—a series of information boards or videos that can be called up by phone to a television screen. (See [Interactive Television](#).)

Why are they useful?

Telephone techniques are basically interactive. The telephone is used to initiate a conversation or a query, and a response of some kind is made to advance the action. Responses can vary from pre-recorded messages to staff responses on specific topics. For example, a toll-free hotline number was provided for public information during the Washington, D.C., Bypass Study, which covered an area of 6,600 square miles in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. (See [Hotlines](#).)

Telephone techniques reach out to a broad variety of people who might not otherwise participate in transportation processes, including people with disabilities. (See [People with Disabilities](#).) They are used in community surveys to reach a statistically viable sample of the general population. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).) When combined with television, telephone techniques potentially open a new audience for public involvement. (See [Interactive Television](#).) For example, in Savannah–Chatham County, Georgia, a local television station presented a VISION 2020 program, process, and critical issues, followed by an invitation to give opinions by telephone; results were tabulated and shown later on the same station like election night returns.

Do telephone techniques have special uses?

Agency use of telephones can cover many topics. An audio text service can be programmed to give answers to many pieces of information, including times and dates of community meetings. For example, in Virginia Beach, Virginia, a municipal telephone service is capable of answering 700 commonly asked questions; after receiving information, people leave messages and respond to survey questions.

Agency use of telephones covers a large geographic area and shows a desire to communicate with the general public. Telephones can be available around the clock for messages and can be programmed to respond in more than one language. They can be used to poll community opinions. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).)

Telephone techniques are easily understood. Special training for participants to get involved or express ideas is not required. For example, to introduce new users to its municipal service telephone information system, Colleyville, Texas, provides refrigerator magnets as a telephone directory to three-digit subcategories for guidance when calling about specific topics, including transportation.

Telephone techniques can combine several applications. For example, in Diamond Bar, California, an aggressive telecommunications project is enhancing public communications and reducing vehicle trips by combining an electronic bulletin board, optical imaging technology, geographic information systems, electronic and voice mail, and FAX systems.

A FAX-on-demand system can deliver documents in response to queries. These documents can be works-in-progress or final results of a process. Costs can be covered through use of a 900 number (the call is charged to the caller's phone bill) or a credit card billing. In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the State House of Representatives uses a FAX-modem system to provide documents to its members.

Who participates? And how?

Any community resident can participate in most telephone techniques—the exception being the structured telephone survey, which requires specific individuals as part of statistical sampling techniques. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).) In using the telephone, it is important for an agency to provide background information to participants to bolster the ability to understand the subject matter and this method of participation. Agencies need to make special efforts to accommodate people who do not speak English. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#).)

People participate by phoning their queries or ideas to an agency. The agency is responsible for noting and recording ideas presented in this way and for informing inquirers of how their comments are being recorded and considered. Participation is further encouraged if results of telephone interactions can be displayed and distributed to participants.

How do agencies use the output?

Telephone survey results are especially useful in sampling public opinion. They demonstrate the degree of public support for an agency's proposals and thus shape the results. They show potential political difficulties, becoming useful in developing policy.

Hotlines help people reach the right staff person to give out information about a program. They help an agency receive and disseminate accurate information. (See [Hotlines](#).) For example, Fort Collins, Colorado, offers a pothole hotline in its City-Line telephone service for people to report pothole locations. Fort Collins also offers information on right-of-way permits, highway access, excavations and construction activities, signal problems, bike lanes, and buses and carpools as well as city council and neighborhood meeting dates and subjects.

How are they organized?

Highly technical telephone techniques require outside assistance from specialized agencies or firms. The evolving relationships with cable television are likely to require expertise and specific programs or equipment.

Telephone techniques need a lead person within an agency—a person who is vitally interested in trying new techniques for reaching people. The Loveland, Colorado, interactive telephone/cable television service was initiated by the City Manager.

How do they relate to other techniques?

Telephone techniques can be part of a media strategy. They can provide information about meetings or ongoing planning processes. (See [Media Strategies](#).) For example, nine cities in the Dayton, Ohio, area provide a community calendar of upcoming events, accessible by phoning a local cable television station.

Community surveys are sometimes made by phone. Telephone surveys or opinion polls are frequently used to obtain information that is not otherwise available to an agency. They are also used during a process when a specific piece of information is required. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).)

Results of telephone polls are used in many other situations. They can be part of a focus group—as an element for discussion; they can be part of a charrette—to establish the points of view of the community at large; they can be used in civic advisory committees—to deal with community feedback on a program or project. (See [Focus Groups](#); [Charrettes](#); [Civic Advisory Committees](#).)

Special efforts should be made to accommodate hearing disabilities. Text telephones such as TDD (Telephone Devices for the Deaf) phones are available with small screens and keyboards to aid people who have hearing disabilities. (See [People with Disabilities](#).)

Telephone techniques are not used in isolation from other techniques such as public meetings or hearings. (See [Public Meetings/Hearings](#).) They are especially useful in obtaining community reactions after programs or proposals have been adequately explained. They cannot replace face-to-face encounters with other participants and agency staff. (See [Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses](#).)

What do telephone techniques cost?

Costs of telephone techniques depend on the extent of a program. Simple answering devices are inexpensive but not interactive. Staff assignments may be necessary in nearly all other techniques.

Telephone surveys are often inexpensive but in all cases involve a sampling technique that should be statistically valid for subsequent use and for credibility.

Basic interactive machines for cable television use are becoming less expensive, and some channels donate air time as a public service. The expense of producing a telethon or cable television program depends on the extent of information to be presented. Live action and animation are the most expensive portions of a presentation. (See [Interactive Television](#).)

What are the drawbacks?

In recorded messages, participation is strictly limited unless a means of contacting staff or obtaining additional information is offered. Information is frequently disseminated without a means for people to offer opinions or to reach appropriate staff people for further queries.

Telephone techniques may not be democratic, if a large part of the population has no phone. This reduces the possibility of all participants having an equal status and an equal opportunity to participate.

Telephones do not always allow people to hear other opinions. A hotline provides agency information only. In telephone surveys, participants must wait until the results are posted for them to read. However, in electronic town meetings the results are posted shortly after polling is completed.

For further information:

- Colleyville, Texas, (817) 281-4044
- Diamond Bar, California, (909) 396-5689
- Fort Collins, Colorado, (303) 221-6522
- Miami Valley Cable Council, Dayton, Ohio, (513) 438-8887
- Pennsylvania House of Representatives, (717) 783-6430
- Virginia Beach, Virginia, City-Line, (804) 427-4068
- Washington Bypass Study, Virginia Department of Transportation, (807) 786-2935

MEDIA STRATEGIES

What are media strategies?

Media strategies inform customers about projects and programs through newspapers, radio, television and videos, billboards, posters and variable message signs, mass mailings of brochures or newsletters, and distribution of fliers. Working with the media, an agency takes an active role in disseminating information. For example, the San Francisco area's annual "Beat the Backup" program during California Rideshare Week promotes ridesharing in partnership with a full range of the media.

Media strategies take a variety of forms. The simplest examples are fliers about projects within a corridor (a targeted market area) or variable message signs on highways that inform motorists (a targeted market) of delays ahead or of alternate routes. (See [Public Information Materials](#).) Promotional brochures are used in direct mail campaigns or—as in Portland, Maine—through a full-size newspaper supplement explaining the regional transportation plan. Briefing reporters and editorial boards of both newspaper and broadcast media with in-depth background on a project or program prepares them to analyze an agency's approach and report on aspects of an issue in an even-handed way. (See [Briefings](#).) In New Jersey, media executives were briefed on high-occupancy vehicle HOV lane proposals at the outset of planning for the project.

Why are they useful?

An agency proactively frames the message, rather than allowing the media to do it. Framing the message takes thought and attention about all aspects of a program or process. Media strategies are routinely incorporated into projects that need public focus, consensus, and understanding in order to move forward. In Idaho, the Department of Transportation uses video to introduce programs to the public and to provide news stories accompanying press releases.

Effective media strategies deliver a uniform message to alleviate the spread of misinformation that often becomes a barrier to understanding or implementation. Strategies can be styled to meet varying levels of interest. For Seattle's regional transit plan, a detailed program of media coverage was integrated with other forms of community outreach.

Many people rely heavily on the media for information about events, plans, or projects that affect them. The media are an important resource for people who have little time to attend meetings or participate in public involvement activities.

Do they have special uses?

Media coverage helps generate interest in a project or program. In any program, the critical first step is to develop a central message addressing such questions as: What is the plan or project? What does the public need to know in order to participate effectively? Who is the audience? Once these questions have been addressed, the specific media to carry the message are defined—the kinds of media that will best serve the need of encouraging public participation.

The media disseminate information widely. This includes informing and educating the public via major articles and profiles on television and in print as well as eye-catching ads to supplement the more formal, required legal notices. Specific transportation projects typically reach out to community residents along the affected corridor, to interest groups, and to municipal officials. A media strategy for these kinds of projects involves many activities. For example, in Washington, D.C., a media program to encourage ridesharing ranges from mall banners and decals for shop windows to an education program in elementary schools called "It's Cool to Pool."

Cable television is particularly useful as a tool for getting the word out. It is much cheaper than paid network advertising and has a more local flavor. Public access channels often videotape public meetings and other forums and play them repeatedly over a period of time. (See [Video Techniques](#).) In addition, local cable channels have news programs, guest editorials, and interviews where project issues can be highlighted. For assurance of broad outreach to people who do not watch cable channels, programming on regular stations and networks is an effective alternative.

Who participates? And how?

Stakeholders and agencies often cooperate in a media program for a project. Civic advisory committees or other community representatives help identify the best way to get the word out. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).) As individuals directly affected by a particular project or program, or through past experience, they may know the best way to reach the public. Agencies use community residents as part of speakers' bureaus that send representatives out to promote a project at meetings of organizations such as Rotary or Lions' Clubs and chambers of commerce.

How do agencies use the output?

Agencies monitor reactions to a media plan. Random surveys test market penetration and determine whether the message is meeting a targeted population.

A media plan elicits community responses. Mass mailings can include simple questionnaires to be returned to the agency. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).) A television presentation can suggest that reactions be mailed to the agency. On two-way talk shows, agency staff interact with community callers to answer questions directly. As programs and projects evolve and progress, media activities are adjusted to reflect their status and to introduce new information.

The key is to put together a plan that informs and educates the public by delivering the central message, no matter which type or types of media strategies are identified.

Who leads media strategies?

Media strategies are led by agency staff, either the staff members most closely identified with the project or the public affairs officer. The involvement of local people is particularly important to a successful media campaign. Community input and feedback help to "take the pulse" of a program to be sure the media chosen are appropriate and effective.

What do media strategies cost?

Because media strategies are often expensive, they must be used carefully and efficiently. A minimum strategy includes a central message, perhaps contained in a basic press kit with maps, fact sheets, and other background information, supplemented by a media tour of the project site. Complex projects call for a more elaborate strategy. For example, in New Jersey a strategic media plan was developed for outreach to print and electronic media to support the long-range transportation plan.

Time involved is often substantial over the life of a project or program. Some strategies are relatively low-cost. Briefings with editorial boards of both print and electronic media, as well as regular low-key contact with reporters and other media staff, are low-cost ways to deliver a message. (See [Briefings](#).) A public service announcement is usually a low-cost activity.

Costs rise with the kind of media used. A television/radio or newspaper campaign can be costly, involving air time and production/printing costs. Costs vary by project complexity and length. There are

low, moderate, and high levels of investment for utilizing the media. Depending on the needs of the project, a media strategy ranges from relatively simple placards or videos to a high-profile media campaign involving radio and television ads in prime time.

Although costs of a paid media campaign are high, the investment pays off, particularly when:

- An agency wants to guarantee that an announcement, information, or meeting date is published or broadcast;
- An audience probably will not be reached in any other way, or maximum exposure is needed;
- An agency wants a say in the placement of the material; for example, requesting a certain page location for a paid ad or a certain time slot for radio/television;
- A map, graphic, logo, slogan, or written material needs to be shown in a certain format or with a certain design that identifies the project or plan;
- An agency wants to assure that its message goes out exactly as written—paid advertising is not edited;
- The media are likely to give an agency better *free* coverage if it is already known as a paying client.

How are they organized?

Media strategies should be comprehensive. Strategies need to be evaluated as they are being assembled and after implementation. Questions to ask include:

- Breadth of techniques to use—How many and what kind of techniques are appropriate?
- Effectiveness—How many people were reached and how did they react to particular media?
- Ease of implementation—How easy or difficult is it for the agency to implement the various elements? Is an outside consultant needed? and
- Cost—What are the cost-effective benefits in view of constrained resources?

How do they relate to other techniques?

Media strategies are used in conjunction with other techniques. For example, televising civic advisory committee meetings enhances the participation process by giving it a wider audience. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).) Results of brainstorming, visioning, charrettes, and community surveys can be reported in the media. (See [Brainstorming](#); [Visioning](#); [Charrettes](#); [Public Opinion Surveys](#).) News stories can promote a telephone hot line for answering questions. (See [Hotlines](#).) A visioning process in Atlanta included televised town hall meetings, newspaper editorials, and a six-newspaper survey of public opinion that produced 10,000 responses.

Are they flexible?

Media strategies are extremely flexible. A wide range of techniques is used, depending on the project, its budget, and the complexity of the message. In Los Angeles, a commuter newsletter bulletin was prepared for widespread distribution to inform commuters about ride options and programs.

Preparation and monitoring is crucial. Advance work is essential for staff to prepare the overall program and central message and to identify the targeted audience. In New York, for example, a range of media has been designed to promote the new HOV lane on the Long Island Expressway: a video on ridesharing for businesses to use at their companies; posters in the workplace on carpools and vanpools; local cable channels for advertising spots; and variable message signs along the corridor. All these target a specific audience—either residents or employers in the corridor or daily expressway users.

What are the drawbacks?

Media outlets may outpace an agency by looking for a scoop and framing the message without agency or community input. Public agencies have little control over stories before publication or broadcast. Agencies frequently spend valuable resources to explain a message or to try to reshape public opinion rather than framing the message in the first place.

Media strategies take a high level of commitment sustained over time to be successful. Strategic planning starts at the outset of a project with the development of a detailed central message.

When are they most effective?

Media strategies should be developed early and sustained over time. In this way, the public is well-informed and aware from the beginning, thus enhancing the public participation process and creating greater opportunity for successful implementation of the project or program.

For further information:

- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1730
- Idaho Department of Transportation, (208) 334-4444
- New Jersey Department of Transportation, Communications, (609) 530-4280
- Rides (Commuter Services), San Francisco, California, (415) 861-7665
- Washington, D.C., Council of Governments Ride-finders Network, (202) 962-3327

SPEAKERS' BUREAUS AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT VOLUNTEERS

What are speakers' bureaus and public involvement volunteers?

Speakers' bureaus are groups of specially-trained representatives who can speak about a process or program. They can be community people or agency staff. Bureau members meet with public and private organizations and groups on behalf of a project, program, or planning activity. Members of a speakers' bureau provide information about planning or project activities, listen to people's concerns, answer questions, and seek continued participation and input from the public. Agencies sometimes call them "listeners' bureaus" to emphasize two-way communication and the intention to listen to the public.

Public involvement volunteers are people from the community temporarily enlisted to assist an agency in developing and implementing a public involvement program. In Georgia, the Atlanta Regional Commission's Family of Partners' nearly 800 volunteers work with the commission on designing and implementing its public involvement program. The Family of Partners trains its volunteers to run meetings with local groups and neighborhoods and to move agency planning information down to the grass roots level.

Public involvement volunteers add to the capabilities of a speakers' bureau. Volunteer programs and speakers' bureaus may be used together or separately. Speakers can be either community volunteers or agency staff.

Why are they useful?

Speakers' bureaus and public involvement volunteers serve a variety of community groups. Speakers can be organized to address civic groups, social clubs, professional organizations, neighborhood associations, and other groups, but they have other uses as well. The Maryland State Highway Administration created a speakers' bureau to cover the five-county U.S. 301 corridor project study area. Speakers addressed county chambers of commerce, county commissioners, local Rotary clubs, neighborhood associations, building industry associations, churches, political clubs, city councils, local planning commissions, the regional delegation of the State legislature, the regional council of governments, the State association of counties, the regional transportation association, the professional engineering society, and real estate firms.

They expand possibilities for community participation. Speaking to community groups at a place of their choice increases the number of participants in a planning process. (See [Improving Meeting Attendance](#).) Local groups involving people on their own terms and issues enhances interest and thus helps broaden participation. Groups such as business or professional organizations welcome community issues to the table at their own meetings, where they focus on specific issues and concerns.

They help the agency understand community viewpoints. Community representatives value the opportunity to present their concerns directly to an agency representative who has come to speak with and listen to them. They expect the representative to carry their comments back to the agency for incorporation into plans or programs.

They help the community understand an agency and its work. Speakers and volunteers help an agency establish closer relationships with various organizations, facilitating communication and involvement in its planning efforts. Working with several groups, they help develop a base of support for implementation of the agency's efforts. The League of Women Voters worked with the Port Authority of Allegheny County on the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Light Rail Transit project.

They add vigor to the public involvement process. Speakers and public involvement volunteers help agencies respond quickly to requests from local organizations for an agency representative to attend a community meeting. The Missouri Highway and Transportation Department established a public

involvement strategy team made up of mayors, Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) heads, and other local leaders for speaking in transportation districts throughout the State. This arrangement stimulated many creative efforts, including school curricula on transportation, writing contests, information tents at football games, and a variety of open houses. (See [Games and Contests](#); [Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses](#).)

Do they have special uses?

Public involvement volunteers can help assemble a community perspective on a project or program. Volunteers who live in the community offer special insight into a process or project. They understand its potential benefits and impacts and have a well-defined perspective an agency staff member might lack.

Speakers' bureau presentations can be tailored to address specific concerns. Presentations can address the special interests of business, environment, or local neighborhood groups. An agency can receive details of the concerns and amplify its understanding of the perspectives of different constituencies. An improved understanding helps an agency incorporate community points of view into its products.

Public involvement speakers and volunteers are useful at events like open houses, where person-to-person communication is a focus. (See [Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses](#).) They also represent agencies at transportation fairs or events sponsored by other agencies. (See [Transportation Fairs](#).) For the New Haven, Connecticut, Q Bridge project, members of the project advisory committee staffed an open house.

Public involvement volunteers can distribute information in meetings or door-to-door. In Boise, Idaho, the highway district pays groups to distribute materials such as reports and other documents. These public involvement volunteers disseminate information on the streets or in other public places; in some cases, they are prepared to answer simple questions as well. (See [Public Information Materials](#).)

Public involvement speakers and volunteers help bridge communication gaps. Multi-lingual speakers serve as interpreters at events with a sizable non-English-speaking representation. During its statewide planning process, the Alaska Department of Transportation (DOT) used community volunteers as Inuit interpreters for meetings in rural areas. When DOT planners were on the agenda at traditional council meetings, where many elders do not speak English, they took along Inuit interpreters to translate their long-range plan presentations and facilitate question-and-answer sessions.

Public involvement volunteers serve functions in addition to speaking. As part of an agency's public involvement program, volunteers serve as assistants and auxiliary staff, or they may actually lead or assist in organizing large events such as transportation fairs or agency open houses. (See [Transportation Fairs](#); [Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses](#).)

Who participates?

A variety of people serve as speakers or volunteers—members of partnership agencies, consultants, agency board members, elected officials, or community residents. Speakers from civic and technical advisory committees have the advantage of being already familiar with a planning effort. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).) Agency representatives (including public involvement and technical specialists) serve as a nucleus to help in training. The Maryland State Highway Administration called on people from its staff, the consultant team, and a State-appointed civic task force to create a speakers' bureau for the U.S. 301 corridor project.

Many groups of people are reached by speakers, including homeowner organizations and neighborhood associations, chambers of commerce, regional environmental and civic organizations, labor unions, professional associations, religious groups, fraternal and philanthropic organizations, and educational institutions.

How do agencies use speakers' bureaus and public involvement volunteers?

A speakers' bureau functions as an on-call service. Once a public agency selects and trains speakers, it relies on them as an on-call resource to respond to requests by community groups for agency presentations. The Puget Sound Regional Council in Washington State has established a speakers' bureau to improve understanding of freight movement as the circulatory system of its economy. The Council works with volunteers from the private sector's Regional Freight Mobility Roundtable to set up its speakers' bureau calendar.

Public involvement volunteers have an advantage in eliciting concerns and issues. Community volunteers genuinely portray themselves as part of the general public. They are often seen as more neutral than agency staff.

Speakers and public involvement volunteers contribute to an agency's written communications. The San Francisco, California, Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) encourages its speakers and public involvement volunteers to write newsletter articles. People who have served as members of the agency outreach team can help establish a rounded perspective in the agency's written communications. (See [Public Information Materials](#); [Media Strategies](#).)

A public involvement volunteer program helps identify people for leadership positions. Volunteers frequently include interested individuals or stakeholders. If they are effective speakers with well-developed interpersonal skills, they may be candidates for further leadership in the community. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#); [Collaborative Task Forces](#); [Citizens on Decision and Policy Bodies](#).)

Who leads?

An agency appoints a staff person to coordinate speakers and volunteers. Project managers often control staffing for their projects, and they may be equipped to select and manage speakers and volunteers. Alternatively, an agency's speakers' bureau can coordinate the speakers or public involvement volunteers for all projects and programs of the agency.

Agency staff must provide training to help speakers and volunteers be most effective. For speakers and volunteers, training should be simple and continuous. Volunteers with public speaking experience may need instruction on technical issues or a political context. Other volunteers and agency staff may need coaching in the art of speaking. Training should be available to speakers from the beginning of their involvement, and periodic refresher sessions should be worked into the program.

Leadership is sometimes found outside an agency. As speakers and volunteers address organizations and associations, people are drawn into the process. This widening pool of individuals may include many dynamic and influential people who, as they become interested in an agency's work, may be tapped for additional outreach efforts. If they are community group leaders, they may become key players in mobilizing their organizations to assist an agency with its program or a specific project.

What are the costs?

Speakers' bureaus are relatively inexpensive. Basic costs are incurred in sending speakers to a public meeting, whether they are volunteers or not, including travel, handout materials, feedback cards,

presentation equipment, and (possibly) refreshments. Some agencies reimburse volunteers for travel costs, including meals.

Public involvement volunteers can stretch a limited outreach budget. An agency keeps public involvement costs down by making efficient use of volunteers. Volunteers also enable an agency to greatly expand the scope and intensity of its outreach program. Volunteer speakers provide assistance to agency staff that lets the agency hold more meetings and reach more people on a limited budget.

Even volunteer bureaus have a cost to the agency. Start-up costs are associated with organizing the bureau and recruiting and training speakers. Staff time costs are associated with debriefing speakers after their meetings and with necessary record-keeping and meeting follow-up. The Atlanta, Georgia, Regional Commission trains volunteers to be speakers and sends a junior staff person to every meeting led by a public involvement volunteer to take notes and ensure agency follow-up.

Public involvement volunteers and speakers are sometimes paid for temporary work. For special events, projects, or programs, it is useful for an agency to pay its volunteers and speakers a nominal sum for their efforts. The use of speakers and volunteers extends staff capabilities for a brief period or for an extended period of planning or development.

How are speakers' bureaus and volunteers organized?

Speakers' bureaus are initiated before or after community requests. Agencies that are pro-active create a speakers' bureaus first, then solicit invitations for speakers to come to meetings of community groups.

Agencies recruit representative candidates for their speakers' bureaus. Since speakers are perceived as representatives of an agency, it is imperative that the agency recruit people qualified and willing to do the job. Speakers function as ambassadors, and their work should represent an agency's best efforts.

Agencies train and equip the speakers for their work. People frequently need help preparing for the role. Basic training includes tips on posture, elocution, diction, and timing. While practice sessions and role playing help in training, new speakers can attend presentations by veteran speakers to see what the work entails.

Speakers need adequate materials and preparation. A core presentation can be devised for speakers to use, including handouts, maps, videos, or presentation boards. Prior to meetings, agency staff can assist a speaker in tailoring the presentation to the host group's special interests. Many speakers' bureaus also distribute questionnaires to the host groups and prepare a list of specific questions to be discussed at meetings. Speakers should be given an easy method of reporting back to the agency.

Speakers rely on agency staff for support and assistance. Junior staff people accompany speakers to meetings to take notes, help with materials or equipment, and assist with follow-up and reporting. Written records of all meetings are prepared, with special attention given to major comments, perspectives, and concerns. Agency staff helps speakers follow through on responses to questions or requests that cannot be immediately addressed at a meeting.

Speakers and public involvement volunteers are matched to community group needs so their particular backgrounds and skills are effectively employed. In a large-scale project, many organizations learn of the agency's efforts and seek additional information. The agency speaker/helper coordinator then works to assign appropriate speakers to the various host groups.

Agencies offer the speakers' bureau as a special public service. The initial task is to let groups and organizations know such services are available. An agency contacts the prominent civic and social

organizations within a study area and offer speakers for future meetings. This arrangement allows the agency to distribute meetings over time to make the best use of time available to its speakers.

Speakers and volunteers focus on communication and follow-up. Within a speakers' bureau, the essential functions of communication and follow-up must be stressed throughout. Speakers and volunteers facilitate communication between an agency and its constituency and get the right information out to people who request it.

How are they used with other techniques?

Speakers' bureaus are used in conjunction with written material or videos and other graphic information pieces. They are also used to follow up mailings of brochures or fliers. (See [Public Information Materials](#).) Rochester, New York's Genesee Transportation Committee includes in its basic outreach materials a brochure about its well-established speakers' bureau.

Speakers' bureaus and public involvement volunteers are integrated into a larger effort with a variety of other public involvement techniques. Although they are useful and relatively inexpensive, they cannot substitute for other methods of reaching and involving the public.

Civic Advisory Committee members are ideal candidates for speakers' bureaus. Since they are already actively involved in an agency's efforts, they can speak comfortably about the agency's project or program. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).) The Governor of Maryland appointed 76 people to a task force to study the U.S. 301 corridor. Several qualified speakers from this task force volunteered to speak to community groups and to make presentations to their own organizations or societies.

At open houses, speakers and volunteers help explain an agency's work. Open houses can be labor-intensive, with many simultaneous one-on-one discussions. The support of volunteers makes the effort easier for an agency with limited full-time staff. Public involvement volunteers also assist staff in the variety of tasks involved in preparation and implementation of an open house. (See [Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses](#).)

Public involvement volunteers staff drop-in centers or booths at transportation fairs. They direct people to displays or written literature and answer questions. If they cannot answer specific questions, they take names and addresses for follow-up by an appropriate agency staff member. (See [Transportation Fairs; Drop-in Centers](#).)

Trained public involvement volunteers offer advice on program elements. With speaking experience and exposure to community groups, volunteers have useful perspectives on an agency's public involvement program. The League of Women Voters helped the Metro Transit Authority in Seattle, Washington, improve its public involvement program. The Austin, Texas, MPO enlisted community volunteers to help monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of an entire public involvement program for an alternatives analysis/draft environmental impact statement.

What are the drawbacks?

An agency has less control over unpaid volunteers. Unpaid volunteers, acting as speakers or volunteers, are not employees and are not entirely under the control of the agency. An agency may design the speaking program, but it cannot completely control the message the speakers give out. To minimize this difficulty, the leader of the speakers' bureau needs to select speakers carefully to match speaker with audience.

These techniques do not substitute for staff involvement. Speakers' bureaus volunteers are not shields between the public and agency officials. Agency heads, project managers, program coordinators, and technical staff still need some exposure to the community during the public involvement process.

Speakers and volunteers play an important role in the outreach process, but they must not be “fronts” for a distant agency.

An agency has a responsibility to volunteers and is aware of their best interests. An agency does not expect volunteers to put in the same hours or travel the same distance as paid staff. While an agency may not be able to pay its volunteers, it acknowledges their contributions and guards against demanding too much from them.

Volunteers lose credibility and standing in the community if things go awry. At a critical stage in a project, especially if there is a potential for confrontation, it is best to avoid using volunteers for presentations. They have more to lose in the local community than an agency does. Agency staff, however, may be seen as “only doing their jobs” during tough going.

Are speakers’ bureaus and volunteer programs flexible?

Speakers and volunteer programs are shaped and modified as conditions change and requests come in for agency presentations at group meetings.

These techniques make an overall program more flexible. By creating a speakers’ bureau or organizing volunteers, an agency adds flexibility to its outreach. Speakers and volunteers bring a variety of additional skills, contacts, and personal qualities to an agency’s program or project that might otherwise not be found among agency staff.

When are they used most effectively?

Speakers’ bureaus are effective when approaching a milestone event, a critical decision, or a program review. Getting the right speaker before the right group at the right time is very effective. Some speakers are considered “big guns”—people of high stature within the community. In addition to political influence, some individuals or groups may command greater respect within the community, and a well-timed endorsement or sign of support helps an agency’s project.

For labor-intensive events, it is cost-effective to use volunteers (paid or unpaid) to augment staff or stand in for staff. A group of trained, informed volunteers helps agency staff do more in the time available. Volunteers staff information tables, collect names and addresses, and forward inquiries to staff for response.

For further information:

- Alaska Department of Transportation, Juneau, Alaska, (907) 465-2171
- Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2500
- Austin Urban Transportation Study, Austin, Texas, (512) 472-7483
- Bay Area Rapid Transit, Oakland, California, (510) 464-6172
- Connecticut Department of Transportation, (860) 594-2000
- Genesee Transportation Committee, Rochester, New York, (716) 232-6240
- Georgia Department of Transportation, Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 656-5267
- Idaho Department of Transportation, Boise, Idaho, (208) 334-8300
- League of Women Voters, Washington, D.C., (202) 429-1965
- Maryland State Highway Administration, Baltimore, Maryland, (410) 333-6431
- Metro-Dade Transit Agency, Miami, Florida, (305) 375-5675
- Missouri Highway and Transportation Department, Jefferson City, Missouri, (314) 751-1685
- Port Authority of Allegheny County, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, (412) 237-7000