

Research Initiative 2015-2017:  
Powell-Division and Development Project  
**Public Engagement**

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## Best Practices in Public Engagement

### *Powell-Division Transit and Development Project in Portland, OR*

This case study examines public outreach conducted by Metro, the regional government body that provides services for the Portland, Ore., metropolitan area. From January 2014 to June 2015, Metro communicated purposefully and assertively regarding the Powell-Division Transit and Development Project. This is the region's first bus rapid transit along an urban 15-mile stretch through the most culturally and economically diverse part of the state. By employing an array of public engagement strategies, Metro sought to overcome feelings of apathy and disenfranchisement and increase public participation in the planning stage.

Findings from this case study confirm that public engagement strategies work best when tailored to the local community and its concerns, and balance public input with city responsiveness and accountability. That was certainly true with Metro. Still, this campaign fell short on discussing public transportation within the larger context of livability, leaving a possible opportunity for improvement as the Powell-Division project moves forward.

## Literature Review

Scholars who have studied public engagement in the field of public transportation contend that public engagement should be deliberate, participatory, flexible, transparent, methodologically sound, initially independent of the potential planning options, and take the public's input seriously (Zhong et al., 2007; de Luca, 2014). Such engagement should help gain public support, avoid delays, reduce project costs and increase the agency's credibility (Zhong et al., 2007). In addition, public engagement should involve not only individual voices, but the voices of organized communities and other groups, as well, adding further nuance and complexity to the process (McAndrews & Marcus, 2015). Effort should be made to engage vulnerable populations, as well, such as citizens with low incomes (Ramasubramanian, 2015).

## Background

Metro is the nation's first directly elected regional government, created more than 30 years ago to help manage growth issues across jurisdictions, and to protect farms and forests from urbanization. As such, Metro is authorized by the U.S. Congress and the State of Oregon to coordinate and plan investments in the transportation system for the three counties and more than 1.5 million people it serves. Expanding transportation options, maximizing existing streets and improving public transit service are among the priorities that Metro works to balance.

From January 2014 to June 2015, Metro conducted extensive public engagement in support of the Powell-Division project. These efforts included online and in-person methods. Metro focused on equity, as well, to tackle head-on the public's concern about the risk of market-driven involuntary displacement. The equity engagement targeted transit riders, youth and cultural communities.

Notably, the Powell-Division corridor is among the most ethnically diverse regions in the Pacific Northwest. Metro conducted multicultural engagement efforts that involved people from the Latino, Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian-speaking, Tongan, Bhutanese, African American and African immigrant communities.

Metro committed to four goals with its public engagement efforts about the Powell-Division project, as follows:

- Communicate complete, accurate, understandable and timely information
- Gather input by providing meaningful opportunities to participate
- Provide timely public notice of opportunities to participate
- Facilitate the involvement of low income populations, communities of color and people with limited English proficiency

In terms of guiding principles, Metro strove to:

- Use a first person lens: Relate to people, not through a project lens
- Make it easy for people to participate
- Be clear about decisions, how input is a part of decision-making, who is making the decisions and when/what to expect as a result



Projects officials met with community leaders to better understand how people might like to be engaged in the Powell-Division project. They then conducted an online survey between March 2013 and January 2014, encouraging citizens to share what they value most about their community, how they want to receive project information, and, in return, share input. The public engagement efforts were based on findings from this survey.

In response to input from community leaders and survey respondents, Metro launched three means of public engagement to realize its goals and objectives for the Powell-Division project: in-person, online and equity-focused strategies. In all, Metro coordinated 25 distinct categories of public engagement tactics during the January 2014-June 2015 timeframe: 10 categories of in-person tactics, three categories of online tactics, and 12 categories of equity engagement tactics.

In-person engagement centered around meetings held at community locations in the corridor, a decision-making body comprised of community members and elected, and public comment opportunities at each decision-making meeting. The in-person efforts also included multilingual single-question surveys at bus stops and community events, and work groups focused on specific issues of concern. The core online tactics included the project website, email updates, news features, blog posts and social media content.

Specialized online efforts included multilingual surveys for citizens of diverse cultural backgrounds and social media campaigns to encourage survey participation by high school and college students. Additionally, an interactive map tool was implemented to solicit public input. The web-accessible site allowed citizens to view the different route options being considered and leave comments.

Equity engagement focused on cultural communities, transit riders and youth. Primary tactics included partnerships with community-based organizations and multicultural conversations with Latino, Russian-speaking, Tongan, Chinese, Vietnamese, Bhutanese, African immigrant and African-American communities. Liaisons to cultural groups received stipends and helped spark the participation of historically underrepresented groups, such as elders who do not speak English and high school students. In addition, youth were engaged through multilingual canvassing of businesses in the Powell-Division corridor, as well as student-led interviews and service learning in the area.

## Research Methods

Qualitative textual analysis was conducted on Metro's public engagement tactics about the Powell-Division project during the project planning period, which lasted from January 2014 to June 2015. In addition, public reports issued by Metro and news stories produced by local and regional news media about the Powell-Division project, all from that same timeframe, were also studied, using the same process.

The textual analysis identified four broad themes communicated by Metro. In contract, the public comments to Metro's June 2015 survey, following 18 months of public engagement efforts, fell into three broad themes, only one of which was in line with Metro's communication.



## Key Themes Communicated by Metro

- Your input is important (to help city officials, planners, etc., make decisions).
- We are addressing your concerns (e.g. affordable housing impact).
- Be aware of decisions made (e.g. route changes).
- Transit betters our community (e.g. extending reach of employers, educators, etc., through transit).

## Key Themes Made by the Public in Response to Metro's Public Engagement

- Transit is a means to improve the community (e.g. mixed income neighborhoods, intentional affordable housing, safer streets and community spaces, more jobs, support communities of color, protect small business especially ethnic-owned, etc.)
- We want safer, more comfortable transportation (safer sidewalks/crossings; improved mobility for all road users; faster, more reliable transit, better access to transit)
- Some places could be made more welcoming, healthy and better connected (which would help with economic development and community-building)



## Analysis & Discussion

There can be little question that Metro accomplished what public engagement initiatives about public transportation projects should. Metro advocated a process that was deliberate, highly inclusive, flexible, transparent, methodologically sound, initially independent of the potential planning options, squarely focused on collaborative problem-solving, and which empowered citizens by taking their input seriously (CAPA, 2008; IAPAA, n.d.; Zhong et al., 2007; de Luca, 2014). This was reflected by the range of in-person, online and equity engagement programs, as well as the depth of tactics delivered underneath each of the broad programmatic areas.

In addition, Metro worked diligently to engage with multicultural communities and other historically underrepresented, marginalized, vulnerable and/or disengaged populations, including young people. This reflects purposeful application of

the theoretical principles of distributing decision-making power and engaging organizations and groups, not just individuals (Berger, 2005; McAndrews & Marcus, 2015; Ramasubramanian, 2015).

Metro and the public only shared one common theme in their communication: that transit is a means to improve the community. That is a strong and encouraging result of Metro's public engagement efforts. However, the other three themes evident in Metro's engagement tactics focused on the project and the process, while the other two themes evident in the citizens' response focused on their needs as community-dwellers. Livability is a concept that has been applied sparingly by Metro in its communications and public engagement. This case study, and in particular Portland citizens' clearly stated desire for safer transportation and more welcoming spaces within the Powell-Division corridor, suggests an opportunity to frame future communications around the concept of livability. Doing so would anchor project-related communication and public engagement tactics in the quality that is most important in the hearts and minds of citizens. This more citizen-centric approach should help government agencies in their effort to get the public on board with transportation initiatives.

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