



EXPERTS TALK

Community Compensation on Infrastructure Projects with **Katie Caskey**



Exploring the Emerging Practice of Compensating Participants for Engagement in the Public Process

Despite longstanding efforts to create inclusive, broadly representative participation processes, many infrastructure agencies and owners across the globe still struggle to engage underserved communities meaningfully and fairly. Compensating community members for their participation in the public process is one strategy steadily gaining attention to address this disparity. The result can be more meaningful public participation, critical for building support and achieving sustainable, equitable decisions.

Senior Strategic Communications Consultant **Katie Caskey** has worked for more than a decade in public engagement for transportation projects. She is passionate about developing and executing creative and meaningful engagement strategies that incorporate all relevant community voices. Before joining HDR, she worked as the policy planning director at the Minnesota Department of Transportation, where she used many of the same strategies that she now applies on service delivery for a wide variety of clients.

In this interview, she explains why public involvement compensation is receiving more attention now, addresses some of the challenges in implementing the strategy and explains how it can be a powerful tool for gathering previously overlooked input on infrastructure projects.

Q. Why are infrastructure owners and agencies exploring participant compensation?

A. One reason the idea of compensation has been getting more attention is a recent [USDOT guide for equitable public involvement](#) that detailed strategies in this space. One of the bigger things it clarified is that federal funds can be used for compensating participants in public involvement, which wasn't clear in the past. That seal of approval has prompted more interest from agencies.

Ongoing conversations about equity and equitable decision making are also driving interest. Infrastructure owners are realizing that historical decision making didn't include all people and all voices, and many are trying to do better going forward. There's a push for improved communication across all the different aspects of infrastructure.

Compensation is coming into the conversation to remove barriers to participation. It can take various forms:

- Cash or cash equivalent, which compensates participants for the time they may have had to take off work or just as recognition of the value of people's time and expertise.

(Cont.)



- Non-cash compensation that also encourages more representative and equitable participation, such as
 - o A meal
 - o Childcare
 - o Transportation
- Payments to community-based organizations to support agency engagement activities

The whole concept of environmental justice — including how that’s applied and what the standards are — also continues to evolve. The standards keep getting higher and higher in terms of what it means to truly do good engagement as part of environmental reviews and NEPA, particularly given the White House’s [Justice40 Initiative](#).

Q. What’s the current status in the industry? How is the concept of community compensation being implemented across the United States?

A. It varies a lot. Some states already have laws that require them to provide some level of compensation. These states are trying to figure out exactly what that looks like. Other states want to do it and are trying to develop their own guidelines. Still other states or regions don’t like the idea at all and aren’t pursuing it.

Within geographies, there’s also a lot of variability depending on specific agency and industry. Perceptions are varied. Places that have leaned more into equity conversations tend to be the ones on the forefront.

The transportation industry has been talking about this for a while now, but I think the conversation has evolved. It started as providing meals or transportation, maybe small stipends or gift cards. Now it’s beginning to coalesce around more formal and substantial compensation. Within

the last couple of years, I think the idea has gained a lot more prominence and is something that agencies are exploring more seriously.

Q. What are the main challenges that agencies have in implementing participant compensation strategies?

A. The challenges vary based on where the agency is in their process. States, regions or agencies may have policies or laws that limit what funding can be spent on. Working with legislators or policymakers to authorize spending on participant compensation is the first step.

For others who have gotten past that hurdle, the challenges are very tangible. How do we logistically get payment to people? Many agencies aren’t set up to draw cash out and give it to someone without multiple steps. And having someone fill out a vendor form to get \$100 at a meeting is not efficient or easy for participants.

There are also a lot of questions about the amount of compensation. Is it for everyone? Is it for certain groups? If it’s for certain groups, which groups and how are those lines drawn? Is it a nominal kind of gift? Is it the value of what a professional would expect? How should compensation for the public compare to what staff are paid? What if cumulative compensation for an individual crosses the \$600 annual threshold that triggers tax reporting requirements? Right now, across the industry, there are more questions than answers. Agencies need to be considering all of these and developing clear guidelines.

Q. What are the some of the objections of naysayers and how can agencies respond?

A. One objection is that it’s everyone’s civic duty to participate; we shouldn’t be paying people to do it. The idea is that if people don’t want to participate, they don’t care. But as is noted in federal guidance, it’s practical barriers such as childcare or scheduling that have kept many people from taking part.

A similar philosophy is that this isn’t a responsible use of government dollars, particularly if there isn’t clear guidance about who is paid. That’s still more of a gray area. There’s some level of compensation that’s accepted within the industry. And then there’s a level that everyone agrees is way too much. But the happy medium is not quite defined yet. Developing clear internal guidelines will help agencies address this concern.

There’s also worry about paying people to participate. Does that introduce any real or perceived bias? Is it

buying biased input depending on who asks for the participation? This is something the industry needs to figure out. However, from my perspective, other industries have shown us that this is possible. Other industries pay participants for market research and for study participation and have addressed this concern by adopting standards that we can emulate.

Agencies can also point out the tangible benefits of compensation. It can lead to smoother, quicker projects. If project delays occur due to public engagement, it's often because we don't have the right voices at the table at the right time. Instead, decisions get made and the project advances, then stakeholders who were left out discover what's happening and there are delays, protests, lawsuits, etc. That's why compensation — however it may be implemented — can be so powerful. Any strategy that helps make sure the voices that are going to be most impacted by decisions are at the table when the decisions are made can help a project stay on schedule.

Q. What does it look like when this sort of approach works?

A. There are lots of good examples of this strategy in action. One client delivery strategy I am leading involved a series of workshops, for which it was critical that community members participate along with technical staff.

The workshops occurred during working hours, so without a compensation approach technical staff would be getting paid for their time but not the community members, who would just have to find time to take part. Since equity and recognizing the value of people's lived experiences were important to this project and client, we decided to offer about \$100 per workshop for community members, who we invited individually. And the number of people who participated and the diversity of people who came to the workshops was exponentially above any other similar activity we've done. It led to great conversation, mutual learning and great outcomes for that project.

On another transportation project, we paid a \$2,000 stipend to neighborhood organizations to help us develop and implement a community engagement plan for a major roadway redesign on a complex urban corridor. Neighborhood organizations are often working on tight budgets and get a lot of requests for their time. Because we came to the table and compensated them for their time, they were able to assist our project in a much more meaningful way. Their insights into how best to engage people in their neighborhoods and their willingness to share project information via their existing communication channels resulted in a much more effective outreach strategy on our end.



Inspiration & Advice

Q. How did you come to be interested in this aspect of public engagement? Any advice for others?

A. My interest in the field of public engagement really stems from a core belief that people impacted by policies, planning and projects in their community should have a voice in the recommended direction. This isn't something that has always been true in the past for the infrastructure industry. As we continue to strive to do more inclusive and equitable engagement, compensation was a natural next step in the conversation. I started exploring this topic prior to joining HDR when I worked at the Minnesota Department of Transportation, and even six or seven years ago now, we were starting to explore this as a way to get better representation in our decision-making processes.

This idea of compensation or recognizing the value of people's time was one that we started exploring in small ways. And it's just grown. Anyone interested in infrastructure decision-making communications will discover it's an exciting time. Looking ahead, I think there's a lot of opportunity for us to get better at involving people and making sure that everybody can be an active participant.

Experts Talk is an interview series with technical leaders from across our Transportation program. Each interview illuminates a different aspect of transportation infrastructure planning, design and delivery. Contact HDRTransportation@hdrinc.com for more information. Visit www.hdrinc.com/insights regularly to gain insights from specialized experts and thought leaders behind our award-winning, full service consulting practice.