

Beyond the Checked Box: Better Project Outcomes Start with Equitable Engagement

BY CATHY LAFATA AND JOHN MITCHELL

Transportation infrastructure does not just get people from point A to point B; it brings people together, it opens opportunities, it improves lives. Transportation can transform marginalized or disadvantaged communities; however, the best results come when the communities themselves are involved in the decision-making process.



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“Meaningful involvement” of communities has always been an aspiration during project development, as a component of the early definition of environmental justice. With the issuance of Executive Order 12898 in January 1994, the Environmental Protection Agency defined environmental justice as the “fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, national origin or education level.” While community involvement has been a part of environmental justice, it has often lacked meaningful impact, with limited opportunities for real input into decision-making.

With the signing of Executive Order 14096 in April 2023, the definition evolved significantly. The new order broadens the scope of environmental justice to include any communities with environmental justice concerns and underscores a shift from a framework centered on equality to a more nuanced emphasis on equity.* With this shift came a renewed focus on meaningful, or equitable, community engagement.

This broader definition also requires a fundamental change in perspective: viewing the community as a partner rather than an antagonist. Historically, public outreach often felt like a mere formality—a way to check a box and avoid conflict. By embracing communities as partners, project leaders can create better solutions that incorporate diverse ideas and insights, ultimately fostering trust throughout the project lifecycle.

The Implications of This Shift

Previously, public participation on projects was not always meaningful and inclusive, including engagement conducted during the environmental review process most often associated with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). As part of NEPA, projects need to address environmental justice, which has been fairly standardized since 1994: communities are identified, project impacts are assessed, and analyses are conducted to determine if

* Equity is defined by Merriam-Webster as “fairness or justice in the way people are treated.” Equality is defined as the “quality or state of being equal.”



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those impacts disproportionately affected minority or low-income populations. The goal has always been to mitigate harms.

Today, with EO 14096, the emphasis is on a more holistic approach that not only considers potential harms but actively seeks to enhance community benefits—and also includes all people or communities with environmental justice concerns, not just minority and low-income populations. That includes those with Tribal affiliations, mobile populations such as migrant farmworkers, people with disabilities, and more. Providing this holistic approach starts with better engagement of the community.

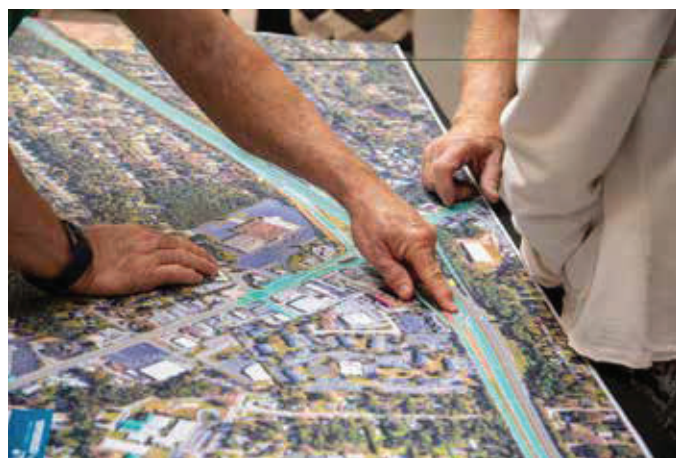
The implications of this updated definition are profound. Transportation projects must now go beyond merely avoiding or mitigating harm in their design. They should actively consider addressing historical injustices and rectifying areas of underinvestment in infrastructure that have left certain communities vulnerable. This shift prioritizes the needs of populations who have historically been marginalized or overlooked, ensuring that projects deliver tangible benefits to these communities.

As environmental justice has shifted, so has the community engagement that goes hand in hand. It now emphasizes community input and collaborative problem-solving, fostering an inclusive atmosphere where solutions are tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of communities. The goal is to create a participatory environment that allows community members to voice their concerns and contribute to the decision-making process.

This improved engagement is good news for the community, but also provides value for project leaders. By cultivating political will and building community trust, a strong engagement process can lead to a better product that is less likely to require a redesign or re-evaluation. Improved public acceptance can also reduce the chance of project delays, future legal concerns or public opposition.

Evolving Engagement Practices

A notable evolution in engagement practices is the timing; while it was not unheard of for community involvement to begin before NEPA, the practice is becoming more common, with more projects



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now making a deliberate effort to initiate community involvement earlier in the process. It has become clear that initiating strong engagement at the beginning is a crucial ingredient for successful transportation projects. It is much harder to bake a cake and add butter in the middle of baking. The same is true for projects and engagement.

This shift allows for deeper insights into community needs and can help establish partnerships with local organizations. Earlier engagement fosters trust and emphasizes that community input is vital for successful project outcomes. Engaging with communities at the outset of a project involves asking targeted questions: How do residents use the transportation system? What challenges do they face? What resources do they need? By prioritizing community feedback from the start, project teams can craft solutions that reflect the real needs of those affected, rather than imposing solutions based on incomplete information.

When developing a meaningful engagement strategy, project leaders must recognize that each community has its unique context, needs, and challenges. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; each project requires a tailored approach. While traditional public meetings remain necessary, the emphasis is increasingly on more organic relationships and smaller, more interactive workshops and focus groups that meet communities where they are. This approach enhances engagement and leads to more meaningful dialogue. It fosters a sense of ownership among community members, allowing them to feel like active participants rather than passive recipients of information.

Practical Examples of Meaningful Engagement

Successful community engagement is continuous and consistent throughout the project lifecycle. Some examples illustrating how this principle has been applied across various phases of project development:

Planning Phase: In collaboration with the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority, we are identifying barriers to transit access in areas of persistent poverty. By analyzing 30 years of data on community conditions, we aim to develop strategies that



effectively remove or reduce these barriers. As part of this effort, the project team is dedicated to understanding the lived experiences of residents. Importantly, our engagement seeks feedback from a proportional demographic swath of residents to gather the perspectives of the area's diverse communities.

By gathering input from those who are most affected by transit policies, we can help future initiatives not only address existing challenges but also enhance community cohesion and connectivity. Involving the community during the planning and ideation phase also plays an important role in determining which projects happen. If engagement is delayed until specific projects are chosen, some decisions are already off the table for the community to influence. But by engaging with community members throughout this process, we are building trust and fostering collaboration, as it demonstrates our commitment to listening and responding to their needs.

Funding Phase: In Saint Paul, MN, USA, MnDOT is using RAISE grant funds to improve safety for all users along a 3.7-mile section of East 7th Street and Arcade Street from I-94 in Saint Paul to Roselawn Avenue. The project was originally defined as a resurfacing project, but feedback from the community indicated a need and opportunity to address long-standing safety, connectivity and quality of life issues for people living and working along the corridor.

Initial public engagement results for the project revealed community interest in aesthetic improvements in the project area, not just roadway improvements. This led to a community design workshop and the creation of a visual quality advisory committee that provided key feedback on design options. As part of the keeping focus on the community, meetings included a meal shared by participants (who were compensated by the DOT for their time) from a local restaurant culturally significant to the corridor's rich culture.

Design Phase: The Lowcountry Rapid Transit project in South Carolina illustrates effective engagement even when it is not mandated. While the project received a documented categorical exclusion under NEPA in 2021, our team has continued to conduct extensive dialogue with local stakeholders from non-traditional spaces, such as libraries or churches, who will be the eventual ambassadors for this program. One key difference is that this bus rapid transit system is being built to serve an existing community of



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riders, not based on projected new riders in the future. Accordingly, it is important to understand the needs of that community. The project team is creating relationships with neighborhood leadership and community leaders, using a variety of methods, from newsletters to virtual meetings to knocking on doors. The overall goal is to reach people where they are and inform a better project.

Construction Phase: The Carolina Crossroads program in Columbia, SC, highlights ongoing community engagement commitments throughout the construction phases. The public engagement team continues to host public meetings to introduce new project phases while also leveraging technology—such as social media and virtual presentations—to enhance communication. This multifaceted approach means that the community remains informed and engaged throughout the project lifecycle.

One exciting new effort consists of working with schools to use the project as a showcase for workforce development and entry into the industry. The project team is helping young people in the community see multiple pathways of success regardless of their educational aspirations. If they want to work on a project like this straight out of high school, there are options for that. If they want to go to college and get a 2-year degree, or a 4-year degree or more,

there are also many ways they can be involved on projects such as this. The team is using the project to improve opportunities within the impacted community. This not only benefits the entire industry, but also helps build public support for this major and necessary project.

Lessons Learned from Meaningful Engagement

Through these examples, several key lessons emerge regarding the value of meaningful community engagement:

1. **Start early:** Engaging communities early in the project development process lays the groundwork for building trust and fostering collaboration. Early input allows project teams to better understand community needs and preferences, leading to more effective solutions.
2. **Be inclusive:** It is crucial to engage a diverse range of voices, particularly those from historically marginalized communities. Inclusive engagement helps all perspectives be considered, which strengthens the overall quality of project outcomes.
3. **Foster relationships:** Building relationships with community members and local organizations is essential for effective

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engagement. Trust is a vital component of successful collaboration, and investing time in relationship-building pays dividends throughout the project lifecycle.

4. Adaptability is key: Each community is unique, and engagement strategies must be tailored to the specific context. Flexibility in approach allows project teams to respond to community feedback and evolving circumstances.
5. Communicate transparently: Clear and transparent communication fosters trust and makes community members feel informed and empowered. Regular updates and open channels for feedback are essential components of effective engagement.

Looking Ahead: The Future of Environmental Justice

In our years of serving clients through community engagement work, it has become clear: It can result in a positive impact. When done correctly, it enhances project outcomes, minimizes redesign costs, avoids potential delays, and mitigates risks associated with public dissent. The benefits of meaningful engagement extend beyond individual projects; they contribute to the broader goal of fostering equitable and sustainable communities.

Integrating meaningful engagement into each aspect of a project is essential for advancing environmental justice. Environmental justice and public participation are no longer exercises in “checking the box”—they are now advanced meaningfully and intentionally. This approach not only addresses the unique needs of communities but also contributes to a more equitable future for all. By recognizing the importance of community input and prioritizing collaboration, we can build a foundation for projects that serve as catalysts for positive change. [itej](#)



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