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# A PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

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Beyond periodic trips to the voting booth and occasional brief appearances at public hearings, U.S. citizens usually have had little access to the Government decisionmaking process. In an effort to broaden their involvement, citizens-- through litigation and public protest --have demanded the development of additional channels for making their views known and thereby influencing Government policy.

In response to this demand, Congress has mandated increased citizen participation in Government activities, from planning to actual implementation of programs. Experimentation with techniques for public participation is under way in several Government agencies. Because there has been limited experience with an expanded public participation process, a brief discussion of the automobile assessment's public participation program may be useful to others engaged in such activities.

In the automobile assessment, the OTA staff operated under two assumptions:

- . A better understanding of people's needs, attitudes, and behavior is needed in order to build more humane and satisfactory systems, transportation being only one. What better source of information is there, then, than people themselves?
- Involvement of a diverse group of people in the assessment would lead to a better understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of the automobile transportation system and, hence, to a more thorough analysis.

In designing the citizen participation program for the assessment, an effort was made to stimulate public commentary on substantive questions, to facilitate the public's ability to participate in the study, and, where possible, to establish a two-way dialog. Too often, even now, public participation efforts are limited to public hearings, held during the traditional work day (between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.), in a handful of major cities. The schedule typically allots participants 5 to 10 minutes to speak, which usually means time to read a prepared statement. There is no discussion, and those conducting the hear-

ing rarely make any response to testimony and comments offered by the public "witnesses," who tend to be persons with a professional or organizational interest in the subject under consideration. In form, the hearing process more closely resembles a quasi-legal proceeding than an open forum for mutual exchange of views.

The OTA staff decided to exclude public hearings and to rely on other methods to reach the public. The methods included a brochure and questionnaire, workshops, interviews, small-group discussions, and regular meetings with a Public Participation Working Group. The intent was to employ techniques that would encourage discussion and informal exchange of views without the trappings of a formal judicial procedure. This was done, also, with the intent of expanding public participation in general and exposing Government activity to closer scrutiny by a broader range of the public.

The data collected are fairly representative of American thinking on the subject of the future use and characteristics of the automobile transportation system. This is due to the diversity and number of people involved, and to the nationwide and open-forum characteristics of the program. However, it is only a very small piece of what is needed in terms of public dialog and participation in Government decisionmaking on the topic of personal mobility. It is hoped that this effort will serve as a point of departure from which others can continue.

**Brochure and questionnaire.** A brochure, entitled "The Automobile: It's Driving Us To Think," was distributed throughout the United States during June 1978. (See appendix A.) It contained a brief discussion of the origin of the automobile assessment, the issues identified for

study, and background information on OTA. Enclosed was a short questionnaire designed to explore the recipient's views on issues, technological alternatives for personal mobility, and policy options for the Federal Government. About 17,000 copies were mailed, and almost 700 responses were received. This is a response rate of approximately 4 percent.

The questionnaire raised basically the same topics that were considered in other parts of the public participation activity and in the technical analysis itself. An open-ended questionnaire was used to give respondents the greatest amount of leeway in selecting points for comment and articulating their replies. Space was also provided for additional comments that respondents wished to make.

Members of Congress from areas where automobile assessment workshops were not scheduled were asked to assist in the distribution of the brochure and questionnaire by sending it to a limited and randomly selected number of people on their mailing lists. Help was also obtained from national organizations which had no connection with the automobile transportation system. (See table 4 for distribution list.)

Table 4.—Brochure Distribution List

Congressman Morris K, Udall, Arizona. . . .	2,000
Congressman John J. Cavanaugh, Montana ..	2,000
Congressman Olin E. Teague, Texas . . .	2,000
Congressman Hamilton Fish, New York, ..	1,000
Congressman Wyche Fowler, Georgia	2,000
Washington State Energy Off Ice, Washington	1,800
Indiana University, Purdue, Indiana	500
National Rural Center, national	1,800
National Economists Club, national	1,200
Parents Without Partners, national	1,500
OTA, Public Affairs, national	1,200
Total . . . . .	17,100

While this technique produced a large number of responses, it was limiting in that the staff was unable to pursue specific points made by individual respondents. However, some of these points were incorporated in later discussions with other people during workshops and interviews. The major difficulty encountered with this and other outreach techniques used was putting together written (and oral) materials in an even-handed, objective manner. What appears to one individual to be fair presentation appears to another as misrepresentation. Illus-

trative of this dilemma was that environmentalists tended to criticize the brochure for being "too lenient on the auto and its impact," whereas auto industry officials tended to label it "biased" against the automobile.

**Workshops.** Eight workshops were held—four in July and four in September 1978—at locations throughout the country. The sites selected were Concord, N. H.; Akron, Ohio; Ft. Dodge, Iowa; Portland, Oreg.; Anchorage, Alaska; Los Angeles, Calif.; Albuquerque, N. Mex.; and Memphis, Term. (See appendix B for copies of the workshop notice, agenda, and handout material.)

Basically, three criteria were used in site selection. First, the staff felt that a workshop should be held in each of the major regions of the country to sample whatever regional differences there might be in attitudes and travel habits. Second, a range of sparse to dense population was needed to determine differences, if any, in attitudes about transportation and travel needs and patterns. (Viewpoints throughout the country were found to be similar on the topic of personal transportation, regardless of the region or the size of the community.) Third, an effort was made to select areas that are not generally visited by Government representatives in other public outreach programs.

Anchorage was included not only because it met the criteria, but also because Alaska is a large area on the brink of what could be substantial development. The staff was interested in knowing if transportation decisions being made in that State would mirror those of the "lower 48," or if Alaskan development might introduce innovation in modes and usage that would be applicable elsewhere in the United States. Akron, Ohio, was added to the list because its economy is largely dependent on the automobile industry. The remaining six sites were selected based mostly on their regional location (north-east, midwest, northwest, west, southwest, southeast) and size (rural, small town, medium-sized town, large metropolitan area).

Mailing lists for each workshop location were assembled with the help of chambers of commerce, local government officials, and occasionally, the district office staff of Members of Congress. These lists contained the names of a variety of individuals living in and around the



*Photo credits. Bob Ounsmore and Vicki Sibley*

Involving the public—citizens from the east to west coasts provided valuable input to the public participation process

communities to be visited. An average of 30 people attended each of the workshops, five of which were held on a weekday evening (7 to 10:30 p.m. ) and three on Saturdays (9 a.m. to 4 p.m. ). Participants were encouraged to air their opinions, and time was allocated for dialog among the participants and the two or three OTA staff members in attendance.

Interest appeared to be higher and attendance greater at the evening sessions, even though the shortened time period allowed less discussion. Some adjustments were made in the OTA presentation and wording of questions following the first few workshops, primarily at the suggestion of participants. This helped later participants to understand more easily the nature of the effort and resulted in better response during the remaining sessions. While there was a good mix among the participants in terms of background experience and community activities, there was not as much balance as the staff would have liked in terms of age, sex, and race. More intensive efforts to reach people in these categories is needed for future efforts of this sort.

The workshops were the most time-consuming of the public participation measures used, but they also resulted in a substantial amount of information. The administrative effort was large due to the need for travel and hotel accommodations, room arrangements, audio-visual equipment rental, compilation of mailing lists, preparation of handout materials, and a myriad of other tasks. Where time allows, a workshop is a good method for stimulating public discussion and obtaining a variety of comments.

**Interviews and small group discussions.** Over 200 people were interviewed individually or in small groups throughout the country. In some instances, the discussions took place as an extra session of an annual conference, such as those conducted by the American Institute of Planners or the National Council for the Transportation Disadvantaged. Interviews were arranged in every community where the staff held workshops—including, in one case, a stopover location. Meetings with special groups were arranged also, such as one meeting with a group of architectural students and a separate meeting with the students' professors. Occasionally, spontaneous interviews took place—as in one

case when an OTA staff member struck up a conversation with a rural southern shopkeeper.

The format for these sessions was similar to the workshops: a brief explanation about the study and OTA, then questions and discussion. (See appendix C for a sample of the questions asked. ) This method of gathering public commentary allowed the OTA staff to discuss respondents' viewpoints in more detail than was possible at workshops. It was also the easiest and least costly technique to organize and implement, and it seemed to be the most productive with respect to quantity of detailed commentary.

**Public Participation Working Group.** This group was composed of nine people from the Washington, D. C., metropolitan area. They were selected on the basis on their travel needs and modal choices, rather than technical transportation expertise. The members represented a mix of income level, age, sex, and race. Some members owned cars, some did not. Some had technical knowledge about various aspects of the automobile transportation system; some did not. They represented themselves, rather than an organization. (See appendix D for a brief background description of working group members. )

The working group was established primarily to provide an ongoing mechanism through which a small number of people from the general public could comment on the procedural and substantive aspects of the automobile assessment and the public participation program. Over time, the members became familiar with the general concerns of OTA and with the immediate problems of the OTA staff conducting the assessment.

Eight full-day meetings were held on Saturdays between April and mid-December 1978. Initially, the members were asked the same basic questions as in the questionnaire. As time passed, they were given materials to read pertaining to the future of the automobile; presentations were made by the staff which provided them with additional information; and discussions took place during which the members' views and need for more information were examined. During their last meetings, the questions asked of them initially were repeated, and their responses discussed. Generally, their views

had not changed much over the course of 8 months, nor did they differ substantially from responses received through other channels. This is probably due to the fact that the automobile is a well-known technology. If the assessment had dealt with a less familiar technology, the working group responses might have differed greatly from the beginning of their participation to the end, or might have differed from the comments of less informed respondents.

In summary, participants in all aspects of the program appeared eager to comment on the study and seemed to be generally pleased with the approaches used. Less than a dozen people out of the 1,300 respondents objected to the program as a whole or to specific parts. Three individuals said that the distribution of the questionnaires was a "rip off of taxpayers' money." A northwestern couple charged that the "hidden agenda of the auto assessment is to do away with the car and democracy." A few individuals who were affiliated with the auto or auto-related industries claimed that the assessment staff was "trying to stack the workshops with radicals, hippies, and screaming environmentalists." Interestingly, a car enthusiast who attended a workshop said that he was "disappointed that there weren't any radicals in attendance."

For the most part, respondents answered questions enthusiastically. They **made construc-**

tive suggestions on both the content of the assessment and the public participation program. Additionally, many requested more information from the staff and asked for copies of the report when published.

"This is the first time I've seen a Washington bureaucrat," several people commented. Others said the questions "triggered new thoughts" and sometimes changed their perspectives. Some said they enjoyed the "exchange of ideas" during the discussions. A western man said he came to the workshop "because I thought there would be a good cross section of people, and I was interested in the direction of transportation. I got more answers than I expected."

An auto club official wrote to us: "I compliment you on conducting a good workshop . . . . Your presentation of data and alternatives was without prejudice. All participants had the opportunity to express their concerns and recommendations. I am pleased to have had the opportunity to participate." Many questionnaire respondents said they appreciated being informed about the study and being offered the chance to voice their concerns and opinions. In Washington, D. C., a public participation Working Group member said, "We have learned while participating."

So did we.