



# Public Involvement Best Practices: Linking Land Use & Transportation

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## **Summary**

This paper outlines effective practices for incorporating grassroots community-based planning techniques into the statutory transportation planning process, while developing new strategies for linking land use and transportation planning, re-engineering roadways to enhance safety and multi-modal mobility, and encouraging more compact development patterns. The basic components – inter-agency teams, facilitator training, community education, hands-on charrette-style workshops, engaging presentations, group workbooks, inspiring and buildable plans – have been developed over time by the Citizen Planner Institute, and tested in communities across the country.

### **Effective process does not replace governance and good business with anarchy.**

- ❑ The people ‘own’ the process
- ❑ Designers do their work
- ❑ Developers or agencies ‘own’ the projects
- ❑ Elected decision-makers still make the tough decisions
- ❑ Most importantly, the plans get built.

## **Practice Development & Core Principles**

These practices have been developed over the last fifteen years (working with firms like Dover Kohl, Duany Plater-Zyberk, Ramon Trias, Correa Valle Valle, Dan Burden, Daniel Williams), and tested in a wide variety of community and agency applications. The author founded the Citizen Planner Program at Miami-Dade Community College in 1995, to translate complex New Urbanist principles to average citizens and planning staff. The MacArthur Foundation’s Sustainable Everglades Initiative funded expansion of the program’s training workshops and community charrettes into South Florida, and required collaboration with a wide range of community and government groups. Florida Department of Community Affairs funded additional training workshops for communities and agencies across Florida. In 1996, the Citizen Planner Institute (CPI) was founded to carry this work on outside the community college system. US EPA provided funding to complete and publish the training handbook, *Real Towns: Making Your Neighborhood Work*, along with several training workshops in California.

During the early years of program development, Citizen Planner training typically lasted a month or more – four half-day sessions for agency staff, and four evening sessions for community groups. As the materials improved, and presentations were refined, this was compressed to a single training session (mornings for staff, evenings for citizens, and a walking audit in the afternoon) to prepare for a Saturday planning workshop.

### **Core Principles**

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Grassroots planning techniques applied to statutory agency policies &amp; process</li> <li>❑ Used across country, neighborhoods to regions, workshops for a dozen to 1,200 people</li> <li>❑ Works for transportation, land use, housing, workforce, environment, economy – any topic, project, or agency</li> <li>❑ Most effective when multiple topics, partners, and funding streams combined with new design solutions and built examples</li> </ul> |
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After helping Walkable Communities kick off Honolulu’s Islandwide Traffic Calming Project in 1998, CPI was invited to stay and oversee public participation for Oahu Trans 2K, a Major Investment Study for a proposed Light Rail project. Because of an aggressive timetable – and ideas that were new to both the community and a very large project team – we tightened up the process significantly. This included: more efficient agency & leadership training, formalized facilitator rules (*a 2-page handout & 2-hour training*), turning public input into ‘data’ (*2,400 separate sortable comments entered into an Access database from Round 1 alone*), requiring agency & consultant participation (*over 100 staff & consultants trained from almost 20 firms and agencies*), all-out publicity and communications strategy, blueprint-sized group workbooks, and regular reports on the Action Agenda (*what ideas each agency had implemented since the last workshop*). The Oahu Trans 2K workshops – always an efficient 2-hour hands-on session – went through four rounds of nearly fifty workshops and over fifty focus groups in six months. Most significantly, the active public input led to actual changes in the project, which started as a Light Rail study and morphed into a Bus Rapid Transit project to meet community concerns over cost and maintaining clear views. In essence – if you’re going to seek public input, you have to follow through on what you’ve heard.



*An effective process works as well in a minority neighborhood as it does at a USDOT Leadership Conference.*

Although each project takes a slightly different approach, the most critical elements are common to all. Facilitator training for both agency staff and community leaders is a key predictor of success, since it essentially gives the process over to the community – although a strong moderator is always needed to stay on track. The RoadWork exercises (from *Real Towns*) and Walking Audits help participants to understand their own neighborhoods, while looking for areas where change is appropriate. Even where trained facilitators are plentiful, we practice an ‘open architecture’ process – by describing in the opening PowerPoint just what we’ll do that night, and then clearly laying out the ground rules before each group exercise.

Bricks and mud tend to be thrown by angry people when they have a big audience. While discussions with the entire group are good for initially laying issues on the table, and for taking questions and explaining details of a plan being presented at a later workshop, most creative work happens in small groups (eight to 10 people per table), typically using markers on large area maps. One classic and powerful tool is also the simplest way to start a group’s engines – one-on-ones. The audience is asked to divide into twos and share a key issue with each other, with one caveat – they each have to listen and report the other’s comment back to the group. Another simple trick, ‘post-it visions,’ starts with individual input and leads to a summary of what the group has in common, all in about ten minutes. Each person is given five post-it notes and a few minutes to write down five phrases that describe their long-term vision for the community. These are then self-sorted on the wall into topics that invariably demonstrate how much the group already holds in common. Another

way for the groups to prioritize issues before heading to the tables is listing all the problem areas and potential solutions (big paper, big print), then posting those lists on the wall for a ‘dot vote’ – which again demonstrates clear group preferences. Good process makes effective use of technology, especially clear and well-organized PowerPoint presentations to lay the groundwork and define options. A variety of image-rich toolbox solutions are presented, along with instructions for working together. These images are often available for viewing or comment on the website. Finally, the hallmark of an effective process is efficiency. While many of our community design workshops are an all-day Saturday event, most of the work on transportation projects discussed herein is accomplished in well-organized two-hour sessions.

**Comprehensive approach relies on:**

- 1) **Getting people to the table** – all-out PR and partnerships
  - a. Inter-agency teams, cross-program coordination
  - b. Work through community contacts
- 2) **Preparation & training**
  - a. Facilitator and staff training, community education
  - b. RoadWork & Walking Audits
  - c. Science/data/designs translated & presented clearly
- 3) **Well-designed process** – issues-oriented focus groups, individual exercises, and hands-on public workshops
  - a. Small groups, marking on maps, place based,
  - b. “Open architecture” process – clear directions & rules explained to all
- 4) **Comprehensive, exciting, visual plans** with innovative designs and local examples; cost-effective & buildable
- 5) **Action Agenda** to get buy-in and determine priorities
- 6) **Funding and implementation** of model projects

**Case Studies**

The United Jefferson Area Mobility Plan, or UnJAM 2025, is a regional long-range transportation plan linking transportation, land use, economy, and environment. It focuses on improving mobility, increasing real choices in travel modes, making the best use of our existing roadway investments, and targeting transportation investments to support smart land use decisions. Initiated in April 2002, UnJAM 2025 couples the MPO’s Charlottesville-Albemarle Regional Transportation Plan for the urban/suburban area with the Rural Area Transportation Plan for the surrounding four counties. The inter-jurisdictional planning effort is led by the TJPDC, with active participation from local, state, and federal agencies.



*Groups marking up blueprint-sized UnJAM Round 2 Workbooks, determining policy and project priorities.*

UnJAM executed an extensive public involvement campaign, focused on interactive, hands-on workshops, and taking a fresh look at transportation and land use options. Eight Round 1



and its related principles have become a household word with community members, local elected officials, agency staff, and area businesses.

UnJAM has wrapped around several related planning efforts. The Eastern Planning Initiative modeled changing how and where growth occurs, by building around historic town centers in walkable, village-scaled development, preserving forests and farmland, and saving up to \$500 million in transportation investment. The Hillsdale Drive Traffic Safety Study developed age-friendly roadway improvements. MPO Walkability Workshops increased awareness of pedestrian issues, and broadened the base of allies to include fire chiefs and disabilities activists. As an outgrowth of UnJAM, VDOT and local staff requested training from the MPO in roundabout modeling and design, and attended TJPDC's Mixed-Use Housing Conference. This led to the inter-agency 29H250 study focused on creating intersection improvements and completing the multimodal network to foster transit-oriented, mixed-use development along a typical suburban arterial strip.

## **Challenges**

- ❑ Getting people to the table – especially at regional scale
- ❑ Coordinating public infrastructure & developers' investments with a long-range transportation plan
- ❑ Inter-jurisdictional cooperation & coordination
- ❑ Long-term action on implementation tools & funding

While there are significant challenges to wedding grassroots-style public participation to complex, traditionally regulation-laden transportation planning, the rewards are worth the effort. The biggest challenge is getting people to the table – from competing jurisdictions, agencies, funding sources, public and private developers – to the public at large. It is much easier to get 300 people to turn out after a fatal crash, or to oppose a specific highway, than it is to work together developing regional long-range plans. Similar challenges exist in getting on-going cooperation to coordinate development proposals with transportation improvements that (might) occur far in the future. While we have had strong participation from developers and builders in neighborhood-scaled community design workshops (often eager to incorporate their projects into the plans) it is much more difficult to coordinate major developers' investments with a long-range transportation plan. Creating a successful marriage between transportation and land use planning requires extensive community education, consensus, and long-term action on some of the potential implementation tools, such as: creating urban design guidelines, updating parking regulations & requirements, developing healthy streetscape standards, encouraging compact Transit-Oriented Development, adopting mixed-use zoning, amending building and rehab codes, and developing an integrated, multi-modal transportation network.

## **Key Considerations**

- ❑ Effectiveness is multiplied by coordinating parallel efforts - across agencies, in the region and in localities, over time – wrapping related efforts in the 'brand name' – like Sustainable Everglades Initiative, Oahu Trans 2K or UnJAM
- ❑ Uses training, education and workshops (both public and staff) to introduce new design or policy solutions that can unblock agency resistance to change
- ❑ Facilitator & staff training is the key sparkplug - for smooth process, for PR and participation, and to lead to long-term implementation
- ❑ Facilitator ground rules make workshops smooth, efficient, and productive, while not forcing consensus

## **Strengths**

Effective public involvement is rooted in hands-on community process and partnerships between local jurisdictions, state and federal agencies, transit providers, business groups, developers, regional organizations, and community activists. The comprehensive approach relies on 1) getting people to the table; 2) a well-designed process – including facilitator and staff training, issues-oriented focus groups, and hands-on public workshops; 3) comprehensive, exciting, visual plans with innovative designs and local examples; 4) an action plan to get buy-in and determine priorities, and 5) funding and implementation of model projects.

More people involved – public, business people, staff and agency leaders – helps a plan withstand the vagaries of short election cycles, staff turnover, and lengthy funding timelines. A comprehensive cross-program approach can solve more problems, attract varied funding sources and allies, and build a wider support base. By coordinating related efforts in one region over time, the effect of each plan or program is multiplied. Using an ‘open architecture’ process (explaining exactly how meetings will be run, with simple ground rules), coupled with extensive training, allows participants to apply the principles in other community exercises.



*Getting community decision-makers involved in hands-on exercises and fieldwork – like this street capacity exercise – can multiply the effectiveness of workshops and training, while getting great PR for upcoming events.*

An effective process must be simple enough to be replicable in other communities. The techniques, tools, and process used to develop UnJAM can be repeated anywhere, regardless of size, location, or sophistication. The Level of Quality Guidelines, Facilitator Toolbox, QuickPick Forms, PowerPoint presentations, and workbooks used in UnJAM 2025 are available at [www.tjpc.org](http://www.tjpc.org) and could be tailored to fit any region.

Effective process does not replace governance and good business with anarchy. In a well-designed process: the people ‘own’ the process, the designers do their work, the developers or agencies ‘own’ the projects, the elected decision makers still make the tough decisions, and, most importantly, the plans get built.

*This paper was originally commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and National Charrette Institute for a policy forum on Public Involvement Best Practices.*

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