

# Not Just Checking a Box: What Does Effective Stakeholder Engagement in Public Transit Look Like?

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One of the greatest sources of delays and cost increases in public transit improvements derives from challenges in building support with stakeholders for new initiatives.<sup>123</sup> To some extent this is unavoidable as stakeholder engagement<sup>4</sup> for certain types of transit projects is not only a requirement, but when performed effectively, can substantially improve outcomes. From our experience working within Los Angeles Metro and now, on behalf of transit agencies nationally, we have seen a noticeable shift in approach. Traditional transit outreach has consisted of an agency deciding on a project and then going out and trying to sell it. This approach creates conflict and delay, and often results in concessions that lead to worse outcomes. It also is unlikely to solve the problem of opposition to change, which persists under almost any circumstance, because it does very little to bring people along with a new idea or change anyone's mind.

Fortunately, the industry is evolving towards adopting practices, many of which are adapted from public health, social justice, equity and organizing work, that are more conducive to building trust within the community and ultimately result in a better product and customer experience. These practices include building relationships with the community consistently, working together with communities instead of lecturing to them, and finally, having the courage to move forward when necessary.

## **BUILD RELATIONSHIPS ALL THE TIME, NOT JUST TO SELL PROJECTS**

Consider this: Would you barge into a casual acquaintance's life and start dictating solutions to their problems? Likely not. And if you did, you probably would not find them very receptive. Yet, transit agencies might be criticized for engaging with communities in a similar manner. Admittedly, the average person does not spend as much time thinking about solving public transit issues as much as transit professionals do. And a community meeting just to throw around ideas that may never amount to anything is not a respectful use of anyone's time. The answer is somewhere in between. Transit professionals must be present in the communities they serve. Visit, listen, liaise and be transparent and responsive—*especially* in the absence of specific projects and official channels.

- 1 Goldwyn, Eric, et al. "Transit Costs Study Final Report." Transit Costs Project, NYU Marron Institute for Transportation, 2 Feb. 2023, [transitcosts.com/transit-costs-study-final-report/](https://transitcosts.com/transit-costs-study-final-report/), Accessed 24 May 2024.
- 2 Aevaz, Romic, et al. "Saving Time and Making Cents: A Blueprint for Building Transit Better." Eno Center for Transportation, <https://projectdelivery.enotrans.org/report>. Accessed 24 May 2024.
- 3 Gordon, Aaron. "Why Doesn't America Build Things." Vice, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/93a39e/why-doesnt-america-build-things>. Accessed 24 May 2024.
- 4 We use the phrase "stakeholder engagement" intentionally rather than "community engagement" or "public engagement" because we believe these terms have come to refer to very specific, narrow phases of transportation planning, and we advocate for a more expansive approach. Transit agencies should not bifurcate their approach to community engagement from other stakeholders such as riders, advocacy groups, business groups, elected officials, etc.

Our recent experience indicates this is the kind of interaction that communities desire. We have been engaged with Lane Transit District (LTD), the transit agency for the Eugene/Springfield area in Oregon, to help reset their relationship with the community. For several years, LTD has experienced challenges moving forward on major projects. We helped LTD convene an ad hoc Community Steering Council (CSC) to develop a new framework for stakeholder engagement.<sup>5</sup> Something we heard consistently from the CSC, which was composed of a representative and diverse group of community members, was that they wanted LTD to build relationships – by attending events, listening to concerns, trying to solve problems – even when there was no specific initiative on the docket. This regular refrain became a centerpiece of the engagement framework and will guide LTD into the future.<sup>6</sup> This will require dedicated funds for engagement that are not tied to projects.

Additionally, there is a tendency to put the onus on the Community Relations team (or lone Community Relations Representative) on building and nurturing these relationships. A better approach would be for agency leaders to deputize, train, and expect staff across all departments and levels to be accountable for and understand stakeholder engagement as a critical component of their job. Staff should be responsible for cultivating their own relationships in the community as stewards of the agency’s mission and vision. Job descriptions should highlight the importance of interpersonal skills as well as technical skills, and performance evaluations should assess involvement in the community. We must recognize that transportation planning work is highly relational.

Another area of stakeholder engagement that has received less attention but still needs to move beyond a narrow project-centered relationship is how the public sector interacts with the private sector. Public agencies can be highly distrustful of the private sector and think it is focused on monetary gain alone.<sup>7</sup> This is unsurprising, given the charge to be responsible stewards of taxpayer funds. However, it can often go too far and make the procurement process unbearable for both sides. Well-intended policies to prevent excessive costs and promote fairness in procurement can stifle conversation, innovation, and relationships.

As a result, the mistrust goes both ways—the private sector is often skeptical that public agencies will deliver on what they promise or think their timelines are realistic. This leads to less interest and weaker competition when private sector innovators decide that dealing with public agencies just isn’t worth their time. Less competition results in reduced exposure to new ideas for public agencies and reduces the potential for innovation.

5 “Lane Transit District Announces Creation of Community Steering Council.” Lane Transit District, 19 June 2023, <https://www.ltd.org/latest-news/lane-transit-district-announces-creation/>. Press release.

6 “Lane Transit District Community Outreach Framework Draft for Public Comment.” Lane Transit District, 9 April 2024. Accessed at [https://www.ltd.org/file\\_viewer.php?id=6696](https://www.ltd.org/file_viewer.php?id=6696)

7 Goldwyn, Eric, et al. “Transit Costs Study Final Report.” Transit Costs Project, NYU Marron Institute for Transportation, 2 Feb. 2023, [transitcosts.com/transit-costs-study-final-report/](https://transitcosts.com/transit-costs-study-final-report/), Accessed 24 May 2024.

While at LA Metro, we attempted to move the project-centered communication with the private sector to a more ongoing conversation through an Unsolicited Proposal process.<sup>8</sup> The Innovation and Procurement teams collaborated to create a new process that permitted and even encouraged a conversation between both sectors. This made the procurement and legal departments a bit nervous, but with the backing of the CEO, they were able to accept this additional risk. It was the responsibility of the Innovation Team to create an open portal for new ideas from the private sector, which encouraged private sector ideas and helped them feel included in the public process. However, it also required substantial work on our part to be open to meeting with them as much as possible, be transparent about progress and obstacles, and be responsive to challenges. This helped foster a positive relationship that resulted in substantial competition when RFPs were issued on complex and expensive projects that involved large risks for the private sector, such as the Sepulveda Transit Corridor and Metro Micro procurements.<sup>9,10</sup>

## DON'T BE A DAD, BE A PUBLIC SERVICE

The standard transit agency model for public involvement is to develop a project and then go out and present it to the community for their reaction. We've heard this referred to internally as the "Decide – Announce – Defend (DAD) model," a moniker that sounds paternalistic because it is.<sup>11</sup> If an agency begins the rollout of a new initiative by holding a public meeting where they present a variety of solutions to an audience and then ask for feedback, this is unlikely to lead to positive outcomes. It is always better to first agree on the problem you are trying to solve. The DAD model presumes the problem is already well defined and *then* presents a solution. Without agreement on the problem, agreement on the solution is unlikely. Second, when there is agreement on the problem, the solution should be developed in concert with those who will benefit from the problem being solved. People who will use the new services will likely have insights that cannot be found elsewhere, which will help improve the final product.

The other problem with the traditional DAD model is that it tends to operate like a show. The transit agency presents its proposed project, often on a stage with microphones, and then invites speakers to comment.<sup>12</sup> While this kind of meeting might check a box for NEPA requirements, it is unlikely to add much value. A meeting with this structure immediately puts members of the community on the defensive, as they feel disempowered by having government officials tell them what their own needs are. It often results in disruptive and unhelpful – often performative or vitriolic – reactions from the audience and defensive responses from the agency, and then the cycle repeats.

8 Schank, J. "Office of Extraordinary Innovation (OEI) Unsolicited Proposal Program Update and Five Year Review." Los Angeles Metro. 3 December 2021. Board Box. Accessed at [https://boardarchives.metro.net/BoardBox/2021/211206\\_OEI\\_Unsolicited\\_Proposal\\_Program\\_Update\\_and\\_Five\\_Year\\_Review.pdf](https://boardarchives.metro.net/BoardBox/2021/211206_OEI_Unsolicited_Proposal_Program_Update_and_Five_Year_Review.pdf)

9 "Sepulveda Transit Corridor Project." Los Angeles Metro. 18 February 2021 Executive Management Committee Board Report. File # 2020-0889. Accessed at <https://boardagendas.metro.net/board-report/2020-0889/>

10 Cheung, Conan. "Microtransit Pilot Project Update Report." Los Angeles Metro. 20 June 2023. Board Box. Accessed at [https://boardarchives.metro.net/BoardBox/2023/230620\\_MicroTransit\\_Pilot\\_Project\\_Update\\_Report.pdf](https://boardarchives.metro.net/BoardBox/2023/230620_MicroTransit_Pilot_Project_Update_Report.pdf)

11 While the origins of "DAD" are not clear, there is some evidence that it was used in the 1980s as a top-down approach in Finland to determine the disposal sites for nuclear waste. For more information, see El-Showk, Sedeer. "Final Resting Place." *Science*. 24 February 2022. Accessed at <https://www.science.org/content/article/finland-built-tomb-store-nuclear-waste-can-it-survive-100000-years>

12 Fonseca, Ryan. "LA Metro's Rapid Bus Plan is Tearing Eagle Rock Apart." LAIST. 16 July 2019. Accessed at <https://laist.com/news/eagle-rock-metro-rapid-bus-route-noho-to-pasadena>

LA Metro initially utilized a more traditional engagement style during the public scoping process for the North Hollywood to Pasadena BRT Corridor project. For a series of meetings, Metro offered a brief presentation followed by a public comment period, where individuals from the public could get up in front of a microphone and provide comments for the record. Metro shifted to an open house format after a particularly contentious meeting in the Eagle Rock neighborhood.<sup>13</sup>

In this model, there is little if any dramatic public presentation. Instead, there are stations where people can circulate to learn about aspects of the project. They can speak to people from the agency one-on-one as they circulate and can submit written comments as well. Their ideas can still be written down, and the agency can send out a summary of findings, but the potential for grandstanding by either side is greatly reduced, and the power dynamic is leveled.

An open house is not the only way to be more transparent. In a traditional public meeting, where everyone including the press is recording everything, agency personnel tend to be very cautious about what they say. Transit agencies can foster more candid interactions through intercept events, where communities might be meeting about something else (often without press), but agencies can attend to share information and hear feedback. Another strategy is simply using smaller, more intimate environments, where people can be more candid and take time to explain their perspectives or give information they otherwise would not have.

## **DON'T BE AFRAID TO MOVE FORWARD**

It might be tempting to succumb to the urge to blame local groups for hindering progress on transit projects. It often feels particularly unfair for those who work at transit agencies because sometimes a local neighborhood, representing a small and often well-funded portion of the public, can derail a project that would benefit thousands of (often less well-funded) people. However, transit agencies must shoulder some of the responsibility. Community engagement on a project is often a source of delay in large part because transit agencies allow it to become one.

For example, LA Metro has been trying and failing to move forward on the Vermont Transit Corridor, the second busiest bus corridor in the region, for many years. Since at least 2013, the Vermont Transit Corridor has been identified as the most promising corridor for implementation of BRT. Out of nine corridors studied, Vermont was identified as the best, demonstrating the highest net 20-year benefits.<sup>14</sup> In July 2014, the Metro Board directed staff to begin advanced technical work for BRT on the Vermont Corridor and approved moving the Vermont Avenue BRT to the environmental phase.<sup>15</sup> In 2016, the passage of Measure M allocated \$425M (2015 \$) to the Vermont BRT, with a ground-breaking beginning in FY2024 and expected opening date in FY2028.<sup>16</sup>

13 De La Loza, James. "North Hollywood to Pasadena Bus Rapid Transit Corridor Project Attachment B Public Scoping Summary," Los Angeles Metro. 16 October 2019. Page 13. Accessed at [https://boardarchives.metro.net/BoardBox/2019/191016\\_North\\_Hollywood\\_to\\_Pasadena\\_Bus\\_Rapid\\_Transit\\_Corridor\\_Project.pdf](https://boardarchives.metro.net/BoardBox/2019/191016_North_Hollywood_to_Pasadena_Bus_Rapid_Transit_Corridor_Project.pdf)

14 "Los Angeles County Bus Rapid Transit and Street Design Improvement Study Final Report." Prepared by Parsons Brinckerhoff for Los Angeles Metro. December 2013. Accessed at <https://libraryarchives.metro.net/dpctl/studies/2013-los-angeles-county-bus-rapid-transit-and-street-design-improvement-study-final.pdf>

15 "Minutes Regular Board Meeting Board of Directors." Los Angeles Metro. 24 July 2014. Item 80. Accessed at [https://boardarchives.metro.net/Minutes/2014/07\\_July/20141002rbmitem2.pdf](https://boardarchives.metro.net/Minutes/2014/07_July/20141002rbmitem2.pdf)

16 Measure M included a provision for a future conversion to rail, but not until after 2067.

Metro staff updated the Board in 2017 on the status of that work, including a summary of previous outreach efforts to stakeholders in the corridor. Staff initiated stakeholder outreach efforts beginning in December 2015 with briefings with elected officials and Board staff, and roundtable meetings with local businesses, religious institutions, schools, hospitals, community groups, major cultural centers, neighborhood councils, and Chambers of Commerce. After a February 2017 open house, Metro staff reported that “overall, there was strong agreement that BRT could greatly improve bus service along Vermont, but that it needed to consider future conversion to rail.”<sup>17</sup>

In January 2018, the Board directed Metro to adopt and approve the Twenty-Eight by '28 Initiative, which again, called for completing the BRT project by 2028.<sup>18</sup> After the completion of the Vermont BRT Technical Study in March 2017, in which two promising BRT concepts were put forward, at the same meeting that the Board directed staff to proceed with the Vermont BRT, the Board also instructed staff to initiate a study looking at rail.<sup>19</sup> In 2019, the rail conversion/feasibility study was completed, and the Metro Board directed staff to advance both BRT and rail concepts into environmental review<sup>20</sup> despite the CEO indicating that this would delay BRT.<sup>21</sup>

In 2020, Metro staff issued a Request for Proposal for the environmental clearance of the BRT, but then later cancelled the RFP due to Board concerns about insufficient stakeholder engagement. After another engagement strategy conducted between December 2021 to June 2022, feedback showed that regular transit riders again overwhelmingly supported dedicated lanes along Vermont avenue.<sup>22</sup> Further, Metro assessed that based on all engagement activities completed as part of the Community Based Partnership program, only 11% of stakeholders preferred Metro to only pursue rail.<sup>23</sup>

The collective reluctance to demonstrate leadership has caused substantial delay for the project. The Vermont Transit Corridor is located entirely within an Equity Focus Community, based on its household income, race/ethnicity factors, and low vehicle ownership. Nine out of ten riders identify as BIPOC, 60% live below the poverty line, 84% do not have access to a car, 66% ride five days

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- 17 “Bus Rapid Transit Corridor Studies.” Los Angeles Metro. 15 March 2017. Planning & Programming Committee Board Report. File #2016-0835. Accessed at <https://metro.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=2981805&GUID=559AEBD2-6834-41F0-8A26-387D40BA4776&FullText=1>
  - 18 “Twenty-Eight by '28 Project List – Transportation Investment Guide in Tandem With The 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games.” Los Angeles Metro. 18 January 2017. Executive Management Committee Board Report. File # 2017-0799. Accessed at <https://metro.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=3312039&GUID=62FEC248-44DD-4A5E-9093-0F3A3DFB8CD4&FullText=1>
  - 19 “Motion by Directors Garcetti, Ridley-Thomas and Dupont Walker.” Los Angeles Metro. 23 March 2017. Regular Board Meeting File # 2017-0213. Accessed at <https://metro.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=2990393&GUID=725B3B1B-FCE2-459A-99E7-5BBFF60D9453&Options=ID|Text|&Search=vermont+transit+corridor>
  - 20 “Motion by Garcetti, Dupont-Walker, Hahn, Solis and Butts.” Los Angeles Metro. 17 April 2019. Planning and Programming Committee. File #2019-0259. Accessed at <https://metro.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=3926484&GUID=0889002A-1615-4421-B7D7-3D1AED4B0AFA&Options=ID|Text|&Search=2019-0259>
  - 21 “Transit Coalition Meeting with Phil Washington – 30 May 2019.” YouTube. Uploaded by TonyW79SFV. Accessed at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcf4QPOO\\_Zw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcf4QPOO_Zw). Comments begin at 10:25
  - 22 “Vermont Transit Corridor.” Los Angeles Metro. 25 August 2022. Regular Board Meeting. File #2022-0416. Accessed at <https://metro.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5768517&GUID=A6DF4958-2B54-4A93-950A-D61509E50BF7&FullText=1>
  - 23 “2022 Community-Based Partnership Program Documentation Report.” Los Angeles Metro. Attachment D to “Vermont Transit Corridor” Regular Board Meeting Board Report. #2022-0416. Accessed at <https://metro.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5768517&GUID=A6DF4958-2B54-4A93-950A-D61509E50BF7&FullText=1>



a week, and 50% do not transfer—indicating they live or work in the area.<sup>24</sup> However, buses averaging 45,000 boardings daily travel in the same lanes as cars and have slow travel times due to gridlock.

Not until September 2023, ten years after being instructed to move forward on the environment process for BRT, did Metro seek Board approval for consulting services to prepare the Planning and Environmental Study for the Vermont Transit Corridor.<sup>25</sup> Only recently in March 2024, did Metro provide an update identifying early 2025 as a target for Board approval of the proposed BRT project. There is no timeline on construction.

Community engagement is part of the environmental process, and it is critical for improving project outcomes. But community engagement should not be used as a crutch to avoid exercising leadership when it delays a project that would benefit thousands of people—in this case mostly low-income people of color. Allowing that delay in the name of engagement is inequitable, environmentally hazardous, and an abdication of the responsibility of governance.

## Conclusion

Stakeholder engagement for public transit projects should be genuine, transparent, and people-oriented to be effective. Ultimately, transit planning professionals are responsible for who has a seat at the table. If we are hearing repeatedly from one small, but loud group of people and not from anyone else—it is likely because our engagement strategy was designed this way. The transit community needs to build relationships and trust even when we are not building projects. We need to see stakeholder input as a way to help shape and improve initiatives, rather than a way to gauge reaction to the project.

But we also need to recognize when additional engagement is providing diminishing returns and make the decision to move forward. Yes, there will be times when genuine stakeholder engagement will result in the community being totally satisfied with the status quo and wanting to make no changes. But in U.S. cities, this is highly unusual. Delaying and doing nothing is a choice, and it is one that is usually damaging for everyone. Once stakeholder input has helped formulate a project, even if there continues to be a minority of opposition, transit agency leaders need to avoid being overcome by events and find the fortitude to move forward.

24 “Vermont Transit Corridor: We’re planning a new way to ride on Vermont.” Los Angeles Metro. <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/d3cecab189b445b9a8ad0a1ce6d359c1>.

25 “Vermont Transit Corridor.” Los Angeles Metro. 20 September 2023. Planning and Programming Committee Board Report. File# 2023-0409. Accessed at <https://boardagendas.metro.net/board-report/2023-0409/>.

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