Community Comments Database
Rethinking I-94: Community Comments Database

Overview

In working with a robust team, MnDOT piloted a new model for engagement through the Rethinking I-94 project. The project team established goals to design a community-based, comprehensive and long-term approach to address I-94 study area needs. Since 2016, MnDOT has been engaging with communities along I-94 between Minneapolis and St. Paul in an effort to plan for future transportation changes on and along the corridor. The project team spent time listening and learning directly from the community about:

- How they want to be engaged
- Past frustrations and hopes for the future of I-94 and its benefits to and impacts on the community
- Visions for the I-94 corridor and their communities
- Expectations of the people impacted in various ways in the corridor including community members, commuters, city and county partners, and organizational leaders

The team used a variety of engagement methods aimed at gathering feedback and opening a dialogue with communities along the I-94 corridor, including:

- Visioning Workshops
- Community Events
- Listening Sessions
- Individual Meetings
- Interactive Map

Community members provided valuable information and comments through these engagement opportunities.

Purpose

In order to develop a comprehensive, long-term and community-based approach to address I-94 study area needs, the Rethinking I-94 team wanted to design a database of all community comments that would be capable of informing future MnDOT project teams. Based on what we have heard through various engagement activities, MnDOT’s vision for the I-94 corridor is to best address all transportation infrastructure and modal needs while balancing community needs and impacts. Any improvement and enhancement to the I-94 corridor will be sensitive to the health, environment, safety, accessibility, connectivity, economic vitality, legacy and equity of the adjacent I-94 corridor neighborhoods, communities and stakeholders.

The information that was gathered through the various engagement efforts focused on those that live along and in the corridor. The findings of desk research and tracking the corridor demographics have enabled the project...
team to develop an initial understanding of the corridor and to ensure we are connecting with the communities in an inclusive manner through our engagement efforts. This directly aligns with engagement goals of the project to include more voices, earlier in the planning process and to improve diversity and inclusion of underrepresented voices.

The community engagement methods were designed to engage the public in a meaningful manner in order to articulate transportation values, issues and concerns of I-94 users and those impacted by it and to better understand the vision(s) of people living within one-half mile of the freeway—“Impacted” by the freeway and people living more than one-half mile away from the freeway—“Users” of the freeway. This will help the project team to gain a better understanding of the communities along I-94 and how the freeway affects them, and to help identify what works well for “impacted” and “users”, and what needs improvement on, along and across I-94.

MnDOT staff created the community comments database in Microsoft Access with the intent to store and organize all comments and feedback received from the community into one comprehensive database. The community comments database is an excellent tool that can be used to review the comment made, location along the corridor, affiliated agency (i.e. MnDOT, County, City), appropriate phase (i.e. construction, planning), and associated theme (i.e. safety, congestion). It can also be used to review the focus, timeline, location, zone, location, format, entity, and theme of each comment as well as the comments themselves. The comments received throughout the Rethinking I-94 engagement efforts can be organized into various reports that would help inform the project team of the underlying vision, values and issues from the community and I-94 “users” that will help guide future transportation project development and investment in this corridor; it has and will continue to inform the study process by articulating neighborhood-level transportation values and concerns; and has helped set the ground work for next steps of engagement that reflect the shared vision of the community.

**DATABASE FUNCTIONS**

The community comments database has a set of functions and capabilities that make it a unique tool for managing the community comments:

- The database has a user-friendly interface and doesn't require in-depth knowledge of the software
- Anticipated workflows can be programmed in advance at the click of a button
- The database can accommodate multiple output formats with ease
- The database can be formatted to display a variety of data subsets and reports

At this time, the following reports can be generated via the Microsoft Access database:
- Comments within a given zone and comparisons between different zones
- Comments categorized based on themes
- Comments categorized based on the agencies who are relevant to the resolution of the comment
- Comments based on the project phase during which the comment is relevant
- Breakdowns of comments by the focus of the comment on either mainline I-94 or the surrounding corridor
- Ability to track the current status of comments, or comments within one of the subsets noted above, and any and all actions associated with those comments.

**Community Comment Themes**

A small group of MnDOT staff and consultants determined the “themes” identified in the community comments database. This enabled the project team to organize the comments by topic. The team created the themes based upon comments gathered from the visioning workshops hosted in summer 2017 and other comments received through various community events and engagement activities. The database includes comments categorized into the following themes:

- **Aesthetic/Urban and Environmental Design Elements** – comments that address specific design elements, particularly of aesthetic, environmentally friendly or place-making nature.
- **Alternative Options: MnPASS/Managed Lanes/Highway Expansion** – comments that propose solutions or identify problems with other proposed solutions, specifically related to congestion on I-94.
- **Auto Connections** – comments about how different auto hierarchy facilities connect to one another and how auto facilities in general connect to land uses.
- **Bike/Pedestrian/Multimodal Connections** – comments that address bike, pedestrian or transit issues/elements, or any combination thereof. This theme also can be considered for comments about how these modes connect to land use, each other or auto infrastructure.
- **Bridge/Land Bridge** – comments about bridges of any kind.
- **Development** – comments about land development around the I-94 corridor such as the addition of businesses, parks and housing.
- **Economics** – comments about the economic impacts of transportation and land development.
- **Justice** – comments about environmental justice; issues—or perceived issues—with injustice associated with I-94 currently, or proposed corrections to those issues; issues regarding unfair distribution—e.g., MnPASS being unfair to low income populations who cannot afford to pay their way out of congestion.
- **Maintenance** – comments about the current condition of infrastructure such as road condition, broken lights, glass on bridges, etc...

- **Neighborhoods/Livability** – comments about transportation in the neighborhoods surrounding I-94 and/or the impact that transportation has on those neighborhoods.

- **Noise/Noise Pollution** – any comments regarding noise as an issue or noise walls.

- **Rebuilding Community (Rondo)** – this theme is a subset of the Justice theme that specifically relates to the Rondo neighborhood or the rebuilding of communities that were split or broken by I-94.

- **Safety** – comments that address safety or a dangerous situation.

- **Traffic Impacts/Congestion** – comments about congestion and the impacts of automobile traffic.

- **Transit** – comments related to transit.

- **Wayfinding/Traffic Control** – comments about signing, pavement markings, or lack thereof, and confusion about what is expected of the driver; comments about the amount of information available to all individuals with regard to getting from point “a” to point “b” regardless of mode.

- **Other** – this category includes any other general comments related to I-94 that did not fall into the categories listed above.

**How MnDOT Can Use This Information In Project Planning**

- The information gathered can be used in a variety of ways. For example: develop a general understanding of issues and perspectives of corridor communities prior to initiating a project

- Query the database by specific areas (project area or neighborhood) to identify issues associated with a specific geography or community

- With respect to transportation technical issues, review the comments database for information potentially unknown to MnDOT (such as an area of poor pavement or poor condition of a sidewalk) and/or to understand people’s perceptions of the technical information (perceived safety issue despite not being flagged from a technical perspective).

- Ability to share comments with MnDOT partners and other agencies as they plan for the future

**Steps to Identify Common Themes**

The team took the following steps to identify the most common themes within the database:

1. Categorizing each comment by:
   a. Engagement Method
   b. Zone – if applicable
c. Location – if applicable

d. Focus Area – mainline, surrounding community

e. Relevant Agencies – MnDOT, counties, cities and the Metropolitan Council

f. Project Phase – Planning, Design

g. Themes – Bike, Bridge, Economics, etc...

2. Reviewing and noting all the themes by frequency

3. Identifying the most common themes, to date

**Most Common Themes**

- Congestion Issues
- Safety Issues -- Bike, Pedestrian, Motorist
- Improved Health and Environment – Noise, Air Quality
- No "Identity/Sense of Place" in Areas
- Need for More Job Opportunities
- Better Connections Across the Freeway
- More Inclusivity in Planning Needed

**Database Interface**

The screen shots below show selected pages and interfaces available in the database.
Figure 1. Community Comments Database—Start Page

Figure 2. Community Comments Database—Master Input Page
Figure 3. Community Comments Database—Themes
**Figure 4.** Community Comments Database—Master Report, Sample Report on Traffic Impacts/Congestion
Figure 5. Community Comments Database—Master Spreadsheet

CONCLUSIONS

The Community Comments Database is an innovative tool that has already provided many benefits to Rethinking I-94, in particular by identifying the most common comment themes. This helps project teams better understand the perspectives of corridor community members. Also, the data base allows for multiple query types to get information associated with specific issues, locations, etc. By continuing to build the database, the value of this tool will grow over time as Rethinking I-94 continues.