



## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

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### LRRB PROJECT COST:

\$140,060



Photo by Guillermo Narvaez

Beltrami County roundtable discussions helped stakeholders appreciate diverse viewpoints.



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# Effective Public Engagement for Local Transportation System Decision-Making

## What Was the Need?

Local transportation engineers have to manage numerous challenges that the public and elected officials often do not understand, including aging transportation infrastructure, insufficient repair and maintenance funds, demanding environmental regulations and often-inadequate staffing. Local engineers need to use effective strategies to communicate these fiscal and operational challenges and engage stakeholders in addressing them.

## What Was Our Goal?

The goal of this project was to analyze appropriate uses for public communication and engagement processes and to evaluate current practices being used in several Minnesota counties. The study was initiated to identify critical gaps in understanding of local road system challenges and develop communications methods and tools to address these gaps.

## What Did We Do?

Researchers examined the public engagement processes in three counties around the state that are each faced with unique transportation system challenges:

- Beltrami County, where researchers facilitated focus groups and roundtable dialogues to address options for a countywide strategy to bring the road system to an acceptable performance level.
- Dakota County, where the county held an open house to present plans for a new roundabout, and public meetings to follow up on concerns raised at the open house.
- Jackson County, where researchers convened a study group to examine and respond to residents' concerns about lack of safety at a rural intersection that the county highway department viewed as safe, based on best practices in road design and choice of signage.

At several points in this process, researchers conducted interviews to identify key issues and concerns, to design and interpret public engagement efforts, and to collect feedback from participants in the public engagement process. Ninety-one participants from the three counties were interviewed, including county staff, elected officials and members of the public.

## What Did We Learn?

This project revealed widespread confusion about local road system issues. For example, many participants erroneously believed that the gas tax covers (or was enacted to cover) the cost of maintaining local roads. Factors contributing to this lack of information include the complexity of local transportation issues, people's tendency to take little notice of issues that do not affect them directly, and incomplete communication by elected officials and administrators with their constituents about the full extent of road system challenges and policy choices.

*This project examined three counties' public engagement processes for policymaking about local roads. In one county, the process brought stakeholders with highly diverging opinions to near unanimity on several issues. Researchers identified general principles and created a communication tool to help facilitate effective engagement.*

*“The biggest benefit for local agencies will be improving the ability of local engineers to engage the public through the communications tool the researchers developed, the focused consultations they did and the training they provided.”*

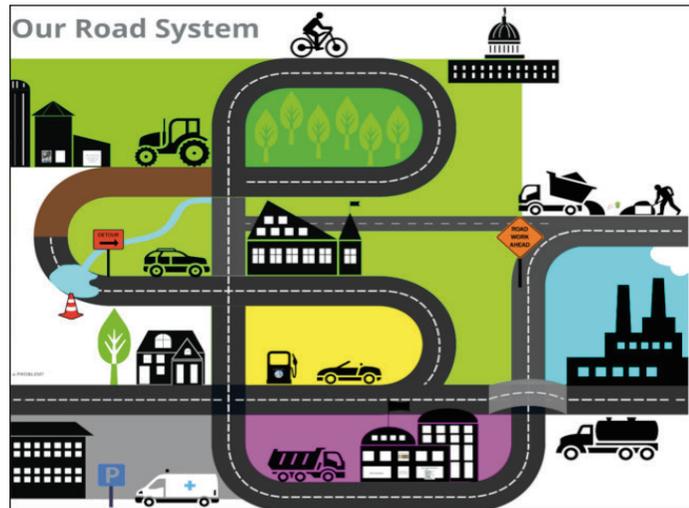
—Bruce Hasbargen,  
Beltrami County Engineer

*“Given the opportunity to have an extended discussion among people with diverse perspectives, there was a lot of convergence around desirable solutions. Through this process, people changed their minds and came to agreement that policymakers could move forward on.”*

—Kathryn Quick,  
Assistant Professor,  
University of Minnesota  
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This project developed a tool to help local engineers convey complex budgetary and other information to bring stakeholders to a common baseline about the issues faced by their local road systems.

The project also demonstrated ways that carefully designed public engagement can overcome these challenges. In Beltrami County, a wide range of participants (including county engineers) became more informed and empathetic toward those with other viewpoints. Many who initially opposed a half-cent sales tax for transportation ultimately came to support and even advocate for it as a result of these discussions.

Researchers made six recommendations for communication and public involvement:

- Create a single location for information about local road system sustainability issues. Researchers developed a Prezi-based [communication tool](#) that local agencies can adapt to bring stakeholders to a common baseline of information about local road issues.
- Actively recruit and involve diverse stakeholders in discussions. In Beltrami County, this required repeated, personal contact through email, phone calls and letters.
- Involve stakeholders through sustained, deliberative dialogue. Of the three study sites, Beltrami County’s process came closest to this model.
- Keep the public informed about local transportation issues, but reserve public engagement efforts for nontechnical problems that participants can effectively influence rather than options that are tightly constrained by law, engineering parameters or finances. In Dakota County, for example, some participants complained that they had no impact because decisions had been made before the public engagement process.
- Evaluate public engagement efforts. Proposed criteria are included as an appendix to the project report.
- Adopt and refine these public engagement methods through implementation in other jurisdictions and further study.

### What’s Next?

While Beltrami County’s process resulted in approval of a half-cent local sales tax as newly permitted by the Minnesota Legislature, such an option should not be considered an expected or desirable outcome in all cases. This public engagement model is a tool to help reach appropriate solutions based on local factors.

A follow-up project will test Beltrami County’s public engagement approach in three or four other counties and cities to determine the extent to which the county’s experiences are replicable elsewhere. The new project will strengthen the current findings by incorporating data from other contexts and showing how the process can be adapted to other localities’ specific conditions.

*This Technical Summary pertains to the LRRB-produced Report 2014-17, “Building Local Agency Capacity for Public Engagement in Local Road Systems Planning and Decision Making,” published May 2014. The full report can be accessed at <http://www.lrrb.org/PDF/201417.pdf>.*