

Principles for Effective Stakeholder Engagement in Infrastructure Permitting and Review Processes¹

Effective stakeholder engagement in infrastructure permitting requires a process that is based on mutual education, effective communication about the project and its impacts, identification of all of the interests that will be affected, and open discussion about how to address those interests to the extent that is possible. An effective stakeholder engagement process can create benefits for large infrastructure projects, including:

- Improved, sustainable outcomes, because the final plan builds on local capacity and knowledge and addresses local and regional issues that may require resolution in order to move forward
- Shared understanding of perspectives, issues, challenges, alternatives, and how these factor into the needed outcomes
- Credibility of and predictability for the project that comes from transparency
- Stakeholder support for the planning process through shared data, ideas, funding, and political support
- Strengthened relationships for moving forward on the project.

What is a Stakeholder? In general, stakeholders may include:

- Potentially- and clearly-affected governmental agencies and non-governmental economic, cultural and environmental organizations with motivation and resources to participate on an ongoing basis
- Loosely-organized or non-organized groups and individuals interested in participating in specific areas that affect them
- Members of the public who may or may not participate, but need to remain informed about the project along with other stakeholders

¹ Most infrastructure projects will include some form of public involvement, because there is a NEPA process going forward, or because the nature of the project is very public to begin with. Stakeholder engagement goes beyond public involvement to bring project proponents, permitting agencies, and affected interest groups – local governments, economic, environmental, and community interests and others – into consistent conversation about the project and its impacts. Tribal interests also need consistent involvement, usually undertaken in a consultation process initiated by the federal agency with decision making authority. As much as possible, effective stakeholder engagement should be integrated with the other mandated public involvement steps, and the various processes should be mutually reinforcing.

The suggestions in this document apply to the involvement of all three categories of stakeholders, from the most focused interest groups to the most diffuse.

Principle 1: Provide Clear Goals and Avenues for Stakeholder and Public

Participation

Desired Outcome: A well-planned engagement effort that supports and complements the overall planning process, and well-informed stakeholders and citizens who understand the project and permitting process and who can identify and capitalize on opportunities for their involvement.

Guidance:

- From the earliest stage of the project, identify and communicate:
 - The goals and schedule of the project planning and development process
 - Opportunities for stakeholder engagement
 - Commitment from project sponsors and others to stakeholder engagement effort
- Analyze the needs for stakeholder engagement in the particular project and develop options to meet those needs (see Attachment 1 regarding the continuum of processes for stakeholder engagement)
- Engage stakeholders in the planning for the stakeholder engagement process
- Institutionalize stakeholder engagement by funding it, staffing it, and making public commitments to it

Best Practices, Tools, Techniques:

- Establish a public information and education effort at the outset or before the start of the permitting process
- Develop and share a process map with the public and stakeholders so that they can see where their input fits into the decision making process
- Develop overarching goals for the stakeholder and public engagement effort
- Develop an organized engagement approach at the outset, and update and modify it as needed
- Treat stakeholder engagement the same as any other planning component, including creating timetables, budgets, staffing and management

EXAMPLE: In 2013, the project proponent for a 200-mile transmission line in the state of Oregon proactively envisioned stakeholder engagement and reached out early in the permitting process to

federal, tribal, local and state agencies as well as to affected stakeholders along the proposed transmission corridor. The proponent gathered data about the interests of all involved and formed an inter-governmental working group to collectively reach out to non-governmental stakeholders. A web site was established that included a clear roadmap for the project decision making and stakeholder involvement and key stakeholders were able to understand their roles and potential contributions to the planning process. By actively working to ensure stakeholders understood where their input fit into the larger picture, and by taking into account their needs and concerns, the project proponents laid the groundwork for ongoing communication and problem-solving moving forward.

Principle 2: Ensure Inclusiveness and Accessibility

Desired Outcome: Adequate and appropriate opportunities for all interested parties to participate and inclusion of diverse voices, ideas and information, to achieve sustainable decisions.

Guidance:

- Ensure participation from the full range of potentially affected parties
- Identify and address barriers to participation (e.g. funding, geographic issues, capacity for participating, accessibility, lack of information)
- Be sensitive to the needs, interest, and resource levels of stakeholders and the public

Best Practices, Tools, Techniques:

- Conduct a stakeholder analysis that includes outreach to any entity that is affected or that has information or other resources to contribute to the project
- Consider the establishment of a balanced stakeholder advisory group to foster public discussion of trade-offs and solutions
- Identify ways to overcome barriers to participation, including:
 - Multiple locations for stakeholder engagement to increase accessibility
 - Excellent online information sharing
 - Collaborative technologies (e.g., web streaming meetings, online forums)
 - Travel support for staff and/or stakeholders (e.g., for a stakeholder advisory committee representative)

EXAMPLE: Four California national forests jointly initiated planning for their management of road use and travel (“travel management”) in the four forests. They proposed and engaged in a coordinated

process for developing a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for public comment. They worked together with the public to create an integrated approach to travel management planning that maximized public participation and developed widely supported actions for each of the forests. Planners engaged in significant public outreach including 30 public meetings to present the DEIS for each forest to the public. The process helped the public understand how to share their comments about the plans, and how their comments would be used to revise the plans. Planners also conducted advance training sessions for Forest Service staff to learn how to effectively engage the public. This case was unique because meetings were convened as workshops rather than hearings, making them more accessible to a wider audience. Participants could directly interact with Forest Service staff, question and answer periods were held for in-depth discussion on specific issues, and there was a break-out period for further interaction among the commenters. By making the process highly inclusive and accessible, the process gained wide public support.

Principle 3: Build Transparency and Openness

Desired Outcome: Information about planning and decision making is communicated in a forthright manner to stakeholders, with appropriate opportunities for dialogue and feedback, resulting in a mutual understanding. This principle requires a clearly demonstrated interest in soliciting feedback and an openness to learning from stakeholders.

Guidance:

- Establish clear and consistent communication channels
- Periodically disseminate information about the project for review and feedback
- Demonstrate openness to learning from stakeholders

Best Practices, Tools, Techniques:

- Implement a broad suite of communication tools and techniques
- Promote a common understanding of key processes, terminology, decisions, and technical challenges through substantive discussions and information dissemination (see Principle 4 for additional information on this technique)
- Inform stakeholders about how to provide input and how it will be used
- Provide periodic reports on how stakeholder and public input impacted project products
- Produce and share meeting summaries of critical discussions for public distribution

EXAMPLE: The US EPA established and funds the **Gowanus Canal Community Advisory Group** to guide the cleanup of an industrial waste canal in the heart of Brooklyn, NY. This group is a chartered, representative group of over 50 interest groups that provide feedback on data, options for remediation, impacts of the project on the community, and methods to mitigate for those impacts. Current events in the group as well as background on its founding, structure and operations can be viewed at www.gowanuscag.org. By being transparent and open in the approach to these important discussions, the process helped foster mutual understanding and trust around the proposed plan of action.

Principle 4: Empower Informed Engagement

Desired Outcome: A shared understanding of the issues and the planning process among decision makers, stakeholders, and the public, through knowledge transfer that develops an understanding of the challenges posed by the project and potential solutions.

Guidance:

- Encourage quality, informed, and interactive dialogue, including between technical experts and stakeholders
- Engage in mutual education about the permitting process and the project complexities
- Identify opportunities for the inclusion of stakeholder knowledge and data
- Provide technical information in an appropriate format for stakeholder and public use

Best Practices, Tools, Techniques:

- Provide impartial facilitation for technical and decision making discussions
- Develop unbiased technical tools for information sharing (e.g., GIS, data portals)
- Tailor presentations to non-technical audiences
- Conduct stakeholder workshops to discuss technical issues, options and impacts
- Establish mechanisms to collect input (e.g., workshops, meetings, comment forms, surveys, interviews)

EXAMPLE: LANDSCAPE-SCALE MITIGATION STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOP: The Department of Interior sponsored a national workshop in 2013 to convene scientists, government decision makers, and non-governmental organizations to discuss barriers to and mechanisms for promoting landscape scale mitigation for infrastructure and other projects. DOI designed the workshop to be extremely inclusive for its participants and speakers. All of the key implementers of landscape mitigation schemes attended

and were available for discussion with the stakeholders and government decision makers. Remarks were concise and to the point, and a good exchange of information and options occurred. The summary of the workshop included suggestions for a path forward to remove barriers to implementing landscape scale mitigation strategies for infrastructure projects. By actively ensuring that information was shared and available in a way that met the needs of stakeholders and the public, the process was considered credible and garnered support.

Principle 5: Ensure Timeliness of Participation

Desired Outcome: Stakeholders and the public are engaged with sufficient notice, and provided with an adequate amount of time to prepare and respond to proposed actions and plans. This not only assures meaningful participation and robust outcomes, but also builds trust in the stakeholder engagement process. Adequate advance notice is essential to effective engagement.

Guidance:

- Coordinate the planning process and the timing of the stakeholder engagement activities to allow for inclusion of stakeholder input in to preliminary decisions and products
- Provide sufficient notice of meetings and outcomes, and provide materials for advance review
- Use diverse communication methods to ensure broad distribution

Best Practices, Tools, Techniques:

- Disseminate a project timeline with engagement opportunities noted and highlighted
- Provide meeting notices and advance materials with sufficient time to foster participation
 - A minimum of 3 weeks' notice for meeting announcements
 - A minimum of 1 week for distribution of advance materials
- Use web tools to disseminate schedules and materials
- Disseminate meeting notices through a variety of mechanisms (e.g., website, social media, newspaper)

EXAMPLE: A citizen advisory group was formed to consult with a regional airport in the northwest when runway expansion with impacts on residential areas was being considered. The NEPA process for this airport expansion included establishment of a standing group of citizens who were educated about the potential expansion before the purpose and need for the project was established. This allowed the citizens to have early and in-depth discussions about the plan prior to the development of the purpose

and need and alternatives, and avoided the creation of an after-the-fact consultation that could have angered the surrounding communities. The process did not slow down the NEPA process.

Principle 6: Build and Maintain Process Integrity

Desired Outcome: Trustworthy and credible stakeholder engagement in the project planning and development process, established through equitable and reliable action.

Guidance:

- Take actions that create stakeholder confidence
 - Maintain predictability and reliability in the stakeholder engagement schedule to the extent feasible
 - Balance participation among all stakeholders
 - Provide multiple opportunities for engagement
 - Demonstrate that input is accepted, considered, addressed
 - Needs and concerns are addressed
 - All stakeholders are treated with equal concern and responsiveness
 - Products and plans reflect various interests and needs
- Commit to meaningful stakeholder participation – and follow through!

Best Practices, Tools, Techniques:

- Use ground rules that ensure that all meetings are participatory and foster two-way communication
- Develop realistic agendas and impartial meeting summaries
- Encourage inclusive and balanced dialogue
- Consider a stakeholder advisory committee when:
 - Community effects will be great
 - The controversy warrants identifying a group of citizens who become thoroughly educated about the project, its impacts and mitigation options and thus can provide informed comments and feedback
 - Negotiations with the affected communities will be necessary to move forward (for example, there are environmental justice issues which will need to be addressed, or contentious local decisions that affect the project's outcome).

- Reflect on stakeholder input, and communicate how that input is used

EXAMPLE: Federal and state transportation and environmental agencies in Alaska needed to develop an Interagency Agreement and operating protocols to better coordinate on infrastructure projects and meet NEPA requirements. The agencies formed an Environmental Streamlining Group (ESG) comprised of local, state and federal officials working with the help of a neutral facilitator. Planners organized participants into several work teams to draft documents needed for the process. One team drafted principles and goals related to mitigation, another drafted an early agency coordination format and environmental review process, and a third drafted alternative design features for projects involving stream crossings. This effort is an example of process integrity because it required and benefited from structured participation among all stakeholders, all stakeholders having input and a chance to have their concerns reflected, and there was equal attention to all parties' interests and needs.

Principle 7: Foster Adaptability and Flexibility in Stakeholder Engagement

Desired Outcome: A flexible and resilient stakeholder engagement effort that adapts to changing information and circumstances.

Guidance:

- Monitor and seek feedback from participants and the public, and modify processes as needed
- Develop engagement methods that match regional or local issues, cultures and relationships

Best Practices, Tools, Techniques:

- Establish performance measures for meeting stakeholder engagement goals
- Employ measurement tools for progress checks, such as surveys, comments forms, etc.
- Reassess and modify the engagement process periodically
- Conduct an impartial assessment if the stakeholder process seems ineffective

EXAMPLE: The North Carolina Division of FHWA and North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) faced many differences of perspectives and an impasse among agency partners that were stalling project development and decision making on proposed portions of the Appalachian Highway Corridor K-N.C. Route 74 relocation project in western North Carolina. An environmental impact assessment was stalled by controversy over design, location, benefits, and environmental impacts of the proposed road. Neutral third parties conducted assessment interviews with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and tribes, which revealed that the parties were in disagreement about

interagency commitments, alternative options, and differences in expectations for benefits of the project. The assessment recommended that the governmental parties clarify their willingness to reexamine earlier decisions concerning the purpose and need for the road and address broader concerns. A series of meetings were then held with local and regional officials, opposition groups, local businesses, tribes, and local NGOs. The federal and state agencies agreed to jointly revisit the purpose and need for the project and additional studies are ongoing. This mid-course assessment was important because it allowed the planners to confront and adapt to changing information, circumstances, and stakeholder perspectives.

Attachment 1: Continuum of stakeholder and agency roles in stakeholder engagement efforts

Degrees of Collaboration

Increasing Degree of Influence →

One-way Communication	Two-way Communication		
Inform	Low	Medium	High
Provides others with information to assist them in understanding the problem being addressed, the alternatives considered, and the final decision made.	Inform others about decision-making process and also seeks their feedback on analysis, options, and proposed actions.	Work directly with others to ensure their issues and concerns are understood, considered, and directly reflected in the options developed and decisions made. Feedback is provided on how their input influenced the final decision.	Work directly with others to share information, explore options and potential solutions, and to seek agreement where possible on decisions and actions. Legal and policy constraints must be considered and addressed in the agreement-seeking process.
Agency retains authority for final decisions in all degrees of collaboration.			

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Spectrum of Stakeholder and Public Involvement Mechanisms in Infrastructure Permitting Processes

	Explore/Inform	Consult	Decide	Implement
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved shared understanding of issues, process, perspectives, etc. Lists of concerns Information needs identified Explore differing perspectives Build relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification of priority concerns, issues and topics Comments on draft planning products Suggestions for approaches Discussion of options Establishment of a community of stakeholder groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consensus-based agreements on project plan or plan components 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multi-party agreements to implement projects collaboratively
Parties Involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Federal Agencies, States, Tribes, and other governmental entities Interest Groups Public 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Federal Agencies, States, Tribes, and other governmental entities Stakeholder Advisory Group Interest Groups, NGOs Public Scientists, Subject Matter Experts Resource management bodies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interagency Implementers State, Federal, and Tribal Authorities Stakeholders implementers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementing Agencies Stakeholder Advisory Groups Federal agencies Other entities contributing resources to the implementation of a project

Tools/Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Websites • Educational Materials • Focus Groups • Conferences • Open houses • Dialogues • Forums • Listening sessions/including online 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews • Workshops for public discussion of key issues • Visioning and Scoping • Public Hearings • Comment Forms • Surveys • Public meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All from previous columns plus • Facilitated Meetings • Consensus meetings • Mediated negotiations • Structured Decision Making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured Decision making • Collaborative Planning • Partnerships for Action • Adaptive Management Teams • Implementation Committees
Use When	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early in projects when issues are under development • Throughout the process, beginning in scoping phase, when broad public education and support are needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To gather or present data and information • When broad input is helpful • Throughout the project lifecycle • To test proposals from the planning process and solicit public and stakeholder ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To create implementable agreements re: project design, mitigation, community benefits, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need for meaningful partnerships to make and implement decisions • To create and implement strategic or controversial project components or products of permitting decisions

