

## **Social Networking and Planning Project**

Part of the Innovative Small Research Projects to Advance Public Participation Related to Public Transportation Planning

# POST-Project Qualitative Interviews – Summary of Work and Results

### **Grantee:**

Texas Citizen Fund  
Sheila Holbrook-White, Executive Director  
Glenn Gadbois, Project Manager

### **Grantor:**

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION, FEDERAL TRANSIT ADMINISTRATION

**Purpose of Grant Program (Summary):** The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) is soliciting proposals for applied research in the area of public participation as it relates to the planning of public transportation projects and programs. The purpose of the Public Transportation Participation (PTP) Program, as called for under Section 3046 of the *Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users* (SAFETEA-LU), is to support the research and development of innovative approaches to enhance the quality and level of public participation in public transportation planning.

### **Report Author**

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## **Purpose and Scope of Post-project Interviews**

After the SNAPP, the project leaders and advisory committee would like to know how the project performed versus the expectations that were conveyed to and derived from decision makers and influencers as well as those people that are responsible for conducting the project itself. As part of this inquiry, we aim to determine reflections on the project's outcome. In terms of success, we have attempted to understand how, in the opinion of respondents, we might measure success. We have interviewed, where possible, the same respondents, both before and after the project.

The pre-project interview instrument (see Pre-Project report) was modified for this follow up study (see Appendix A of this report). As for the pre-project, this study involved qualitative interviews that were conducted in December 2010.

### **Timing**

Recruiting started on 10/27/2010 and the last interview occurred on 1/6/2011.

Respondents and dates interviewed were as follows:

Mike Clark-Madison, Hahn, Texas Communications 12/7/10  
Shawn Shillington – Attorney and Austinist.com Urban Development Editor 12/8/10  
Greg Griffin, AICP – CAMPO 12/9/10  
Councilmember Chris Riley 12/7/10  
Karla Vilallon, City of Austin Dept. of Transportation, Communications Director 12/7/10  
Gordon Derr, City of Austin Dept. of Transportation, Asst. Director 1/6/11  
Kurt Schulte, Kimley-Horn, 12/10/10  
Councilmember Spelman, 12/7/10  
Mayor Pro Tem Mike Martinez, 12/7/10

## **Interview Results Summary**

### **On SNAPP's effectiveness in informing the public**

During the pre-project interviews, there were high expectations for social media in terms of informing the public. Most respondents were very skeptical on the more difficult aspect of engaging the public in decision making. As such, the project summary report focused on the challenge of engagement; the report was shared with respondents as part of these interviews. Most respondents focused on their positive impression with how much SNAPP helped engage respondents in decision-making, and focused less on how SNAPP helped inform the public. However, a few respondents noted that more metrics would help them validate how much SNAPP helped get information out to the public. One respondent suggested that we report on how many people clicked through to outside links, such as the Austin Strategic Mobility Plan. Another respondent had followed the project and so was able to see the numerous informational messages and was very impressed with their tone and subjects. It might be helpful to have the informational messages broken down by the types of information that was shared and when.

### **On SNAPP's effectiveness in engaging / interacting on decision making**

While there was skepticism before SNAPP launched about social media's ability to engage people in public decision-making, most respondents were subsequently impressed by the proportion of comments in the "engage" or "analyzing" categories on

the summary table in the summary of results. Most respondents positively received the sentiment graph, and some had follow up questions to identify the underlying stories. Those stories were answered somewhat in the final report, but more opportunities are revealed under “frustrations” below. In terms of going further on engagement, one councilmember suggested that we attempt to catalyze some deliberation and / or document deliberation that occurred amongst SNAPP participants. Several respondents close to the process particularly praised how SNAPP used humans to pose questions and maintain dialogue in a professional way.

### **On how the SNAPP process met some of their criteria for optimal public involvement**

In the pre-project interviews, respondents either defined the first criteria of optimal public involvement as broad involvement (representation) or numbers of people involved (an implication of representation). Representativeness was defined variously, including age, geography, and ethnicity.

In the post-project interviews, the interviewer initially encountered questions about who participated, and whether or not SNAPP knows who participants are individually, and whether those are the same people who always participate, as well as how many unique individuals participated. The interviewer worked with the rest of the SNAPP team to create a metric of unique individuals and a list of individual participants, which allayed much of these concerns. Respondents felt more demographics would help measure breadth of participation.

In that vein, in terms of reaching different segments of the population, which was another hope from the pre-project interviews, more data will be available from a pending survey with some questions on age and gender. Respondents expressed hopes for other information, such as checking to see if participants come to other public input events, have different opinions or meet other goals, such as federal goals on minorities and low-income segments.

### **On specific reactions to measurements provided in the final report**

The interviewer noted, although didn't specifically ask for, reactions of respondents to the metrics that were conveyed in the final report. Many respondents originally had suggested measuring demographics in the pre-surveys, but that was a point of difficulty in that it's difficult to gain demographics out of social media, and the work-around was still not completed when these interviews took place.

On other potential measurements that were suggested at the beginning,

On pushing information: # of followers – this was collected but was not presented as such in the summary report used for these interviews

On interaction and engagement: (most say its harder to measure) As mentioned, respondents received the categorization of comments very positively.

On Positive or negative sentiment trends – the information that we gave was static for the project period, so trending could have been requested, but no one mentioned it. It could become an issue on projects with longer timelines.

One measure suggested by participants before the survey was sentiment magnitude, and almost every respondent was impressed with the comment sentiment graph. On authenticity: # of unique individuals, % of respondents unique to SNAPP versus another public outreach effort – comparing participants with other public participants. As mentioned above, this was provided after the interviews based on the respondents' desire.

**On how SNAPP helps and / or frustrated decisions:**

Whereas respondents expressed optimism for how social media could help decision making during the pre-project interviews, respondents felt challenges remain to realizing the potential.

Respondents had originally conveyed optimism on social media's role, for example:

- Public could be more informed
- Broader participation
- The public learns
- Reaching different segments
- Direction of opinion would be ascertainable.
- Validate level of support and sentiment of the supporters of specific policies

Most of the frustration with how social media (and SNAPP) frustrated decision making fell into these areas:

- 1) Specific policy direction. A number of respondents expressed a desire to have more direction on specific policy decisions, but also shared a sense of realism that that could be difficult to garner.
- 2) Authenticity. The issue of who participates, and who they represent, again was central to some respondents. More visibility to that information might help significantly alleviate those concerns. Particular opportunities may come in the form of survey that collect demographics (income, minorities) or comparing participants to other participation venues to determine overlapping participants.

Examples:

Regarding specific policy direction, respondents desired a way to analyze the relationships in the data so that it tells some stories – as it is, it's hard to take direction from it. Example: How would I drill down on the sentiment graph? For example, what are people saying about Car2Go, about Bikes

Regarding authenticity, the Mayor Pro Tem also expressed optimism about who was reached and who could be reached. He suggested that social media could reach every day drivers who will never take transit, but nonetheless may have useful information about how to execute transit.

**Potential conclusions:**

The conclusions of the follow up interviews fall into the following areas

*Pushing information – information visibility*

The perception of respondents was quite affected by how much visibility they had to the project and its metrics. Some respondents therefore had less optimistic evaluations of pushing information, while others were very impressed. To evaluate how well social media can get information to the public, the author proposes that future project metrics on this aspect be made more visible and accessible during the project.

*Catalyzing analysis – a good process*

The visibility to sentiment and the level of engagement were well received aspects of the project. Participants were particularly impressed with the level of engagement and how it was measured. Respondents in particular praised the process followed to engage the public.

*Broad-base participation*

Issues of authenticity and representation hold potential for further research. As noted in this report, there are some existing ways to allay concerns, but additional innovations might yield other benefits.

*Policy Direction requested*

Summary information might be organized into words that express, but also re-frame the public's areas of concern (in the context of how it relates to policy decisions). The information could "tell a story" more effectively to help with more policy direction for public decision makers.

*Limits of government to engage public*

According to City Staff, it might be helpful to have an external organization that could sponsor a social media project, because of the perceived requirement that social media needs to maintain the public's interest by taking an advocacy position, or at the very least highlighting areas of controversy and disagreement. The City of Austin's transportation department feels it might be difficult to maintain a level of success with social media because they are limited in terms of taking on those roles that may be necessary to make social media a successful engagement tool.

## **Appendix A: Post Project Interview Instrument – Questions only**

For further background on the instrument and methodology, please see the pre-project report, Appendix A. This appendix merely notes the questions that were asked of respondents in the post-project interviews as opposed to the pre-project interviews.

The respondents were given a copy of the “Final Report” in advance of the interview, and the interviewer reviewed the contents with the respondents during the interview.

- 1) Given the report, how well did SNAPP help in pushing information out to the public?**
- 2) Given the report, how well do you think SNAPP engaged the public in decision making?**
- 3) How did SNAPP perform versus your [previously stated] ideal of public engagement?**
- 4) How do you think SNAPP helped with decision making?**
- 5) What do you think was frustrating about making decisions with information from SNAPP?**