

Research Problem Statement

Title¹

Develop staff-level training resources to improve community and interagency communication

Background²

Good communication is essential for staff to effectively engage with the community and coordinate with other agencies. This item is especially true for staff in communities where the demand for new services and fast-changing needs associated with growth can be more effectively resolved by working together with the public and other agencies. However, good communication skills are a prerequisite for achieving good communication.

Interagency coordination involves a process in which two or more organizations representing different agencies and/or disciplines come together to solve a specific problem or meet a specific need. These types of partnerships can be formed among all levels of public and private sector agencies, including Federal and state agencies, regional and local agencies, private and nonprofit organizations, and advocacy groups representing a variety of disciplines. Agencies that have participated in coordination efforts have observed increased effectiveness, resource availability, and decision-making capabilities, which thereby more effectively assist in the resolution of a community need or problem that could not be met by any single agency acting alone.

Interagency coordination comes in a variety of forms. At its most basic level, coordination simply involves familiarity with the personnel and programs of other local organizations and information communication and knowledge sharing. An example is membership in joint councils. Taken a step further, agencies can develop formal exchanges of information, resources, and personnel. In these instances, agencies participate in joint projects, although specific tasks and responsibilities will not have been clearly identified. The highest level of coordination involves joint budgeting of programs, joint agreements with clearly understood goals and policies, and representation on overlapping boards and councils. A few examples of successful interagency coordination efforts include the Urban Fringe Development Area project between the city and county governments in Missoula, Montana and Colorado's Strategic Transportation, Environmental, and Planning Process for Urban Places (STEP-UP), a pilot project for interagency and multidisciplinary coordination to increase early consideration of environmental impacts in the transportation planning process.

Effective coordination and consensus building are common features in the more successful transportation and land use case studies that have been featured in recent national and regional toolkits. However, many communication tools seem to focus on large-scale outreach efforts, and miss the day-to-day interaction opportunities that exist between transportation planners and their "clients." Frequently, the quality of these ongoing interactions can set the stage for trust-

¹ This section corresponds to "Problem Title" in the MDT and TCRP Research Problem Statements.

² This section corresponds to "Problem Statement" in the MDT Research Topic Statement, and "Research Problem Statement" in the TCRP Research Problem Statement.

based relationships between an agency and the general public, decision-makers, and other agencies. In spite of all the focus in the last decades on collaboration and partnerships, very little training has been developed or undertaken to improve the capacity of transportation professionals to collaborate and partner.

Objective

The objective of the research is to develop staff-level training resources to improve community and interagency communication.

Potential Benefits³

As noted above, effective coordination and consensus building is one of the common features in the more successful transportation and land use case studies. While many outreach and engagement tools are well-developed and generally widely disseminated in transportation literature, most of these examples relate to specialized or complex engagement procedures, and miss the day-to-day interaction opportunities that exist between transportation planners and their clients. Frequently, the quality of these ongoing interactions can set the stage for trust-based relationships between an agency and the general public, decision-makers, and other agencies. Open, ongoing interaction can be critical for identifying areas of common interest and solutions with mutual benefits to all parties. Additional tools focused on improving more routine, day-to-day coordination are needed.

Training programs, manuals, and on-line, do-it-yourself guides would be helpful in building staff capabilities to conduct effective outreach and facilitation on a day-in, day-out basis. The goal for this research product will be to open and sustain dialogue between agencies, as well as between agency staff and the general public.

Relationships to the Existing Body of Knowledge⁴

The Transportation Research Board (TRB) *Research in Progress* (RIP) database was searched in December 2009, and three citations were found relating to community engagement and interagency coordination.⁵ The first research project, *Measuring the Effectiveness of Public Involvement*, proposes to develop a methodology for evaluating public involvement programs. This research is primarily concerned with measures and not for developing training resources for public involvement. Another research project proposes to use the Language Action Framework, a tool set specifically geared toward producing effective and efficient collaboration and coordination among multiple actors, to design a process for developing an ecologically based transportation plan. However the key participants identified in this effort are not from smaller communities, instead are from a state transportation departments, metropolitan planning

³This section corresponds to “Urgency and Expected Benefits” in the MDT Research Topic Statement, and “Urgency and Payoff Potential” in the TCRP Research Problem Statement.

⁴This section corresponds to “Related Research” in the TCRP Research Problem Statement. This information is included in the “Problem Statement” section of the MDT Research Topic Statement.

⁵RIP search terms: multi-agency, inter-agency, coordination, communication, training.

organizations, and other state and Federal agencies. Once the process is developed and tested, then it would be published as a model for use by other agencies. The third research project aims to develop a multi-agency change management framework and guidance to support the development of the collaborative decision-making framework. Not enough information is available yet to determine the transferability to this research statement.

Previous research products include the *Land Use and Economic Development in Statewide Transportation Planning*, the *Transportation Research Circular Number E-C100: Linking Transportation and Land Use a Peer Exchange*, and *Planning at the Edge: Communication, Coordination, Consultation to Address Common Issues across Regional Boundaries*, which summarizes examples of successful formal, informal, and ad hoc interregional cooperation initiatives. These current products are not effective training resources for improving staff-level community and interagency coordination.

A search of the Transportation Research Information Services (TRIS) database was conducted in April 2010 using the index term “(coordination OR cooperation OR collaboration) AND ‘technical assistance’”; the search string was linked to subject area of “planning and forecasting.” A second TRIS search combined the index term “(coordination OR cooperation OR collaboration) with the subject areas of “‘planning and forecasting’ AND ‘education and training.’” The two searches returned 61 records. Many of the citations, including ones for New Mexico, Texas and Virginia described successful practices for interagency coordination as part of transportation plan development, but none of the records fell into the category of training or guidance material for day-to-day agency interaction. Nonetheless, the authors of *Technical Assistance: A Path to Better Interagency Cooperation* describe four key guidelines for interagency cooperation, particularly for cases where “inertia is a risk.” In *Training Professionals for Cross-Boundary Planning*, the authors describe a coordination training program for Dutch agencies based on the theories and practices of the learning organization and on a constructivist perspective on learning.

Tasks⁶

Training resources could be developed as programs and do-it-yourself guides for staff at public agencies to build capabilities to conduct effective outreach and facilitation on a day-in, day-out basis. The focus of these resources should be on basic skill such as listening, conflict resolution, and feedback that may not have been previously taught or developed in technically oriented staff.

For interagency communication, targeted skills should be developed to assist in opening and sustaining dialogue between different agencies by identifying areas of common interest and solutions with mutual benefits. Other essential keys to success include the fostering of working relationships and open communication among appropriate personnel across agencies, a clear understanding of project goals, desired outcomes, and agency roles. The proposed research tasks may consider using structured literature searches, interviews, case studies, and comparative studies from similar states to identify best practices and options for training resources.

⁶This section corresponds to “Research Proposed” in the MDT Research Topic Statement and the TCRP Research Problem Statement.

Follow-on and Implementation Activities⁷

The end product of this research effort is anticipated to be tools and guidance for use in smaller communities. It is possible that this information could be integrated into existing on-line planning toolkits such as *Montana Transportation and Land Use: Resources for Growing Communities*.⁸ The research products will also be useful additions for existing training programs, conferences and guidebooks related to general transportation planning and public outreach. Follow-on activities may be warranted to integrate the research products into these existing training programs

Estimated Funding Requirements⁹

The estimated funding needed for this research project is between \$150,000 and \$175,000. Estimated labor needs for a research team are about 300 hours for a principal investigator, 100 hours of senior-level research support, 100 hours of mid-level research support, and 400 hours of junior-level research support. A research period of about 12 to 18 months, including review time for draft products, is anticipated. The actual time range will depend upon the format of the resultant training resources, with software-based training potentially taking more time for thorough beta-testing.

Relationship to FTA Strategic Research Goals and/or TCRP Strategic Priorities¹⁰

The proposed research directly supports both FTA Strategic Research Areas. In terms of livability, the proposed research will improve the capacity of the transit work force and industry. The proposed research will also provide improved coordination processes for agency staff and managers that can contribute to better decision-making. Similarly, effective interpersonal and interagency coordination are necessary elements for revitalizing transit organizations (TCRP Strategic Priority 5).

Person(s) Developing the Problem¹¹

<<To be completed at time of submittal to the research program.>>

⁷This section corresponds to “Implementation Plan” in the MDT Research Topic Statement. There is no corresponding section in the TCRP Research Problem Statement.

⁸<http://www.mdt.mt.gov/research/toolkit/>.

⁹This section corresponds to “Estimate of the Problem Funding and Research Period” in the TCRP Research Problem Statement. There is no corresponding section in the MDT Research Topic Statement.

¹⁰ This section only appears in the TCRP Research Problem Statement.

¹¹ This section only appears in the TCRP Research Problem Statement.

Process Used to Develop Problem Statement¹²

This problem statement is the product of the *Local Transportation and Land Use Coordination: Tools and Gaps* research project sponsored by the Montana Department of Transportation.¹³ The research topic was one of six high-priority gaps in practice identified by the research team and confirmed by a research panel comprised of representatives from city, county and state government agencies as well as transportation stakeholder groups.

IT Component¹⁴

The necessary software applications are already resident within planning offices. No new software is anticipated to be developed as part of this research effort. The research product could possibly include interactive, on-line training modules that would be incorporated in the *Montana Transportation and Land Use Toolkit*. If created, these modules would entail scripting and application development, most likely using currently available commercial software. Decisions regarding packaging and dissemination of the research product will be made as part of the research effort.

Date and Submitted By¹⁵

<<To be completed at time of submittal to the research program.>>

¹² This section only appears in the TCRP Research Problem Statement.

¹³ http://www.mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/planning/smart_trans.shtml.

¹⁴ This section only appears in the MDT Research Topic Statement.

¹⁵ This section corresponds to “Submitted by” in the MDT Research Topic Statement.