

Public Involvement Plan for the Kelly Parkway Corridor Study Context Sensitive Design

By

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For The

2nd Urban Street Symposium

Submitted
May 17, 2002

Members of the community came out to express distrust and animosity as a result of previous public projects in the area.



ABSTRACT

One of the most important of all transportation planning tasks is preparation and execution of a plan for public involvement. This task is particularly challenging when transportation improvement projects impact communities or neighborhoods in which an atmosphere of public distrust exists due to past or present experience. The need of public agencies to ensure that social equity issues are properly addressed in project planning demands the use of new and innovative techniques of public notification and participation.

The Texas Department of Transportation has retained Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade & Douglas (PBQ&D) to provide planning and engineering services for the proposed Kelly Parkway, an 8.8 mile link between US 90 and SH 16 in San Antonio, Texas. The project management plan prepared by PBQ&D for the Kelly Parkway Corridor Study includes a public involvement plan that combines traditional methods, such as public meetings and notification via print media, with new technologies and methods, such as creation of a public involvement Website and establishment of a public involvement office. Employment of new methodologies is particularly important in San Antonio in order to offset some negative expectations and perceptions that exist among citizens of the neighborhoods contained within the bounds of the study area. The public involvement plan prepared by PBQ&D also recognizes that the manner in which information is transmitted to the public is just as important as the message communicated, and was created with sensitivity to the needs of the target community, which includes a significant population that is Spanish speaking only.

This paper will provide timely information to transportation engineers, planners and allied professionals concerning a practical and innovative approach to public involvement.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Kelly Parkway Corridor Study Alternatives Analysis was conducted by the Texas Department of Transportation—San Antonio District to evaluate viable design alternatives to provide for a new multi-lane arterial with limited access in the Southwest area of San Antonio, Texas. The San Antonio District retained the consultant services of Parsons Brinckerhoff to conduct the study. The Alternative Analysis was a sub-study to the District's Advanced Planning Department's Kelly Parkway Project, which has now progressed into the preparation of the Environmental Impact Statement. The Alternative Analysis (A/A) began in March 2000 and was concluded in December 2001 just after the project team's third public meeting held November 7, 2001. A major component of the A/A was a very proactive public involvement program (PIP). The public involvement program was targeted to offer the public, and more specifically the Southwest San Antonio community, a variety of opportunities to become involved in the study. Included in the PIP were a number of formal and informal methods for receiving and integrating input from the public. The public involvement program was not only responsive to the letter of the law, but embraced the spirit of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) as adopted by the Federal Highway Administration and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The PIP further complies with public involvement requirements as prescribed by Executive Order 12898, for Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice on Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations (*3 CFR, 1994 Comp., p. 859*) and guidance as established by the National Historic Preservation Act (*16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.*).

There were more than 250 participants at Public Meeting #2



PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IS THE KEY

One of the most important of all transportation planning tasks is preparation and execution of a plan for public involvement. This task is particularly challenging when transportation improvement projects impact communities or neighborhoods in which an atmosphere of public distrust exists due to the past or present experiences. The need for public agencies to ensure that context sensitive design issues are properly addressed in the earliest stages of project planning, specifically during the alternatives development and analysis phases demands the use of new and innovative techniques of public notification, participation and education.

The PB team, lead by Project Manager Rodolfo “Rudy” J. Rivera, prepared a project management plan, inclusive of a detailed Public Involvement Plan at the onset of the project. The public involvement plan combined traditional methods, such as public meetings and notification via print media, with new technologies and methods, such as the establishment of a public involvement office, creation of a public involvement website, on-going stakeholder meetings, public education workshops, and four (4) working committees.

To assist in the deployment of the Kelly Parkway Public Involvement Program, PB assembled a Public Involvement Team lead by Raquelle Wooten that included key personnel from PB and the locally well-known public involvement firm, Ximenes and Associates (X&A). Recognizing the need to tailor the PI program, PB took seriously the need to be able to “relate” to the stakeholders and as such identified X&A as a vital and invaluable resource relative to effectively obtaining community input and participation.

Equally as important, particularly in this part of San Antonio was the need to explore new methodologies in order to offset negative expectations and perceptions that exist among most citizens in this area. The public involvement plan also recognized that the manner in which information is transmitted to the public is just as important as the message communicated, and as such, the message was created with sensitivity to the needs of the target community.

TAILORING THE PIP TO THE TARGETED COMMUNITY

The Kelly Parkway project study area has a unique demographic profile. Specifically, the community is comprised predominately of Hispanics (91%), many of them only Spanish speaking, living at or below the Nation’s poverty level (35%). Accordingly, in developing the public involvement plan three overarching program objectives were identified. The objectives, and their partnering strategies, are:

- *Increase public awareness and understanding about the Project Development Process & the EIS decision-making processes.*

Strategy—Broad distribution of information about the project development and EIS processes and findings. Concerted effort was targeted to provide Information that makes a link between activities being undertaken and the input received from the general public. Information was provided in English and Spanish, using extensive graphics and illustrations to clearly communicate alternatives and their impacts. Examples of the use of bi-lingual forums and

mechanisms include: the project newsletter, project website, public meeting handouts and comment forms, simultaneous translation of public meeting presentations, and bi-lingual staff.

Bilingual translation at presentations



- *Ensure that the final recommendations are sensitive to and adequately address the issues raised by the public.*

Strategy—Provide multiple opportunities for input and dialogue through a variety of forums. Maintain credibility of the process by making a commitment to "close the loop" back to individual respondents and the general public.

- *Provide multiple opportunities for different types of input.*

Strategy—Offer a variety of feedback mechanisms in English and Spanish. Meetings, open houses, forums, and workshops are open to the general public. Written comments were sought via opportunities for face-to-face dialogue, telephone and internet/ e-mail access. Full project area meetings were augmented with smaller issue or neighborhood based discussions, including walking and bicycling most of the study area and speaking with individual citizens in their homes.

COMPONENTS OF THE PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROGRAM

The public involvement program incorporated three major concentration areas. These areas are:

- Information Gathering
- Community Involvement
- Public Information and Education

Interwoven into these three components of the program were four underlying communication principles. These principles will guide the development and implementation of the information gathering, community involvement, and public information components. These principles are to:

- Build on existing community partnerships and communication networks.
- Develop, distribute and display high quality, innovative, user-friendly and community appropriate information.
- Coordinate closely with local jurisdictions, community organizations and neighborhood organizations.
- Respond in a timely manner to questions and concerns raised throughout the EIS process.

Outcome Measures

The project team recognized and embraced the important role of public involvement and was guided by the following principles when interfacing with constituencies affected by the Kelly Parkway Corridor improvements.

- Citizen participation was solicited throughout the alternative analysis process.
- Efforts were made to identify and reach groups most affected by roadway improvements.
- Two-way communication (i.e., the free exchange of information, ideas, and values between the project team and citizens) was sought.
- Study status and findings were reported regularly to the public using a variety of communication mechanisms.
- All reasonable and promising suggestions by the community were given serious consideration by the project team.
- Citizen inquiries were promptly followed-up by the project team.
- Public involvement activities and input was documented.
- Public meetings and other activities were informal and presented information tailored to the lay public's understanding and in a bi-lingual format to provide opportunities for the public to talk directly with study team members and comments were documented to ensure project team consideration.
- Multiple opportunities were provided for citizen input.

PUBLIC AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

Public Involvement Office

The project team established a dedicated Public Involvement Office located near the study corridor. The Kelly Parkway Corridor Study Public Involvement Office (PIO), located in the Las Palmas shopping center at 803 Castroville Rd. Suite 409, San Antonio, Texas 78237, provided interested members of the community a means by which to obtain information about the project and contact the project team directly. Staffing for the public Involvement Office was facilitated by members of the project team and was open 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM Tuesdays and Wednesdays and from 12:00 AM to 8:00 PM on Thursdays (except state and federal holidays). The office is also handicap accessible and ample parking is available at the shopping center, as well as a major transit transfer station operated by VIA. The office was established to facilitate the exchange of information with the public and not intended to serve as a project office. Additionally, the office provides a centralized location from which to conduct public outreach activities, such as small meetings, and provide a convenient location for residents and other stakeholders to access the website and other information on the project.

Listening to and documenting public comments and concerns at the Kelly Parkway Public Involvement Office.



Public Meetings

Over the course of the Kelly Parkway Corridor Study, the project team held a series of open forum (3) public meetings to engage the public in a dialogue regarding the project. Each of the public meetings was scheduled in companion to major milestones throughout the alternatives development and analysis process. The public response was overwhelming with an average of over 280 citizens attending each meeting. All three meetings were simultaneously translated into

Spanish. Headphones were provided to those citizens preferring to hearing the presentation in Spanish. We also accommodated a blind Spanish speaking only citizen at our second public meeting.

Stakeholder Meetings

The project team developed a list of major stakeholders from meetings with agencies, community contacts, and other research. Key stakeholders from the neighborhood groups, Air Force Base, businesses, special interest groups, churches, public agencies and political jurisdictions were identified. The project team held over 100 stakeholder meetings over the course of the A/A in an effort to optimize information gathering, community involvement and public information and education regarding the project. Citizen participation at these meetings ranged from one on one meetings to presentations to groups of over 100 citizens.

Working Committees

The project team established four advisory committees to assist in various aspects of the project, as well as to offer input for consideration. The committees meet in sequence with major project milestones and helped to guide project activities and deliverables. The four committees included:

- **The Kelly Parkway Advisory Committee (KPAC);** *composed primarily of elected officials and other public agency directors.*

Members from the four workgroup committees and key stakeholders worked w/the project team to screen the alternatives.



- **The Technical Work Group (TWG);** *composed primarily of engineers, planners and environmental specialists from TxDOT (SAT, DES, ENV), FHWA, FTA, City, County, MPO, VIA, Air Force Base Conversion Agency, Department of Defense and Union Pacific Railroad.*
- **The Community Issues Committee (CIC);** *composed primarily of citizens (neighborhood representatives), property owners, small business owners, farmers, school districts, chambers of commerce and other special interest groups, including opponents to the project.*
- **The Aesthetics Issues Committee (AIC)** *composed of citizens, landscape architects, and planners.*

Newsletter

The project team produced five editions of Kelly Parkway **Newsletter** to provide the public timely updates over the course of the A/A. The current database includes over 3000 stakeholders that receive the newsletter.

Special Issues Workshops

At key junctures throughout the process, the project team coordinated special meetings and public workshops to afford the public additional opportunities to understand and discuss the overall project process and findings. These “**special issues workshops**” were designed to augment the larger public meetings and to focus on specific elements related to environmental and social impacts. Some of the workshop titles included:

- Understanding the TxDOT Project Development Process
- Understand the TxDOT Right of Way Acquisition Process
- What is An EIS?
- How Are the Alternatives Screened?

Additionally, the project team facilitated a number of other special issue workshops to solicit “hands on” involvement, in particular the team held: a series of Alternatives Screening Workshops and invited members of the four working committees and other key stakeholders to participate; a workshop to solicit input on ways to incorporate bicycle and pedestrian path accommodations along the roadway; and a Truckers’ Workshop to soliciting input from freight carriers.

Bilingual publications



Meeting with stakeholders in their own backyards



Additional Avenue for Community Involvement

Coordination with local and public agencies helped to ensure that the alternatives being considered were consistent and coordinated with other planning efforts, and that opportunities for partnership and sharing in public involvement efforts are identified. Staff briefings were important in keeping affected agencies informed of developments in the planning process

Public Website

The project team developed a Kelly Parkway Corridor Study public website to provide the public information on the study, list upcoming public involvement opportunities, and describe the process for the public to comment via e-mail. The website is viewable both in English and Spanish and is also viewable in an American with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance format. The information on the website was periodically updated as progress and changes occurred during the alternatives development and analysis process.