

2.0 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

2.1 STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Metropolitan Atlanta belongs to all of us – the people who live, work and play in its many diverse neighborhoods and communities. An effective transportation system is vital to the quality of life and continuing prosperity of these communities. During the RTAP project, creating a forum to understand and to address the complex transportation needs of the region was GRTA's highest priority.

To stimulate meaningful dialogue about regional public transit, RTAP included a critical task, the public involvement program. This program required skillful application of a set of public involvement techniques for effective communications, assertive public outreach and education, as well as regulatory compliance. This chapter provides a summary of the strategic framework, techniques, and outcomes of the public involvement process.

As GRTA and its planning partners embarked on the development of the Regional Transit Action Plan, they were acutely aware of the importance of their mission. Establishing the groundwork for such an effort could not be accomplished without a process to build community and agency ownership of decisions. Two public involvement strategies were identified to accomplish this mission: *public outreach and interagency coordination*.

The Public Outreach strategy was created to provide opportunities to share information and to engage people from all walks of life in the development of the Draft Concept Plan. Public

outreach, an effective and long-standing practice, accomplished three significant goals:

- ✓ The public was informed of the issues, purpose, and progress of the RTAP project.
- ✓ Initial stages of plan ownership and consensus were developed.
- ✓ The affected public, agencies and other stakeholders communicated their perceptions, opinions and ideas throughout the entire course of the planning process.

The Interagency Coordination strategy was designed to include the many local, regional and state agencies and special interest groups responsible for formulation of policies and implementation of transportation investment projects that may result from RTAP. Coordination efforts with local municipalities and other various agencies included monthly Project Advisory Committee (PAC) meetings to review technical memoranda, to identify key concerns, to determine transit needs, and to establish project priorities. The agency involvement process was also structured to provide insight and recommendations regarding public/private partnership initiatives that may potentially lead to funding or other assistance during subsequent stages of project development. Interagency coordination activities represented the nerve center of the public involvement program – accentuating the technical milestones of the project and enhancing accountability to the public.

The remainder of this chapter describes the specific public involvement techniques and achievements during January 2002 through July 2003.

2.2 PROJECT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Project Advisory Committee (PAC) serves as the core group responsible for overall direction and guidance in the development of the RTAP. As an advisory group, the PAC meets monthly to discuss project developments and participate in project decision-making. The significance of the PAC is multi-faceted:

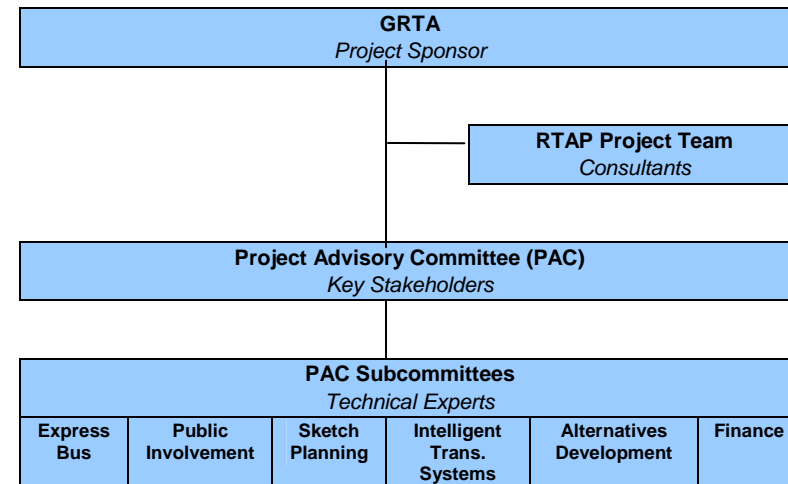
- ✓ Allows GRTA to build partnerships and share information with local governments and community leaders
- ✓ Provides a continuing forum for direct input into the planning process
- ✓ Is a known opportunity for public participation, questioning and clarification
- ✓ Facilitates consensus about RTAP plan components
- ✓ Helps to drive the technical planning process

Determining the membership of the Project Advisory Committee was an important task. GRTA recognized that there are many ways to define “the public” and that the definition has implications for the approach to public outreach and involvement. It was critical to hear as many voices as possible as the conceptual framework and alternatives were being developed. Therefore, RTAP public involvement was broad, including all interests, particularly those not traditionally represented in transportation planning. All of these perspectives needed to be heard. Through meaningful dialogue, these groups have become trusted partners in the RTAP effort.

“We must recognize that we are all partners in the region...we must aspire toward seamless coverage for our citizens by working with other groups.”

RTAP Project Advisory Committee Member

Figure 2.1 Project Advisory Committee Structure -- 2002



Express Bus Subcommittee

This subcommittee reviewed the express bus needs assessment and operating plans and provided implementation support for regional express bus service. The subcommittee provided direction on routing, service levels, park-ride facilities and implementation issues.

Public Involvement Subcommittee

The public involvement subcommittee ensured that the plan for public outreach and interagency coordination was followed during all phases of project development. Residents, community

leaders, key stakeholders and planning partners were involved in shaping RTAP at every step of the process through a variety of approaches including surveys, open houses, forums, and newsletters. The Public Involvement Advisory Group (PIAG) facilitated by ARC, was the primary body for coordinating RTAP public outreach activities with other major studies taking place throughout the region.

Sketch Planning Subcommittee

At the center of the alternatives development process, this team provided input and reviewed the development of analytical tools necessary to identify travel patterns and needs, to estimate ridership and to model potential transit projects.

Intelligent Transportation Systems Subcommittee

The purpose of this committee is to research, evaluate and recommend a regional transit ITS system.

Alternatives Development Subcommittee

For this critical undertaking, the entire Project Advisory Committee functioned as the subcommittee. Over a series of extended meetings the PAC developed goals and objectives, reviewed evaluation criteria and methodology, developed performance measures and standards, and identified potential transit projects to be included in the Draft Concept Plan.

Finance

The funding subcommittee will develop a financial model that includes capital and operating costs, financing mechanisms, organizational structure and fiscal capacity analysis for the long-range RTAP plan.

2.3 PUBLIC AWARENESS SURVEY

In March 2002, GRTA conducted a region-wide telephone survey to better understand the public's level of awareness regarding

GRTA, transit options, funding methods for transit, and how best to solicit public input. Specifically, respondents were drawn from throughout the 13 county non-attainment area. Approximately 1,200 telephone surveys were administered. The complete survey findings were presented to the Project Advisory Committee in May 2002. An abbreviated summary of findings related to the overall public involvement program are listed below:

- ✓ A majority of adults say traffic is the most important problem facing the metro Atlanta region today
- ✓ Three-fifths of residents say rush hour traffic is a very serious or somewhat serious problem for them
- ✓ 49% of residents have heard of GRTA, 50% have not
- ✓ Four-fifths of residents have seen or heard something about local bus service or park and ride lots, but less than half have seen or heard something about express bus service
- ✓ 57% of the respondents who live in a county with existing transit, namely Fulton, Cobb, DeKalb, Gwinnett, and Clayton, can correctly name their system
- ✓ Over three-fifths of respondents who say their county has a transit system do not know how that system is funded
- ✓ Internet sites are the most likely source for information about public transportation routes, schedules and fares
- ✓ Residents are most likely to voice their opinion about transit through an elected official or at public meeting, with weekday evenings considered the best time to attend a meeting

- ✓ Over two-thirds of the respondents get information about local and regional issues from newspapers

The survey technique helped to create a vision for the public involvement program by documenting a baseline of public awareness, defining specific opportunities for outreach, identifying the best methods of communication, and flagging issues requiring additional public information and education.

2.4 OPEN HOUSES/PUBLIC COMMENTS

An open house is a special meeting to inform the public of transportation projects and solicit their input on a variety of planning issues. GRTA and ARC have jointly sponsored three phases of open houses during the months of May 2002, September 2002 and June/July 2003. This agency partnership was significant not only because RTAP will define the transit element of the Regional Transportation Plan, but also because it provides an excellent opportunity for interagency coordination and seamless public involvement.

The strategic objectives of the ARC/RTAP public open houses were:

- To increase awareness of the roles of GRTA and ARC in the regional transportation planning process.
- To describe the regional transportation planning process and its relation to the RTAP.
- To present a draft plan of the regional express bus system.
- To explain the public involvement process.

- To discuss the public's transit needs, priorities and areas of concern for the regional transit system.
- To allow the public to advocate potential transit corridors, routes, and modes.

In Phase I, a public meeting was held in each of the counties within the metropolitan Atlanta non-attainment area. The agenda, focusing primarily on RTAP, included opportunities for independent review of project displays and handouts, one-on-one discussion with project representatives, a formal presentation by ARC and GRTA, and a question and answer session.

In Phase II, public discussion was initiated on a more regional basis with one meeting held for a quadrant or cluster of counties within the study area. Along with RTAP, a host of project sponsors were invited to participate in the ARC 2030 RTP/TIP transportation fairs. The meeting format allowed representatives to respond to individual questions at project tables followed by a formal ARC presentation and public comment period.

“Change the mindset of the general public. Make public transportation the smart thing to do. In order to do that you have to have all the stakeholders (government, business, homeowners, apartment dwellers, schools) develop a common goal and implement a plan.”
Participant at Paulding County Open House.

Finally, in Phase III, ARC scheduled 13 public meetings throughout its 10-county area to present its draft 2030 Mobility Plan and receive public comments. GRTA's Draft Concept Plan is a featured element of the 2030 Mobility Plan. GRTA will hold additional public meetings in the three counties not included in ARC's area: Coweta, Forsyth and Paulding.

Table 2.1 ARC/RTAP Open House Meetings

Phase I	
May 6	Cobb County
May 6	South Fulton County
May 7	Fayette County
May 9	DeKalb County
May 9	N. Fulton County
May 13	Henry County
May 14	Douglas County
May 14	Rockdale County
May 16	Gwinnett County
May 18	City of Atlanta NPU
May 20	Coweta County
May 20	Forsyth County
May 21	Clayton County
May 21	Paulding County
May 23	Cherokee County
May 23	City of Atlanta
Phase II	
Sep 9	Southeast (Stockbridge)
Sep 10	ARC Aging Council
Sep 12	Northwest (Kennesaw)
Sep 16	Northeast (Lawrenceville)
Sep 17	Central (Decatur)
Sep 19	Southwest (Atlanta)
Sep 21	City of Atlanta NPU
Sep 25	ARC Board Meeting
Phase III	
June 16	Gwinnett County
June 17	City of Atlanta
June 18	Cherokee County
June 19	DeKalb County
June 23	North Fulton County
June 24	South Fulton County
June 25	Rockdale County
June 26	Cobb County
June 26	Douglas County

June 30	Clayton County
July 1	Henry County
July 2	Fayette County
July 7	Coweta County
July 8	Paulding County
July 10	Forsyth County

In total, over 600 residents attended the Phase I and II open houses. Nine major messages emerged from these meetings that were voiced by virtually all participants in the open houses:

- ✓ *Regional Connectivity, Configuration and Accessibility*
Create a regional transit system that encourages transit use by promoting seamless bus and train connections, regional coverage (gets you anywhere), dependable and integrated service.
- ✓ *Congestion*
Address the serious impacts of traffic congestion, stress and poor air quality on the lives of metropolitan Atlanta citizens.
- ✓ *Transit Options*
Create a vision for public transit that includes: express bus, light rail transit, expansion of MARTA's rail, HOV lanes, "Rails to Trails", bus rapid transit, commuter rail, van pools, and disincentives for single occupancy vehicles.
- ✓ *Land Use and Transportation Partners*
Coordinate land use and transportation planning to achieve regionalism, decrease congestion, increase access and mobility and improve quality of life. Partner with MARTA, ARC, GDOT and the business sector to address transportation problems facing the region. Provide incentives/reward for counties that implement public transit and smart growth strategies.

- ✓ *Marketing*
Promote the positive benefits and impacts of public transit through a marketing/educational campaign. Focus on improving the image of MARTA and dispelling transit myths. Attract new riders, retain existing ones and ensure ongoing support from the community with marketing.
- ✓ *Funding/Fare*
Avoid raising fares and include free transfers. Consider a variety of funding sources including sales, gasoline, convention and property taxes, local, state and federal funding, parking, impact and vehicle registration fees.
- ✓ *Public Outreach*
Increase advertising and give more consideration to public comments in the agency decision-making process.
- ✓ *Operations*
Improve transit service delivery, amenities, facilities, management, route planning, system safety and cleanliness.
- ✓ *Environment*
Provide for the use of alternative fuels to promote cleaner emissions and improve air quality.

The ARC/RTAP open houses were considered a success by several measures. First, GRTA and its planning partners clearly increased the public's awareness of GRTA, RTAP and the regional transportation planning process. More importantly, the open houses provided meaningful opportunities for the public to comment on the elements of the plan and to advocate for specific projects to meet future transit needs.

2.5 REGIONAL TRANSIT FORUM

On May 30, 2002, GRTA, ARC and MARTA hosted a day-long Regional Transit Forum where key stakeholders were informed and inspired to support and cooperate in the development and implementation of RTAP. Over 300 state and local officials, community activists, business leaders, representatives from various advocacy groups and private citizens attended the forum.

The agenda was structured in three parts:

Part I: Opening Session

Brief remarks by prominent leaders from each of the sponsoring agencies preceded key note speeches from then-Governor Roy E. Barnes, Executive Director of GRTA Dr. Catherine L. Ross, and Port of Allegheny County (Pittsburgh) General Manager Paul Skoutelas. The speakers set the tone for an event designed to create a vision, explain the need and develop a strategy for a regional transit system.

Part II: Moderated Panel

Next, GRTA facilitated a discussion of regional transportation and business leaders on the role and importance of transit. The organizations represented on the panel included the Regional Business Coalition, GRTA, the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, the City of Atlanta, ARC, MARTA, Cobb County and the American Public Transportation Association. A lively Q&A session followed between the audience and the panel.

Part III: Strategic Planning Session

During the strategic planning session, 10 working groups participated in a facilitated strategic planning session to arrive at consensus in the areas of transit vision, current strengths and weaknesses, and specific short- and long-range projects, plans and policies. The discussion questions and strategic themes that emerged from the session are summarized below:

Vision

It is 2025. The Atlanta metropolitan area has won an award for "Excellence in Regional Public Transportation." To win the award, public transportation systems in Atlanta had to demonstrate excellence in many ways. Please describe this award winning system.

- ✓ Seamless/Integrated
- ✓ Regional coverage and accessibility
- ✓ Transit supportive land use planning
- ✓ Affordable
- ✓ Competitive (a viable alternative to the automobile)

Strengths

Now we are back in today, 2002. What are the strengths of the existing transit systems? What do you like most about it?

- ✓ MARTA as the core system
- ✓ Connectivity to downtown and Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport
- ✓ Safe
- ✓ Strong political leadership

Weaknesses

What are the current weaknesses or deficiencies of the existing transit systems? What do you like the least?

- ✓ Lack of sufficient and dedicated funding source
- ✓ Lack of regional connectivity and accessibility
- ✓ Poor public image/perception of transit
- ✓ Inadequate customer service and information

Short-Term Projects

What public transit projects, policies or programs would you personally like to see in the short range (next 5 years)? What are the projects you think will get us to our vision?

- ✓ Expanded bus services (all types)
- ✓ Expanded support systems for bus services (HOV, ITS)
- ✓ Regional funding source
- ✓ Regional fare structure
- ✓ Multi-modal access to transit

Long-Term Projects

What public transit projects, policies or programs would you personally like to see in the long range (next 20 years)? What are the projects you think will get us to our vision?

- ✓ Multi-modal, regional fixed guideway transit (commuter rail, bus rapid transit, light rail transit)
- ✓ Dedicated regional transit funding sources
- ✓ Transit oriented development

The forum was an impressive gathering of people committed to public transit and willing to confront complex issues surrounding the development of a regional transportation system.

2.6 STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

During the months of July through December 2002, over 50 stakeholder interviews were conducted. These interviews provided an initial assessment of public transportation priorities, outlooks on growth, effective communication mechanisms and willingness to support RTAP through one-on-one interviews with select individuals. Each interview was confidential, lasted approximately an hour in length and covered a standard set of interview topics. Interviewees were selected to represent:

- Heads of departments of planning, public transportation and/or community development
- Elected or appointed officials representing constituents within the study area

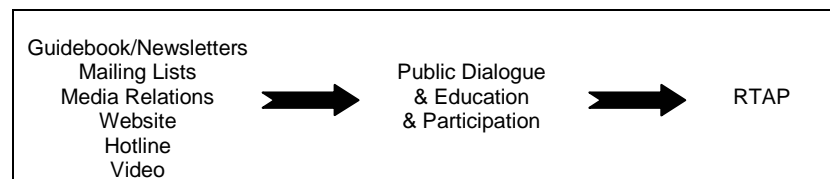
- Presidents of Chambers of Commerce
- Special interest groups expected to play a significant role in the RTAP process
- Individuals representing a cross-section of opinion and perspectives in the community at-large
- Advocates for the interests of environmental justice populations

The interviews were a tremendous learning opportunity for GRTA and the RTAP project team. The candid responses provided insight into the aspects of public transportation of greatest concern to stakeholders, communication preferences and needs, and strategies to increase support for RTAP. Moreover, the interviews provided a direct connection between GRTA and key individuals, helped to ensure a responsive conceptual plan, and identified other stakeholders that should be made aware of the RTAP project to encourage their participation.

2.7 PUBLIC INFORMATION MATERIALS

A number of essential public information materials provided timely, straightforward information to the public and media during all stages of RTAP plan development. Figure 2.2 summarizes the overall approach used to stimulate public interest, dialogue and feedback.

Figure 2.2 Public Information System



Project Guidebook/Newsletters

In the beginning of the project, a 12-page official project guidebook provided detailed information on the:

- History, role, mission and vision of GRTA
- Goals and schedule of RTAP
- Regional transportation planning process
- 2010 Regional Express Bus System
- Meaning, impact, goals and techniques of the public involvement program
- Public meeting calendar and other ways to provide feedback

The guidebook was widely distributed through the RTAP Open Houses, project mailing list, PAC and other GRTA-affiliated groups.

Mailing List

An extensive list of names of residents, business and property owners, elected officials, neighborhood organizations and others that are affected by or interested in the RTAP project was collected during the public involvement process. The list of 10,000 names is a consolidation of several lists that formerly existed separately among several agencies sponsoring projects in the region and is updated regularly with contact information gathered at meeting and from phone calls, emails and other correspondence from the public. Through this mailing list, GRTA has attempted to reach, involve and directly communicate with as many as people as possible that may be impacted by the project.

Media Relations

Primarily through newspapers, radio and television, GRTA disseminated information about the intent, progress, findings and recommendations for the RTAP project to the general public. The media was an important resource for building the understanding for the need and benefits of regional transit.

Website

The RTAP website, www.tapintotransit.com, was launched in Spring 2002 and is updated regularly. The website included a project overview, information on upcoming public meeting dates, committee structure and members, frequently asked questions, map of the study area, other important links, and copies of recent planning documents.

Hotline

A dedicated number, (404) 525-5754, allowed citizens to ask questions and request information about the project, public open houses, committee schedules and agendas, and opportunities to get involved. The hotline was staffed during regular business hours enabling immediate answers for people interested in learning more about RTAP.

Video

Developed immediately following the public awareness survey, the video was designed to help educate the public on the benefits of transit. The video highlighted transit services and options used in the Atlanta region and other states.

2.8 UPCOMING ACTIVITIES

During the last year, GRTA has fully engaged the public and its planning partners in a compelling dialogue about regional public transit and its relationship to air quality, traffic congestion and sustainable growth. Political, financial and technical issues have been openly discussed. Battles have been won and lost, but progress has been made, opinions have been heard, and consensus has emerged.

There is still much work to be done. It is essential that GRTA continue to work closely with the public to create a shared vision of transit for the region. The understanding generated by this open dialogue must strengthen and deepen as the next phase of project development unfolds. While the RTAP Draft Concept Plan is in place, many challenges lay ahead regarding the funding and implementation of RTAP. Nonetheless, GRTA remains firm in its commitment public involvement and the promise to provide transportation choices for all metropolitan Atlanta citizens.