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Listen Up!

Lessons from three cities suggest ways of managing an effective planning process.

By Nate Springer

"Criminals will overrun this system if it isn't abandoned first!" cried opponents of the first plan to bring light rail to St. Louis in 1989. Others called the proposal an "exorbitant boondoggle" and predicted that high costs and low ridership would lead to its complete failure. When tens of thousands boarded the new line to see the St. Louis Cardinals play in the summer of 1993, even transit proponents were stunned by its success.



The intensity of public involvement can overwhelm planners, as it almost did in St. Louis. It was commitment and education that kept the light rail line on track, according to supporters. Similarly, in Denver, a group of transportation advocates was able to rescue an ambitious rail project from the wreckage of a derailed plan. More recently in Atlanta, a plan to revitalize downtown with transit and parks has managed to quell NIMBYism.

All three cities offer lessons for planners seeking to calm public fears.

An idea grows in Atlanta

Abandoned rail tracks circling downtown and midtown Atlanta are all that remain of the 1,000 trains a day that passed through the city in the early 20th century.

Several years ago, a young architect named Ryan Gravel proposed linking 45 Atlanta neighborhoods with a new rail loop. His idea, first outlined in a 1999 Georgia Tech thesis, grew into a plan for transit, parks, and economic development called the Atlanta Beltline.

"I wanted to use transit primarily as infrastructure because it would spur the kind of growth that would be good for these communities," says Gravel. The plan calls for creating passenger service along 22 miles of underused rail lines and adding 1,300 acres of green space to connect the historic neighborhoods. "Transit is the core of the project. If there's no transit, it's a nice project, but with transit it's a transformative project," he says.

With the support of city council president Cathy Woolard, Gravel and his colleagues sent mailings to influential city leaders. They visited local churches and neighborhood groups. Business organizations and Neighborhood Planning Units, the city's official local advisory committees, invited Beltline advocates to meet with them. "This project would not have gotten anywhere if the communities had not bought into it. They got the attention of elected leaders and planners," says Gravel.

The team sidestepped the opposition that often arises when disagreement over one project element escalates into widespread opposition. They learned what residents wanted through the public meetings, surveys, and focus groups undertaken by the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority as part of its Feasibility Study and Alternatives Analysis. "Because the Beltline came from that grassroots perspective, people took ownership of it," says Gravel. "It wasn't something that was being forced on them."

Experts say that making key decisions at the community level reduces distrust and allows a project to move forward. "You try to make the entire process as transparent as possible. When people see the process, they understand," says Barbara Faga, senior vice president for EDAW, Inc., the international consulting firm hired to perform a beltline feasibility study, and author of the 2006



book *Designing Public Consensus*. Faga estimates that up to 125 meetings were held in one year for the feasibility study.

When neighbors raised concerns about potential high-density residential development around the BeltLine, as it is now spelled, EDAW planners presented case studies of successful transit-oriented development projects all over the U.S. "We would break into groups and talk about density," says Faga, who invited the participants to use Legos to build model projects. Residents were encouraged to ask questions and to air their fears. Throughout the planning process, the project team has continued to maintain contact with residents by giving site tours, holding open houses, and publishing informative newsletters.

Participatory planning remains a key component of development and site-specific design for the BeltLine. The project is now in the preliminary acquisition and site-specific design phase. Widespread public support encouraged the Atlanta city council, the Atlanta school board, and the Colton County Commission to create a tax increment financing district to raise the \$2 billion estimated project cost. With 70 organizations involved and an advocacy group, the BeltLine Partnership, in place, the Beltline is becoming a reality.

'What did we do wrong?'

About 1,400 miles west, transit planners in Denver anticipated voter approval of their 1997 transit tax proposal. The comprehensive Guide the Ride project, billed as the solution to the region's sprawl and congestion, crashed with only 42 percent of the vote. Planners wasted no time in seeking to learn where they had gone astray.

One complaint was that the plans for Guide the Ride were too vague. In response, planners set out to design a program that addressed specific neighborhood needs. "We did investment studies and took these ideas to communities, and they came back with really organic projects," including suburb-to-suburb bus routes, says Kathleen Osher, executive director of Transit Alliance, a local nonprofit group that was central to the campaign.

The alliance recruited neighborhood nonprofits, businesses, and local governments in the region in an effort to build a transit coalition. Its efforts yielded a new plan called FasTracks — a \$4.7 billion proposal to build 119 miles of new commuter and light-rail transit, 18 miles of bus rapid transit, and expanded suburban bus service. The rail service would run on six new rail corridors and three extensions of existing lines.

Hopes for the plan were buoyed by the success of another high-profile transportation project conducted by the Regional Transportation District. T-REX, a combined highway and light rail project, was ahead of schedule and on budget. "The trust that the RTD was building was important," says Osher. "That factored into the psyche." In November 2004, the voters again went to the polls and approved FasTracks with 58 percent of the vote.

At that point, public engagement ramped up. The Transit Alliance launched the "Transit Academy," using the model of a citizen's police academy to develop grassroots leaders. "We're creating an army of advocates," says Osher. The first 26 participants began training in February and graduated seven weeks later, armed with tools to make them effective advocates for transit-oriented development and infrastructure projects.

From the beginning, FasTracks planners involved the public in their environmental studies and preliminary designs. "What is important for the public to understand is that they are a big part of what develops in their community," says public information manager Pauletta Tonilas, who helped to craft the program.

The program, which last year involved some 3,500 people, provides community liaisons for each light-rail corridor. Community meetings are held in English and Spanish. "The key is layering to give people lots of different ways to get their information," Tonilas says. In one neighborhood, team members wearing distinctive yellow shirts rang doorbells to tell people about the FasTracks plans and upcoming meetings.

Facing a setback last year, when railroad companies refused to allow light rail on several corridors, FasTracks held a series of public meetings. Hundreds of neighbors turned out in February to debate the alternatives to light rail. For Tonilas, such back-and-forth is part of the ongoing conversation with the public.

"Public involvement is two-way communication. First you draw people in and explain what your initial plan is. Then you get feedback on what they would like to have happen in their community," she says. The input from the meetings gave RTD direction to pursue electric multiple-unit commuter rail on the railroad alignment.

Misunderstanding in St. Louis

As executive director of Citizens for Modern Transit in St. Louis, Thomas Shrou, Jr., knows the effects of public misunderstanding of light rail. "There was a very vocal public perception that the only people who would use the system would be low-income criminals," he says. Shrou had watched decades of decline in the manufacturing sector drain his city, leaving a divide between urban and suburban dwellers by the 1980s.

In 1988, CMT launched an aggressive education campaign to convince city and transit officials to approve the light-rail plan dubbed MetroLink. Members of the group began taking elected officials to see other light rail systems. "They would say, 'You know, I could see myself using something like this to commute or get to the ball game,'" says Shrou.

The group also brought counterparts from other locales to St. Louis. At one well-publicized event, an Oregon businessman told supporters that Portland's light rail line fostered local pride and boosted business. CMT formed a speakers bureau and met with anyone who would listen, on one occasion enduring a snowstorm to speak with Cub Scouts. Eventually, the group secured a one-vote majority of the Metro Board. The line opened in August 1993, carrying the first crowds to see the Cardinals at Busch Stadium and now brings about three million spectators to games each year.

After the line opened, it sold itself because people could touch, feel, and see the light rail. In November 1993, voters in East St. Louis, Illinois, approved an extension to their area. By the end of the first year, ridership had reached nine million people, and by the middle of the second year it achieved its year 2010 goal of 35,000 riders a day.

CMT formed a membership program and recruited supporters among new transit users as well as among business leaders, who saw opportunities for development. "The light rail gave St. Louis a big-city feel. It's a source of civic pride. We've got light rail and the world-champion Cardinals," says Shrou with the confidence of a prophet whose foresight helped place his city on the map.

Proposals for expansion have met with opposition, however. In 1994, angry residents of suburban Clayton, a job center for the region, charged that a planned branch line would create noise and lower property values. They launched their own offensive against the project. "There were a lot of public hearings. People were very angry. They did not want a train in their backyard," says Shrou.

Unable to overcome the political opposition bolstered by the public outcry, planners abandoned the first attempt to build a branch line. But they pressed on with additional public meetings, and a new design took shape that addressed local concerns, including placing sections of the line below grade. Last August the extension opened to serve St. Louis suburbs, stopping at Washington University along the way.

Today, with 1,200 members, Citizens for Modern Transit continues to advocate for expanded service along St. Louis's rail corridors. The group hosts luncheons attended by architects and business leaders and promotes new ridership. "The question has changed in St. Louis," says Shrou, "from whether we'll build light rail to where will we build it next."

Transparency works

Increasingly, transportation agencies all over the country are recognizing the value of this kind of public involvement. Atlanta, St. Louis, and Denver all faced major challenges. They responded with

innovative stakeholder engagement processes, and in the end they produced better projects. That's no surprise to Barbara Faga, who is ever-optimistic about the outcomes of a well-managed public participation program. "The public makes the right decision if it's given all the information — and the process is transparent," she says.

Nate Springer is a public involvement and information professional living in Southern California. He has coordinated community involvement in open space, transportation infrastructure, and volunteer projects.

Images: Top — A before and after view of the Beltline, which seeks to combine convenient transit, lively public spaces, and mixed use development. Photos EDAW, Inc. Bottom — Dennis Cole, the manager of the West Corridor Project, talks with local residents at a public meeting in early 2006. Photo by Fas Tracks.