



The case of public involvement in transportation planning using social media



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 January 2016
Received in revised form 4 November 2016
Accepted 4 November 2016
Available online 8 November 2016

Keywords:

Transportation planning
Public involvement
Social media
Local governments

ABSTRACT

Public involvement in transportation planning using social media is gaining much popularity in an open government era that emphasizes transparency and engagement of the public in meaningful ways. The recent advancements in communications technology have made it possible for many local government agencies, like regional transportation planning organizations, to use social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and others to provide information to the public, educate them, and seek their inputs and ideas for meaningful decision making in transportation projects. This exploratory study has tried to gauge the extent of social media use in transportation planning among local government agencies and identify the challenges encountered in its use. Using the survey instrument, data has been collected from the regional councils of government in the state of Texas. From the analysis of data, it is evident that fifty percent of local government agencies use social media for public involvement in transportation planning. Those who use social media, use it in a one way communication with people which often precludes their scope of participation. Among the non-users of social media, digital divide, absence of organizational policies and lack of knowledge on best practices serve as impediments. To make use of social media as a supplemental tool to traditional modes of public involvement in transportation planning, local governments need to develop distinct policies and invest resources.

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1. Introduction

Public participation or involvement in decision making is an integral component of transportation planning. With transportation being inextricably linked to various aspects of our lives, it is important for people to get involved in planning in its early stages. It is through participation and sharing of information that, individuals can integrate their community values and needs into a transportation plan and thereby aid planners to make informed decisions. The planners by incorporating the practical insights of the public into a transportation plan can then enhance its effectiveness. Additionally, public participation confers legitimacy to transportation related decisions and helps to build trust and accountability. Further, it paves the way for collaboration and consensus building, which are deemed essential in avoiding project delays and in reducing threats of lawsuits and public outcry at the local level (Gazillo et al., 2013).

Despite the many justifications and benefits of public involvement in transportation planning, public attendance at traditional meetings has been disappointing. The low attendance can be partly

attributed to a variety of factors ranging from lack of accessibility to meeting place to inadequate marketing of participation opportunities, planners' insufficient knowledge of target population and stakeholders, and failure to use of interactive strategies to bolster public participation (Wagner, 2013). Whatever may be the cause, at a period of increased emphasis on public participation under the new U.S. laws, social media, with its speed and interactive technology, seems to be the most promising tool that can supplement the traditional mode of public participation in transportation planning. Social media is available free of cost, but its deployment calls for the use of human resources to configure and maintain the steady flow of information.

Social media has become a popular means of communication with the public among federal and state government agencies, and many cities and transit agencies in the U.S. have embraced it. In recent years, various studies on social media use have discussed its role in soliciting public inputs and opinions on transportation projects, tracking movements of vehicular and public transit traffic at all times including emergency periods, addressing congestion and air quality problems, and keeping people informed of the latest developments in transportation policies and projects. But all these studies have focused on large cities in the U.S. and there has been

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little or no investigation into the use of social media in transportation planning by local government agencies.

In view of the paucity of literature on social media use by local governments and the tool's immense potential to engage the public in a meaningful dialog with government agencies, this exploratory study was undertaken to investigate social media use by local government agencies in transportation planning. In the study, efforts have been made to seek answers to two questions: first, to what extent social media is being used in transportation planning by local government agencies, and second, what are the challenges that local government agencies encounter in their use of social media for public involvement purposes in transportation planning. In seeking answers to the aforementioned questions, the study has focused on the case of local government agencies like the Regional Councils of Governments (RCOGs) in the state of Texas in the United States. It is expected that the information collected, analyzed and disseminated in the study will not only help to create an awareness of actual social media use in transportation planning by local government agencies but also understand the challenges they encounter both in its use and nonuse.

In this paper, the following sections have provided information on various aspects of the topic under consideration. The literature review section has discussed the need for public involvement in transportation planning, past and present forums of public involvement in planning, and the scope of use of social media as a supplemental tool. The methodology section has provided information on the tools that were utilized to collect information along with validation on the use of a case study approach undertaken in this study. In the findings and discussion sections, the results obtained from data analysis have been presented along with probable explanations. The conclusion section has reiterated some of the main findings of the research along with a discussion on limitations of this study and suggestions for future researchers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Rationale for public involvement in transportation planning

According to Dewey (1954), the American philosopher, public participation helps to foster a shared sense of consequences of policies and actions and makes possible those necessary adjustments in our lives through the process of social learning. Public involvement helps to build the social intelligence capacity of citizens, enhances their ability to critically analyze, and restrains the forces of domination by a single organization or agency. Also, the idea of public involvement is deeply rooted in the core normative values of democracy, mainly autonomy, equality, and responsiveness to the public good (Leighninger, 2006). Hence, its incorporation into the transportation planning process only helps to build social and intellectual capital, gain an understanding of each other's perspectives and interests (Albrechts, 2002), and promote democratic decision making (Healey, 2007). Considering the fact there is nothing that cannot be changed by conscious and purposive social actions when provided with information and supported by legitimacy (Castells, 1997), public involvement in transportation planning is deemed a powerful force to bring about relevant changes in the community to enhance the quality of public life. Also, inclusion of the public helps planners to practice a more robust style of planning and be more responsive to distributive justice, environmental well-being, and economic vitality of the region (Booher, 2008).

For public involvement to be effective, the public should be kept informed and provided opportunities to contribute at various stages of the decision making process. The U.S. federal government, cognizant of the situation, has passed several regulations since the

1960s to promote public involvement in large projects including transportation (see list below).

- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination.
- National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 keep communities informed of potential environmental impacts of transportation actions.
- Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970, call for the fair and equitable treatment of people whose property have been acquired for large public projects.
- President Bill Clinton's Executive Order 12898 hold metropolitan planning organizations accountable for their transportation plans, including adverse impacts on minority and low income populations.
- Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), 1991 mandates public participation in transportation planning including stakeholders
- Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), 1998 allows the public to be involved from a distance by making public information available in electronically accessible formats and means.

Despite the existence of several regulations, public involvement in transportation planning was limited. Earlier in the 1960s and 1970s, a top-down rational planning model was followed. Here, people had limited scope of participation in planning for projects designed to benefit them. The public was informed only at later stages of planning, and there were no opportunities for feedback and negotiations (Arnstein, 1969).

Over the decades, the public involvement process in planning has undergone changes from a passive mode to a more interactive one. In the twenty first century, efforts to make participation more meaningful and legitimate have meant a transition from the traditional approach of decide, announce, and defend draft plans at public hearings, to a bottom-up grassroots model, where local citizen participation has become an integral part in the decision making process. The adoption of this newer and more empowered model of participation has been aided by two things: (a) advocacy on the need to include the public not only in more meaningful and inclusive ways but also in a fair way (International Association for Public Participation, 2009) and (b) the latest developments in communications technology like social media. Further, the issuance of several new federal regulations in the twenty-first century for greater public involvement in decision making on public projects, have also provided the much needed impetus to adopt and use social media to supplement the traditional methods of public participation in transportation planning (see Table 1).

2.2. The use of social media in transportation planning

In an era of budgetary shortfalls, social media as a tool for public involvement is considered both cost efficient and effective and the outcomes of its use are measurable (Brooks, 2011). Social media enables microparticipation, participation by individuals using social media tools. The process of microparticipation helps to maximize the flow of information into the planning process and minimize both the time required to develop a plan and the opportunity cost to the public (Evans-Cowley and Griffin, 2012). Other important attributes of social media include its use as evidence in decision making, addition of weight to topics under discussion, and ability to communicate two ways with people, entertain riders with a personal touch, and keep the public informed of services available, costs, and long term projects. The many benefits of social media have led to its adoption and use by many transit agencies in engagement and communication with all

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