Community Engagement Team Process

In spring 2014, Secretary Lynn Peterson introduced Results WSDOT. This strategic plan provides the vision, mission, values, goals, priority outcomes, and strategies to guide the agency’s business practices.

There are six goals and outcomes specified in Results WSDOT. Goal 5 is Community Engagement. The vision statement for achieving this goal is to “Strengthen partnerships to increase credibility, drive priorities and inform decision making.”

To fulfill the vision statement of Goal 5, a Community Engagement Team (CET) was formed. Assistant Secretary Amy Scarton heads the CET, which is made up of staff from the following WSDOT offices and divisions:

- Office of the Secretary
- Aviation
- Communications
- Community Transportation Planning Office
- Eastern Region Planning
- Environmental Services Office
- Equal Opportunity Office
- Ferries Division
- Freight Systems Division
- Government Relations
- Local Programs
- Mt. Baker Planning
- Multi-modal Planning Division
- North Central Region Planning
- Olympic Region Planning
- Public Transportation Division
- Rail Division
- South Central Region Planning
- Southwest Region Planning
- Statewide Collision and Data Analysis
- Statewide Transportation Planning Office
- Strategic Assessment
- Toll Division
- Transportation Data
- Traffic Operations
- Urban Planning Office

Next Steps: Testing Performance Measures

The CET will develop and test performance measures based on the three priority outcomes identified in Goal 5 of Results WSDOT.

Those priority outcomes are:

- Increase consent on decisions made by WSDOT, communities, stakeholders and the Legislature based on a shared understanding of need and opportunities;
- Improve the understanding of transportation expenditures and investments and respective benefits (outcomes);
- Improve public access to information and decision making so that WSDOT is recognized as the most credible source for information.

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WSDOT defines community engagement as outreach and communication to internal and external stakeholders, including governments and the public. The term community engagement is often used interchangeably with the term public outreach. Used together, the words community and engagement imply a dialogue, a two way conversation.

A. Connect and engage

Become active members of communities and go to the places they gather. Take advantage of opportunities to work with community members, volunteers and leaders and find out their priorities and perspectives. Reach out to interested parties that cannot attend meetings and receive their feedback. Seek out voices not traditionally heard, including people who are traditionally unable to participate due to age, disability, income or national origin.

B. Listen

Focus on hearing what people are sharing before responding. Confirm that the intended message is understood.

C. Facilitate communications

Help groups listen to each other and explore new ideas. Solicit input by encouraging everyone to speak up. Check in with the group as a whole, as well as with individual participants, to gauge their comfort levels.

D. Help each other succeed

Share resources and information with the various WSDOT regions, divisions, and offices to achieve success. Be aware that success is defined in different terms and outcomes. Be creative in defining work teams and understand how team members define success.

E. Maximize creativity and innovation

Seek out and use successful community engagement tools and techniques when conducting outreach. Prevent requirements from being the only focus of outreach.

F. Blend diverse inputs

Be sensitive to commenters’ perspectives when receiving input. Understand that how we evaluate and respond to comments from governments, stakeholders and the public is critical, especially if there are opposing viewpoints. Consider the commenter’s perspective when reviewing comments. Remember that all comments are considered, even if they and not directly incorporated.
G. Provide access to the process and foster inclusiveness
Rely on effective one-way and two-way communication throughout the process. Strive for transparent conversations that include diverse people, opinions, ideas, and information. Remember that what works for one process or group may not be as effective for others.

H. Be a wise steward of the public’s money
Be mindful of the use of everyone’s time and money while ensuring adequate time and funding for community involvement in planning and project development. Achieve effective two-way engagement without exceeding limited budgets.

I. Consider the needs of the multimodal system
There are a variety of ways to move people and goods on Washington’s transportation system. Consider all modes and offer choices and opportunities. Do not focus on just the goals of individual modes.

J. Be clear and open about the process
Inform and involve users of the transportation system in planning, construction, maintenance and stewardship of the transportation system. Encourage input at decision points, and involve interested parties throughout the process. Continue to exhibit a high level of integrity.

K. Involve communities
Engage governments, stakeholders, and the public early and continuously in our decision making process to lay the groundwork for success. Discuss what success means to WSDOT and then jointly define what success means to the community.

Self-Assessment
As the agency responsible for planning, construction, maintenance, operations, safety, and environmental services on state transportation facilities, WSDOT engages communities in the delivery of these services. One of the needs the CET identified was an internal self-assessment of WSDOT’s community engagement practices. This assessment proceeded with a review of best practices and a Survey Monkey.

To identify best practices, each CET meeting included a presentation of recent community engagement practices by various offices and disciplines from throughout the agency. The highlights and lessons learned from these best practices will help guide future improvements to WSDOT’s community engagement practices.

The Survey Monkey was sent to 27 offices which evaluated 23 different statewide modal regional plans and planning activities. The survey asked how well WSDOT is engaging communities, are there improvements that could be made, and are there additional tools and resources that should be used?

The survey found:
1. What community engagement WSDOT already does, it does well. However, there is room for improvement such as: development of a community engagement plan in advance of the plan or planning activity; and identification and resolution of barriers to involvement.
2. There is a strong desire on the part of WSDOT staff to learn about and expand the use of social media for interacting with the public.
3. WSDOT’s processes are not easily understood by external partners.

Tools & Resources
The Tools and Resources group identified existing and potential tools and resources to improve WSDOT community engagement efforts.

Existing tools and resources include:
• Communications staff
• Communications manual
• Design manual
• Partnerships
• Existing project pages on the web
• Communications templates
• Access to social media

Potential tools & resources
• Internet and Intranet site to share agency best practices
• A tracking tool for community engagement events
• An online or web-based data set and interactive map
• A variety of community engagement trainings
• A community engagement “how to guide”
• A representative citizen’s panel patterned after one used successfully in Minnesota

WSDOT Best Practices Example: State Freight Mobility Plan Customer Interviews
As part of the Washington State Freight Mobility Plan 2014, the WSDOT Freight Office conducted more than 75 interviews with freight customers and system users around the state. The purpose of these interviews was to identify global or local industry trends that will impact demand on the state’s freight system in the future, confirm truck freight performance goals, and build profiles of companies that are reliant on freight.

WSDOT Best Practices Example: Freighthouse Square Station
WSDOT's Rail Division engaged the Tacoma community in the location and design of the Freighthouse Square passenger rail station. WSDOT hosted “station conversations,” workshops, open houses, public meetings, and one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders. Innovative community engagement strategies included integrating a citizen representative to the WSDOT design team, web survey, timely information to media, and transparency with the advisory committee, community, stakeholders, and media.

WSDOT Best Practices Example: WSDOT's Community Engagement Practices
WSDOT's community engagement practices are reliant on freight. WSDOT and then jointly define what success means to the community. WSDOT's community engagement practices are reliant on freight. WSDOT and then jointly define what success means to the community.