

INTERNAL “DEBRIEF” EVALUATION OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS MOWING & HAYING PROJECT *(March 2018)*

PROJECT BACKGROUND



Project overview:

- MnDOT engaged with stakeholders and the public to educate and share different perspectives on how mowing and haying permits and rules impact them or the environment and get their perspective and suggestions on improvements to the process.
- MnDOT used the input to generate recommendations for the Legislature about mowing and haying state right of way and corresponding permits.

Method & tools used to inform and engage:

- Stakeholder meetings were held monthly (and more frequently at the end of the process) with:
 - Business/Agricultural interests
 - State and local governmental entities
 - Environmental groups
- Nine listening sessions were conducted with the public across the state (October - December, 2017).
- An online survey was completed by 200+ participants (tax-payers, interested parties, etc.).
- Paper feedback forms were collected via mail (over 75+).

Internal evaluation:

- This summary is based upon an internal “debrief” evaluation conducted by the PECS Office/Market Research unit using informal, unstructured interviews with several members of the project team:
 - Jed Falgren -District perspective
 - Cori Calhoun and Nancy Daubenberger -Statewide perspective

Objectives for internal evaluations:

- The goal is to create a guide (with a fairly standard set of questions) to assess and document public engagement (PE) efforts, generate examples of how PE efforts impact project outcomes and public sentiment, and promote evaluation as a common practice within MnDOT.
- Ideally, these questions would be considered by project teams upfront and customized for each project/effort.

INTERNAL “DEBRIEF” EVALUATION RECAP

Engagement efforts/processes that stood out positively:

- Using a neutral third-party consultant (MAD) to conduct the sessions added credibility and fostered a more open and honest discussion.
- Starting out stakeholder sessions with an opportunity for each group to educate others on “why” they hold their perspective (without interruption):
 - Infused a greater understanding and empathy (even if all did not agree).
 - Provided input to create an “Interest Chart” which was used as a guide at other sessions.
- Encouraging stakeholders to listen in on at least one public session facilitated an even greater shared understanding of the complexity of the issues and why compromise would be ideal.
- Asking clarifying and/or probing questions regarding concerns can uncover unforeseen barriers and correctable issues (e.g., concerns about security deposit check being cashed).

Engagement efforts that took a lot of effort relative to the (additional) insights they provided:

- Two requests were made to add additional listening sessions for broader district representation.
 - The team felt it was good to have broader representation but one of these sessions was not well attended.

Extra efforts taken to increase participation or diversity:

- Having multiple methods to engage the public reaches a broader geographic area and brings in a wider variety of perspectives:
 - In-person sessions were skewed somewhat toward agricultural/business interests.
 - Online submissions were skewed somewhat more toward environmental interests.

- Mailed in options were mixed.
- Providing options for attendees to bring in the views of others who could not attend broadened the reach even more (“word of mouth” sharing, handing out paper questionnaires to mail back, etc.).

Groups that may have been under-represented:

- No interest segments were overlooked or left out completely.
- Some individuals were unable to make in-person sessions due to time conflicts (farmers who were harvesting, etc.).
- Those without access to the Internet could not Skype into stakeholder sessions (although this was not widely used) or participate in the online survey.
 - NOTE: A decision was made to not integrate or rely on virtual participation for [this project](#) because it was understood that many would not have access to the technology.

Specific “words of wisdom” to share:

Process/Logistics:

- When choosing dates, factor in times of the year when barriers may influence participation (planting, harvesting, state fair, other events, etc.)
- Start planning early, but:
 - Realize there may be no perfect time.
 - The weather and other factors can influence/change the optimal timing.
 - It is important to communicate why the schedule used was chosen and any real constraints influencing the start and end dates.
- Leverage the PACs to get the word out about opportunities to engage/participate.
 - It could be beneficial to leverage district staff (DE administrative assistants, PACs, PECs, etc.) even more when setting up meetings in Greater MN to get their input on venues that work well, etc.
- Take steps to allow for an open dialogue:
 - Hold sessions in a “safe, accessible place.”
 - Use a facilitator who is trained to balance input from individuals and manage group dynamics.
 - Collect contact information from the public on sign-in sheets to allow for an evaluation of the efforts.
- Provide the address (or addressed envelopes) to make it easier for people to mail back forms if/when used.

Technology:

- Evaluate the opportunity to use more technology to allow for remote participation (e.g., Skype sessions could be far more engaging than a conference call and could be very effective for some projects).
- Other social media formats might be effective in gathering feedback/input (e.g., QR codes at meetings

with links to webpages/comment forms, Twitter hashtags).

Content:

- Educate the public about what MnDOT does and why, as needed, to set the stage.
- Be clear upfront about how public input will be used.
 - MnDOT was clear that the public input would influence recommendations (along with other considerations), but also that MnDOT would “own” the recommendations.
- Consider having a diverse group of MnDOT experts available in the background at each meeting to help address questions on the spot or to assign “homework” to handle offline.
- Debrief (with the consultants) after each meeting or session to recap what was heard, and course-correct content/processes, as needed.

New insights and recommendations generated from input:

- The “Take some, Leave some” policy recommendation for mowing and haying (versus recommending a specific % split) was generated by the listening sessions to meet more needs and encourage wider ranging compliance.
- An earlier date range was recommended than initially anticipated because of a better understanding of a wider range of competing factors.
- There is now a clearer sense of specific locations where competing interests can coexist. For example:
 - Some areas of the right of way are more suitable to mowing while others work better for habitat. For example, a localized steep slope may be undesirable or unsafe to mow but could be a great location for a specialized pollinator habitat, so not mowing this area is preferred by both.

Next steps:

- A case study is being conducted by the PECS/Public Engagement unit to highlight some specific PE efforts used as part of this project.
- The PECS/Market Research unit and the project team are discussing a potential stakeholder survey to collect feedback on their experiences and perceptions of the stakeholder group process.

Summary available:

- <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/mowing/feedback.html>

Questions, comments or requests can be sent to:

- TEAM: Cori Calhoun at corrine.calhoun@state.mn.us
- PECS: Renee Raduenz at renee.raduenz@state.mn.us or
- Jan Kihm at janette.kihm@state.mn.us