

Outreach Aids Environmental Justice in Transportation

Outreach is an essential part of any new infrastructure project and a strategic approach helps reach all demographics of a community

By Marlene Pissott

An effective outreach and communication effort is essential to any transportation or infrastructure project but never more so than when Environmental Justice (EJ) communities are within the project area. The federal government requires federal agencies implementing projects under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to analyze the environmental effects of their proposed actions on minority and low-income populations and to ensure adequate, effective communications to these communities.

Outreach to EJ communities presents special challenges. It's the role of the outreach agency to find appropriate, effective and innovative ways to address those challenges and develop a communications strategy that reaches and engages all segments of the community. In developing an outreach plan for EJ populations, several factors need to be considered, including language barriers, the ability to access meeting locations, and how the various population segments access information.

It's the role of the outreach agency to develop a communications strategy that reaches and engages all segments of the community.

The first step is to identify all stakeholders to maximize engagement and create trust within the community. While traditional stakeholders, such as elected officials and environmental organizations, should be included, look beyond to minority businesses and associations; grassroots/community-based social service organizations; homeowners, tenants or residents associations; neighborhood watch groups; religious groups; local media; and any other key groups or individuals in the EJ community. Engage the community early in the process and don't hesitate to ask key people in the community for suggestions on who should be on the stakeholder list.

When developing an outreach plan, it's important to recognize that residents' perception of the effects of the proposed action is just as important as the potential actual effects. It's essential to establish trust by presenting project information clearly and accurately, without "sugar-coating." In clearly written language, information should include the project purpose and need, process, goals, anticipated benefits and any potential effects, along with the mitigation measures to minimize those effects.

Identify the languages spoken by EJ community residents and

determine how they obtain their information. Develop a Limited English Proficiency Plan to ensure the appropriate translation of project materials, documents, ads and notices as well as the availability of language interpretation services at public meetings and hearings. If literacy is an issue, consider supplementing written materials with videos. Use communication vehicles that resonate with the community.

In addition to publishing information and notices in regional newspapers and on project websites, be sure to include community-based media, such as neighborhood organization newsletters, religious center bulletins, local cable access channels, etc. Ask local institutions if you can supply an "information repository" for their facility, where area residents can have ongoing access to updated project communications. "Thinking out of the box" is essential when it comes to meeting planning. Many residents in EJ communities don't have easy access to traditional meeting venues and/or have time constraints that make it difficult for them to attend. There are several strategies that will help ensure as many people as possible have access to meetings and are not excluded from the process. When choosing venues, make sure the sites are accessible by public transportation. A venue that that the community is familiar with—such as a local school or community center—is generally a better choice than a hotel, for instance. Schedule a series of meetings in multiple locations on various days at various times. Provide transportation to the meetings for those who need it, if possible. Consider arranging a toll-free comment line to provide remote access to the meeting and/or to allow callers to leave recorded comments. Having a local community group co-sponsor a project-related public meeting is another effective tactic.

To ensure that those residents who cannot attend public meetings have ample opportunity to engage in the process, establish additional ways to provide feedback, such as an email address or a telephone line for recorded comments.

To summarize, when screening identifies a potential for a project to have disproportionately high and adverse effects on low-income and/or minority communities, a sincere, concerted and comprehensive outreach effort must be made to keep as many people as possible informed about the project and engaged in the process.



Marlene B. Pissott is President and founder of InGroup, Inc., an outreach communications agency. She may be reached at outreach@ingroupinc.com.