



The politics of collective public participation in transportation decision-making



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ABSTRACT

Citizen involvement in transportation planning is typically modeled on a liberal democracy in which individuals express their preferences about a project. In this paper we present an analysis based on interviews with stakeholders whose involvement was grounded in a complementary model of public participation, one in which an organized community used collective action (instead of only individual expression), and worked both within and outside of the formal public involvement process to influence the design of an arterial highway in their neighborhood. This case reflects a commonplace context for public participation: residents opposing a highway expansion and the negative effects of heavy traffic in neighborhoods. The problem presented in this case is that the process for citizen involvement was not designed to fully utilize the community's collective capacity. Three aspects of collective action—representation, the ability to shape a policy agenda, and methods of engagement—were contested in the public participation process. We argue that these conflicts around collective action in the public participation process exposed its “one-way communication,” and enabled a different kind of political process in which neighbors' organizing was powerful and influenced decisions.

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1. Introduction

Federal, state, and local laws in the US require opportunities for citizen involvement in transportation planning and project implementation. Many of these requirements have existed since the 1950s, and they have been strengthened over time (Day, 1997: 423–424; Goldman and Deakin, 2000). In response, transportation planners and policy makers have developed a repertoire of techniques to involve the lay public in decision-making. Some of the most common techniques include convening public meetings, sharing reports and newsletters, publishing websites, forming advisory committees, conducting surveys, and holding focus groups (Giering, 2011; Bickerstaff and Walker, 2001: 439; Howard/Stein-Hudson and Parsons Brinkerhoff Quade and Douglas, 1996). From our experience as participants in these forums, participants often write comments on cards, respond to questions using audience response technologies (e.g., “clickers”), co-create maps, participate in charrettes, fill in surveys, or talk one-on-one with a project representative at an open-house meeting. These participation techniques seem diverse in form, but they are homogeneous in their function. Each is designed to give individuals the opportunity to express their preferences about a transportation project, plan, or decision. Then, decision makers aggregate individuals' preferences into a collective opinion that they weigh against other factors.

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In this paper we analyze a complementary aspect of participation: the collective participation of an organized community group. We are interested in the extent to which public involvement processes in transportation are equipped to engage with the collective input of an organized community. In the literature on public participation, such collective action has been framed as interest group politics prone to excluding interests that are not affiliated with the dominant group, or alternatively, as an extension of civil rights, anti-nuclear, environmental and other social movements seeking social change and exercising power (Rydin and Pennington, 2000; Fainstein and Hirst, 1995). Above and beyond any group's own logic of organizing, groups interact with the logic of the formal public participation process, and they work outside of the formal process. The influence and power that develops through this participation, and the limits of this influence and power, has implications for advocates working at the intersection of community development and transportation equity, as well organized community groups that seek to influence development decisions.

In the case that we present, the collective action arose from a group of neighbors that sought to introduce ideas of environmental justice, public health, and neighborhood livability into highway planning. We collaborated with this particular group of neighbors because we wanted to work with and learn from an organization that was advancing a comprehensive approach to public health within a transportation context. In particular, we sought to learn through observation of and participation in the group's practice how it composed a policy agenda around its public health ideas, and what happened to its agenda in the transportation policy process.

Though our analysis of this case we highlight how this group organized to participate in the highway planning, and how it worked both within and outside of the formal public involvement process to influence the design of an arterial highway in the neighborhood. We also discuss how the formal public participation process engaged (or did not engage) with their participatory methods. Although this single case cannot represent every scenario of collective public participation, our analytical approach and attention to the dynamics between the community and the formal public participation process can inform how we design institutions and forums for public participation, and how organized groups orchestrate their involvement in formal public participation processes.

Our analysis focuses on the interaction between members of the lay public and the official public involvement process, which is an approach that has been used in other studies of public participation in a transportation context (Bickerstaff and Walker, 2005; Bickerstaff et al., 2002). Our analysis is based primarily on interviews with participants who were directly involved in the case, including project staff working in government, consultants from the private sector, members of the lay public, and elected officials.

This case uses empirical evidence to illustrate a distinction between collective and individualized modes of participation (these two modes are not necessarily mutually exclusive). This study also examines how the interests of the lay public can become part of decision-making through the political methods of an organized civil society, and how official public participation processes could take a multi-level perspective and consider an organized community as a political unit.

Our interviews indicate that the interaction between neighbors' collective action and the formal public involvement process resulted in specific conflicts. The individuals who managed the formal public involvement process said that they wanted to secure its procedural order against what they considered neighbors' opposition, and they scrutinized three aspects of the neighbors' collective participation: (1) the representativeness of the neighbors' coalition; (2) the relevance of the policy content and policy framing that neighbors put forward; and (3) the methods through which neighbors engaged with the process and worked outside of it. We found that the formal process for citizen involvement was not equipped to fully utilize the community's collective capacity. More importantly, we conclude that the discourse around these three conflicts—representation, policy framing, and methods of engagement—ultimately transformed the “one-way communication” of the procedural public involvement process into a political process in which neighbors' organizing was powerful and influenced decisions. Collective public participation was a key factor that made neighbors' issues salient, which demonstrates how collective participation can be a valuable part of transportation advocacy. However, with this research we do not argue that community activism is necessarily superior to the participation of individuals, or that including more community groups in public participation processes necessarily makes them “more democratic.”

In the following sections we describe the case study that is the basis for the data collection, analysis, and argument, and provide a theoretical framework that grounds the data from the case study in concepts from the literature on public participation, public policy, and democracy. Then we discuss our study's methodology, describe the techniques that the neighborhood organizations used to participate in transportation planning, and explain the conflicts around representation, policy content, and methods of engagement. In the final section, we discuss the implications for transportation policy, including how formal public involvement processes could be designed to enable engagement with collective forms of participation, and how community-based organizations can adapt their strategies to make the most of traditional public involvement processes and be effective in influencing transportation policy and design decisions.

2. Public participation in the reconstruction of Verona Road

This case illustrates the interaction between an organized group of neighbors and a procedural public participation process for the reconstruction of a suburban arterial highway, Verona Road, in Madison and Fitchburg, Wisconsin. Verona Road is a U.S. highway that connects Iowa to northeastern Wisconsin. It is a “backbone corridor” in the state highway plan, which means that it is part of a statewide road network developed to support regional and state economic development (WisDOT,

2009). In the area around Madison and Fitchburg, WI, which is the site of this case study, Verona Road changes character from a limited-access highway to a signalized urban arterial surrounded by low-density residential and commercial land uses. In our study area Verona Road carries between 50,000 and 60,000 vehicles per day, and during morning and evening peaks the study area experiences intersection delays (US Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and State of Wisconsin Department of Transportation, 2010, ES-3).

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation has been considering the mobility needs of this section of Verona Road and its surrounding urban highway network since the late 1990s (US Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and State of Wisconsin Department of Transportation, 2010, A-1). The needs assessment phase that began in 1997 initiated a formal public involvement process, and the U.S. Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) documented this early public involvement in a series of case studies illustrating best practices in environmental justice in transportation planning (US Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration, 2011a,b). The FHWA used the Verona Road case as an example of how state highway departments should start their public engagement early and use numerous strategies to engage with neighbors (US FHWA, 2011). Thus, this case of planning for the reconstruction of Verona Road represents what the FHWA considers an earnest, high-quality formal public participation process in an environmental justice setting. Other participants in the process, as we discuss below, disagree with this evaluation, but Verona Road's inclusion on the FHWA list of best practices indicates that the formal aspects public participation observed in the study meet a (socially constructed) threshold of quality.

In addition to formal planning for agency coordination (which was required by US transportation legislation in 2005), the State Department of Transportation held numerous public meetings about the project, including public information meetings (overview and feedback), special meetings for property owners and business owners in the area, and “targeted neighborhood meetings...to obtain community input” (US Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and State of Wisconsin Department of Transportation, 2010, Section 5, 1–3). Some, but not all, of these meetings focused on property acquisitions the project would require.

The neighborhoods affected by the arterial highway project are relatively small in population (the most active has a total population of about 2,500 people) but they are significant because they are a well-organized environmental justice community. In the area of the neighborhood with the highest concentration of poverty, over 40 percent of households earn less than USD\$15,000 per year, 95 percent of children participate in free or reduced lunch programs, and over 90 percent of residents are racial or ethnic minorities (US Census, 2010). Approximately 20% of households in this specific area do not have access to a private vehicle. This most vulnerable area of the neighborhood—the location of low-income multi-family housing, day care centers, preschools, and neighborhood-serving retail—is located nearly adjacent to the highway project area.

The majority of participants in the transportation planning effort, however, were educated, white homeowners who had lived in the neighborhoods for decades. In prior neighborhood organizing, these and other neighbors had successfully influenced decisions about open space and parks, bikeways, traffic calming, and land conservation in their neighborhoods. Members of the group included a co-founder of a neighborhood association, a neighborhood activist involved in other initiatives in the neighborhood and region, and a researcher at a local university.

These and other neighbors formed the Verona Road Justice Coalition to organize their participation. The Verona Road Justice Coalition combined the interests and capacities of the Allied-Dunn's Marsh Neighborhood Association, the Dunn's Marsh Neighborhood Association, and neighborhood activists connected with community-based organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club, the community garden, and the Wellness Center. The Verona Road Justice Coalition's purpose is to “provide an organizational structure to enable individuals to and organizations to discuss, research, mobilize, organize, and share their concerns and responses to the WisDOT-proposed Verona Road/US 151 construction project.” A description of its Google Group website says that, “It is a potent website with facts [and] presentations about the reconstruction, health effects of noise and air pollution, sample letters and a list of addresses (e-mails too) to send them to, and much, much more” (Dunn's Marsh Neighborhood Association, 2010).

The main participants had specialized roles in the Verona Road Justice Coalition. For example, one worked as a liaison between the coalition and other special interest groups and community leaders. Because the neighborhoods involved have several other issues at stake—community health, poverty reduction, food security, crime prevention, and child and parent development—this particular neighbor played a crucial role in gathering public input about the transportation project from people who otherwise would not have participated. Another member of the Verona Road Justice Coalition became a representative on the project's policy advisory committee/technical advisory committee alongside other neighbors, professionals, agency representatives, and elected officials.

Through contacts in state, municipal, and county government agencies in Wisconsin, we learned about this group of neighbors whose participation in transportation decision-making went above and beyond traditional roles for citizen-participants. Between 2010 and 2013 we partnered with these neighbors to do a participatory photography mapping project, and carried out this study of public participation.

These neighbors, among others, organized and ultimately influenced the project's design, though they did not achieve everything that they wanted. Some of the specific design changes that they influenced included: the alignment of a frontage road, the alignment of a freeway onramp, the location and design of a pedestrian crossing, the location of a retention basin, and the inclusion of public art. Although their participation influenced some specific design decisions, they had virtually no impact on the broader policies that affected transportation planning and quality of life in their neighborhood. For instance,

neighbors' requests for additional data collection about local air quality and truck traffic were not successful. More generally, the reconstruction presented an opportunity to reframe highway infrastructure as a matter of environmental justice, public health, and local accessibility, but that did not occur. The neighbors' goal of making the air quality, and local social, economic, and accessibility impacts of the project more salient did not gain traction. Nevertheless, they prevailed on certain design changes that benefitted their neighborhoods.

Other cases of collective citizen participation in transportation decision-making have been discussed in the literature, including the formation of the Bus Riders Union in Los Angeles (Grengs, 2002), and the freeway revolts in cities throughout the US (Issel, 1999; Johnson, 2009; Mohl, 2008). This case from Wisconsin reflects a more commonplace context for collective public participation—highway expansions and planning for arterial corridors—and for this reason it contributes to our understanding of how communities organize around and participate in even mundane transportation projects, and suggests a kind of public participation that is relevant in wider range of community contexts.

3. Theoretical framework

Debates about public participation in the transportation sector have questioned whether the required public involvement processes “significantly enhance public engagement” (Giering, 2011: 44). These debates speak to whether the lay public has the power to influence policy and planning decisions, which was the central question raised by Arnstein (1969). Much of the public involvement literature argues that, in general, these processes are mere “rituals designed to satisfy legal requirements,” and Innes and Booher (2004) assert that formal public participation processes are actually detrimental to public engagement in the long run because they produce mistrust (Innes and Booher, 2004). Specific deficiencies mentioned in the literature include:

- That the required public involvement processes do not succeed in creating dialogue;
- That they do not necessarily result in improved decision making;
- That they do not effectively reach disenfranchised groups;
- That the professionals who are responsible for the processes are ambivalent about them;
- That public input is sometimes not formally recorded;
- That decisions are not truly open to the influence of a lay public;
- That the process may create dissent and conflict among or within communities; and
- That failed processes may increase costs to municipalities, states, and developers (Innes and Booher, 2004; Hou, 2011; Camay et al., 2013).

One underlying concern is how the transportation sector can address environmental injustice by increasing social and political inclusion (Deakin, 2007; Bullard, 2003; Collin et al., 1995). Based on the critiques of formal public participation processes, current approaches to public participation are unlikely to “empower” individuals and communities and for this reason many communities employ different strategies (e.g., mass mobilization, social action, public advocacy, popular education, local services development, and litigation) to seek justice and social change (Grengs, 2002; Checkoway, 1995). Scholars of democracy in planning assert, “. . . democratic movements are not bemoaning the many ways they cannot participate. They are instead exploiting the many ways they can” (Purcell, 2008, 5). In a similar way, this study is about how neighbors organized and worked within and outside of existing formal processes to influence decisions that would affect their neighborhood.

This analysis is informed by an interdisciplinary tradition in political science and sociology that deals with questions of organizations and policy advocacy (Ostrom, 1990; Moe, 1980). The concepts that we use to describe the neighbors who were directly involved in the official public involvement process, such as “organizing” and “collective action,” suggest that they had common goals, had a process to arrive at their common goals, and developed formal and informal organizations to guide cooperation and achieve their goals (Ostrom, 1990; Moe, 1980). This difference between individual preferences and the development of common goals is a central theme in this analysis. However, it is outside the scope of this study to test or construct a specific model of effective neighborhood-based organizing, which is a needed analysis for the transportation policy arena.

Certain democratic traditions are implicit (or sometimes explicit) in the design of official public involvement processes. This case illustrates the conflicts that arose from the interaction of different democratic traditions: the neighbors' democratic practices (their organizing) and the democratic practices of the official public involvement process. Ideas from liberal democratic traditions dominate official public participation processes in transportation. In the liberal democratic tradition the individual is the “basic political unit,” whose private, individual rights are protected, and whose political preferences are expressed primarily through voting (Purcell, 2008, 40–43). This democratic tradition underlies the conceptualization of the public good (or social welfare) as emergent from an aggregation of individual preferences, including political preferences (Sunstein, 1991).

In the context of public participation in transportation, the liberal democratic tradition usually involves offering comments on decisions and plans created by (or on behalf of) an administrative agency. Administrative agencies such as a state department of transportation are granted the powers to translate “broad and ambiguous legislative mandates into

hyper-technical regulations and to apply [implement] the regulations to discrete actions,” which involves combining both technical expertise and political input from the public (Gauna, 1998).

One variation of this democratic tradition in the transportation context is the comparison of citizens to consumers who express preferences for infrastructure and travel (Webber, 1971). In Webber’s framework, the problem for planning is to design democratic institutions that can better respond to consumer demand. In its politically “neutral” form, this economic framework is found throughout transportation planning and policy, for instance in concepts of travel demand, location choice, route choice, and various instances of public choice.

It is common for these official processes to be criticized for overreaching with their administrative authority and being “paternalistic” (Barber, 1984, 141; Susskind and Elliott, 1983, 7). According to these critical assessments, “Paternalism describes the dominance of government officials in controlling when and how residents and consumers voice their concerns” (Susskind and Elliott, 1983, 7). In the case presented in this study, we heard this critique from neighbors when they described the official public involvement process. Rejecting collective modes of participation is one way in which the public participation process was paternalistic. However, the case examined in this study is an example of not only the official, administrative process and its paternalism, but also how neighbors organized and subverted it.

Another way to interpret this case of the neighbors’ collective action in the planning process would be to understand them as any other special interest group competing for privilege when issues affect them (Dahl, 1961 [2005]; Polsby, 1963). Pluralism is akin to the collective form of the liberal democratic tradition in which there is bargaining and exchange among groups with different interests (Barber, 1984, 141). Yet, this model falls short of describing this particular case, as we describe in later sections, because in an ideal-type pluralist system one group does not have an unbalanced chance of prevailing over the long run, whereas environmental justice communities such as this one are defined as those whose interests in community health and safety, for example, have not prevailed (Judge, 1995). Instead, the politics of the organized neighbors were most similar to an urban social movement in that they succeeded in creating forums for their participation, yet they did not “dramatically change the outcomes of urban processes beyond decisions on immediately mobilizing issues” (Fainstein and Hirst, 1995, 200–201).

A great deal of contemporary literature in planning theory has focused on how the quality of discourse can shape democratic planning and public participation institutions. Creating a process based on dialogue could help manage “the complex dynamics that arise when people disagree” (Susskind, 1994: 2), including conflict between state actors (e.g., administrative agencies) and citizens (Wagenaar, 2007). Even relatively routine transportation projects can be complex and contentious, and would benefit from participation methods that are more involved than information sharing in a report, newsletter, or informational meeting.

Another related tradition is participatory democracy or “strong democracy” in which *organized* individuals’ actions are the primary political unit (Purcell, 2008; Fung and Wright, 2001; Barber, 1984). In contrast to a “thin” liberal democracy in which people participate (vote, demonstrate, etc.) to express their individual, private interests, Barber proposes a “strong” democratic form that is more collective and focused on participation and citizenship (Barber, 1984). Strong democracy ideas assert that citizenship emerges through acting on common concerns and participation “in the search for common solutions to common conflicts” (Barber, 1984: 219).

Participatory and collective forms of democracy are criticized when they do not sufficiently address how the politics of participation can be exclusionary, even within one’s own grassroots organizing. One of the major problems with Barber’s conceptualization of the “strong” collective democracy was omitting identity-based politics (i.e., strong democracy is not and should not be based on a priori social identities). By not explicitly including social identity, the citizenship that emerges from collective action is vulnerable to excluding groups that are oppressed and disadvantaged (Young, 1999; Phillips, 1985). For collective participation to be equitable, the interests and values of socially excluded groups need to be present. The questions of representation and the politics of presence are important to this case, particularly as we discuss the conflict over the Verona Road Justice Coalition’s representativeness.

A complementary discussion in the public affairs literature centers on organizations, organizational behavior, and institutions in democratic systems instead of on individual behavior and choices (March and Olsen, 1983). Such organizing can benefit transportation planning because residents who work collectively as organized political actors increase their knowledge and skill, and in some cases their agency counterparts appreciate their contributions (Mandell, 1999; Musso et al., 2006; Purcell, 2008). However, other scholars point out that “collective action remains a troublesome problem” because forming and maintaining a cohesive collective voice is rare, and is threatened by incentives to shirk (Rydin and Pennington, 2000). Small (2004) framed this as the 80–20 rule (or even a 95–5 rule) in which a minority of participants (20 percent or five percent) carries out the majority of the collective effort.

Despite problems of representation and one’s individual contribution to the collective effort, scholars have said that collective action is critical for engaging and empowering marginalized groups (Rios, 2008; Checkoway, 1995). In cases where transportation projects affect environmental justice communities, as this case does, recognizing and legitimizing organized neighbors is important because “. . . the fewer resources to which people have access, the more their circumstances will depend on the organization in which they participate, the systems in which these organizations operate, and the institutions governing the behavior of both” (Allard and Small, 2013). Thus, public participation processes that reinforce individualism are a potential mechanism for social and political exclusion, even when they are designed as an instrument of democracy.

4. Material and methods

This study is the result of collaboration between neighborhood organizers who live near Verona Road, transportation and public health researchers, and public health experts from Madison and Dane county. The study of public participation presented in this article was part of a larger project that aimed to identify the neighbors' specific concerns relating to health and wellbeing, and to identify opportunities to eliminate, reduce, or mitigate these conflicts. The results relating to public health concerns have been documented elsewhere (McAndrews and Marcus, 2014).

Through our investigation of the community members' public health agenda we became interested in the strategies neighbors used to promote their interests, and the formal public participation processes with which they interacted. Between December 2011 and June 2013 we collected data about neighbors' public participation in the reconstruction of Verona Road and the formal process of public involvement for the project. We attended public meetings; interviewed neighbors, planners, elected officials, and others who were affiliated with the transportation project; analyzed the content of documents and data about the decisions the neighbors sought to influence (e.g., environmental assessments, prior plans); analyzed public comments on plans; and followed discussions in neighborhood association newsletters and websites.

Over the three-year study period, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with neighbors, leaders of relevant neighborhood associations, elected officials, participants from non-transportation government agencies, and state Department of Transportation (DOT) officials and their consultants. The interviewees were selected because they were deeply knowledgeable about the neighborhood, the Verona Road project, and the public participation process. We used separate interview guides for elected officials, community members, other individuals who work in the community, and planners and project staff members. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the project.

Through these interviews we sought information about decision making for Verona Road, including: participants' perspectives on the proposed redesign of Verona Road; participants' perspectives on the planning and decision-making processes for the Verona Road reconstruction; the structure of official and unofficial public involvement processes and their outcomes; and how residents of the surrounding neighborhoods developed their opposition of or support for the reconstruction project.

We used grounded theory as the foundation for our qualitative analysis. In this tradition, we began with inductive, emergent coding of the interview and documentary data (as opposed to pre-set codes) to capture the content, meaning, or topic area of textual data (Fetterman, 2008; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). For example, high-level themes that emerged included: the local effects of transportation infrastructure; conflicts between the regional planning process and local effects of transportation infrastructure; how Verona Road is framed as a "problem;" specific alternative reconstruction plans suggested by participants in the process; perceived outcomes of the public participation process; descriptions of the public participation process; community organizing; roles and interests of elected officials; roles and interests of professional planning staff members; examples of neighbors influencing the outcomes; horizontal power networks; vertical power networks; and health impact assessments.

The dynamic between collective and individual action emerged as salient when we interpreted and synthesized the coded data into a preliminary narrative. Then, to answer the specific research question of how collective and individual action were used and received in the context of the public participation process, we coded the data a second time for examples of "collective action" and "individual action" in the context of formal participation processes, and we gathered examples of neighbors explaining their effort to create a collective position, to communicate that position, how planning professionals responded to them, and how their organizing influenced project outcomes. We also compared what neighbors said about their participation with what the planners in these cases said about the neighbors' public participation, and searched for supporting and challenging evidence in the documents.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Professional process management

The professional planners, project managers, and consultants working on the reconstruction project gave residents access to an official public involvement process, and one of their indicators of access to the process was the number of meetings held. According to the Final Environmental Impact Statement, the Wisconsin DOT held more than 500 meetings during the 10-year environmental review process (not all of these were dedicated meetings for neighbors, many were with other relevant stakeholders) (US Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and State of Wisconsin Department of Transportation, 2011: ES17). In addition, the US Federal Highway Administration commended the state DOT for demonstrating best practices to foster participation in an environmental justice community because it held many meetings and started the process early (US Federal Highway Administration, 2011a). However, such metrics can be misleading about access to and the content of the public involvement process. Keeping count of the number of meetings does not mean the same thing as counting the number of participants at meetings, or measuring the qualities of the participation at the meetings. Nevertheless, the number of meetings and the timing of the process are metrics of quality used both formally and informally by some transportation professionals.

The DOT and its consultants explained that their responsibility to public involvement was to ensure the quality of the process, and their implied goals for the quality of the process reflect a rational, administrative approach to governing in which they have minimal discretion over the process, let alone outcomes of the process. A key participant explained that their role was, “. . . to make sure that the process—that is laid out in pretty extensive detail—is followed and [to] collaborate with [consultants] and with all the agencies.” The detailed process is set forth in the DOT’s plan for agency coordination, which was required by SAFETEA-LU and subsequent transportation legislation.

The DOT said that its role was to manage a process, not guarantee an outcome—a distinction that clashed with neighbors’ expectations. When community members criticized the DOT for not giving community impacts enough consideration, for example, particularly public health impacts, the agency said: “. . . DOT is basically guided by what the rules of the EPA [US Environmental Protection Agency] and state say. You need to do what they say. . . It’s hard for people to understand all the rules. They’re not supposed to solve all the problems, as much as people want them to.”

When asked about the perceived success of the public participation process for the project, the DOT again framed their metrics of success, explaining that “there was some pretty good creativity applied to that process. . . we’re not saying we brought out a huge percentage of the population, but I think given the circumstances it worked as well as we could hope for.” Other members of the professional transportation policy and planning community agreed with these implied metrics. For instance, a city official explained, “. . . as our process goes, I think they did a fine job. . . there were a million meetings.” These quotations reveal the tacit performance measures used to assess the quality of public participation processes—the number of participants and the number of meetings held. Yet, these tacit performance measures do not capture the substantive qualities of participation in the formal public involvement process, nor do they capture the substantive aspects of participation the wider context of planning and development forums.

5.2. Neighbors’ successful organizing strategy

Residents self-organized to represent their interests in the transportation planning process, and, according to our interviews of people who were close to the process (both with group members and others who were not group members), their participation was also successful. As an elected official explained:

I think the neighborhoods did a great job of organizing. . . I don’t think any sort of wealthy neighborhood could have organized better. . . they. . . did an incredible job of being part of the process, responding, communicating with their residents, and soliciting views and making sure those views were heard.

Based on the interviews, the neighbors’ successful organizing had four main elements, which are summarized in the following table: (1) building and sustaining social networks and creating a coalition (the Verona Road Justice Coalition); (2) developing communications strategies to cultivate neighbors’ interest in the project issues; (3) effective use and development of individual capacities; and (4) seeking out “vertical” connections with elected officials and experts. These strategies are common and effective in community organizing.

The main organizational element was the Verona Road Justice Coalition comprising individuals and community groups who were committed to ongoing public participation. The reason for creating the Verona Road Justice Coalition was to have a bigger impact. A member of the coalition explained, “I think every time you have an organization saying it, rather than an individual, it makes a tremendous difference. That’s why we organized an organization that meets monthly so that we could have an effect.”

Forming a coalition facilitated creating a collective agenda that was broad and reasoned. It included issues such as: bicycle and pedestrian access, noise mitigation, air pollution mitigation, storm water runoff, access on frontage roads, environmental justice, and impacts during construction. This set of issues is what neighbors were prepared to articulate in official public meetings, and they were considered in the project design, as evidenced by the project’s official Record of Decision—the final step in the environmental review process that establishes the preferred alternative, mitigation, and the reasoning behind the decision. The Record of Decision formally recognized neighbors’ concerns about neighborhood impacts as a factor influencing the project’s design (US Federal Highway Administration, 2011b: 6).

A neighborhood newsletter described the Verona Road Justice Coalition’s work in an article titled, “Verona Road Project Opposed through Many Efforts” (Dunn’s Marsh Neighborhood Association, 2010). The article described the “dozens of letters that have been signed opposing the Verona Road/Beltline reconstruction project” and outlined some of the group’s activities. These activities included: holding regular meetings of coalition members, meetings between highway planners and residents, hosting an informational meeting about air pollution and highways, a hotdog barbecue and letter signing event, resident participation in the project policy and technical advisory committees, and presentations to the parent-teacher organization of a local primary school (Dunn’s Marsh Neighborhood Association, 2010).

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the long-run participation of these neighbors was profoundly important to what they achieved. Several of the most committed participants worked on this project for more than 15 years. They were prepared to do so because they had been involved in neighborhood issues over time, for some, since the 1970s. Thus, this was a group of people endowed with skills and knowledge, and who developed additional skills and knowledge to contribute to a public process. Ideally, formal public participation processes should allow people with any endowment of human capital to participate equally, but most processes are not ideal and require a skill set resembling that of a professional.

In summary, a neighbor outlined the steps that people could take to assemble an interest group: “. . . get organized and search out information, and get some volunteers to be the watchdogs. Then get a way to disseminate the information that you have. And then if you have a lot of ambition, get some meetings together.” These steps foster volunteers’ commitment to “an ongoing organization,” and they help to “mobilize people to come to the hearings or to write a letter.”

Principal Elements in the neighbors’ community organizing strategy

1. Building and sustaining social networks and creating a coalition

- Neighbors asked other community members to share opinions with and participate in the coalition *“I have coffee after 7pm church with two of the most active landlords [in the neighborhood]. . . They are the most community-minded people.”*
- The group created a collective agenda that neighbors articulated in public meetings *“ . . . you can stand up [in a public meeting] and scream that it’s not right, but that doesn’t get the work done. You have to give a specific other proposal and stick to it... and of course it takes time.”*
- Long-run participation (more than 10 years) on the highway project, in the context of about 35 years of neighborhood organizing

2. Developing communications strategies

- Using maps and graphic communication *“We asked for a big map [of the neighborhoods and project area] and now we carry it to every community meeting and it’s been invaluable. . . .”*
- Taking information to people instead of making neighbors find information on their own *“[there is] a huge gulf between somebody who . . . [has] worked for DOT all his life and knows all the terminology and the normal person.”*
- Creating new forums for discussion: informal conversations at church, community suppers *“We’ve had newspaper people interested. . . some talk radio, and an editorial published too – all gave opportunity to speak to the issue.”*
- Spreading messages and listening for input through social networks and media

3. Effective use and development of individuals’ skills and assets

- Community members’ skills and assets included time, professional experience (e.g., research, public speaking, writing), community organizing experience *“I’ve been to college, I was a teacher, I’m used to public speaking, I’m used to writing stuff, but if you’re not used to that, it’s difficult.”*
- Neighbors contributed by using their social networks to build the coalition *“ . . . since I’m the neighborhood newsletter editor, I also put out a lot of information to the community trying to inform people and try to get them involved and responding formally.”*

4. Seeking out “vertical” connections with elected officials and experts

- Neighbors worked through elected officials to link their agenda with the city’s agenda *“ . . . if the city . . . has political ability to nudge the state DOT around to consider what it . . . needs and want, then making sure the city is informed of what the neighborhood wants. . . [is a] strategic way to organize. . . .”*
-

5.3. Conflict between procedural public involvement and a collective model of participation

There were gaps between what planners and consultants expected from the traditional modes of public involvement, and what they encountered with the neighbors’ collective participation. Generally, citizen input collected through the public involvement processes is considered alongside other technical data to solve problems. This case sought to resolve the central conflict of how engage with collective citizen input. To the DOT staff members and private-sector consultants the collective input was “opposition”—we argue that it was actually political conflict—and the administrative procedure was not equipped to handle it. The following sections present three specific aspects of the conflict between collective participation and the traditional public involvement process: representation, policy scope, and methods of engagement.

5.3.1. Representation

Neighbors in the coalition were concerned with its representativeness, and sought to include individuals, groups, and neighborhood associations from along the entire highway corridor. Yet, some populations are difficult to reach, and organized neighbors face the same challenges as professional planners when recruiting people who are unwilling to participate, speak different languages, or have different opinions about the issues at hand. As one neighbor explained:

There are infrastructures that exist in many areas, like neighborhood associations, but are they representative? Often renters are left out of that, because it’s literally a home owners association or because it’s just very difficult. . . even for people who are really mindful, and really want to include renters. . . to be on the ground recruiting people into an association, and then to make it a welcoming place to be for all people.

The tension between collective participation and representation was a challenge in this case. Neighbors may form collective ideas about a transportation policy or project, but these may not be broadly representative. Neighborhood coalitions could contribute to the official public participation process by being explicit about who is included in their collective voice, and how they reach a collective agenda. Transparency might have helped the DOT audience interpret the input they received from the neighbors' coalition, and facilitated its inclusion in the policy process.

For instance, this neighborhood network included people who were technically outside of the project area, which made the DOT question the validity of the entire group's participation. An interviewee explained, "...just because a comment might be repeated several times...it might be an issue that's of one or two individuals...Actually if you...geocode where the individuals live, they're...two miles from the corridor. It's actually really strange."

Similarly, when DOT staff members and consultants realized that some of the comments neighbors submitted were actually photocopies of the same handout, it invalidated their comments. According to interviews with neighbors, the photocopied talking points should not have been invalidated because they were a legitimate product of neighborhood organizing. Members of the project staff explained:

In some instances, they would write up what the comments would be, and they would photocopy it and pass it out and their neighbors would sign it...this was just an effort on their part to try to draw more attention...you don't know if that person actually read and believed [it]...That being said...[there] are real issues. I think the DOT was responsive to those...water, noise, crossing of the frontage road.

The language in these statements reveals how staff members' doubt about the representativeness of collective input is used to scrutinize and, in this particular instance, discredit it. What underlies this specific doubt about collective participation is an expectation that participants in the public involvement process should express their own opinions. This is one way in which the formal citizen involvement process was individualizing. As the planner explained, the legitimacy of the process depended on knowing if each individual believed what was written on the photocopied letter. It is as if the letter were a ballot.

Also, this analogy to voting may help explain why it would be strange (as articulated in the quote above) for people outside of the project area to be recruited into the neighbors' coalition. Within the DOT's framework, the required environmental assessment, public involvement, and relocation processes are all clearly defined by the project boundaries, even if the project's spillovers are less well contained. The logic of the project area created a community, and membership in this community entitled some people to participate in the planning, and excluded others, irrespective of the way that the local neighbors and neighborhoods defined their own communities.

5.3.2. Policy scope

A misconception about public participation is that neighbors and community members contribute to projects solely by providing local knowledge about potential project impacts. The neighbors in this case study did provide such input, but they also had opinions and positions about other topics, such as the relationship between the highway reconstruction and regional sustainability, urban sprawl, and the prioritization of infrastructure investments.

The neighbors' positions about broader transportation policy topics fell outside of the scope of the official public participation process, and was one way in which this process was not optimized for collective public participation. This gap contributed to frustration and misunderstanding on both sides of the process.

One neighbor explained it this way:

It's always nice...to have a couple higher-level...division heads or people [who] are ultimately responsible for decision making and are, one would think because they are mostly politically appointed...[they would be] more attuned to what the public has to say, as opposed to people who are bureaucrats. And I was a bureaucrat so I understand the difference.

For instance, neighbors in this case articulated how the highway is socially and economically integrated into the neighborhood. As one neighbor explained, "...the neighborhood impacts are really evident...[in addition to noise and air pollution] there's a negative impact on the quality of housing...more and more single-family homes become rented, people with means and leadership pick up and leave—I'm one of them..." This neighbor linked the negative externalities of the highway with neighborhood instability, an issue that other participants highlighted as one of the most important issues these neighborhoods face. Yet, these issues were not acceptable in the citizen involvement process. A neighbor explained, "They will act as though all of the peripheral issues are not important, and that the central goal is to improve traffic flow through the region..."

Discourse about what should and should not be included in the policy agenda also appeared when planners and elected officials described neighbors' ideas as fantasies: "...[when people talk about] what they dislike about what's there now, and what they like or dislike about where we're going, part of that is not really rooted in reality." A DOT staff person described neighbors' positions as wanting to "wave the wand" to see changes appear. The language of reality versus fantasy, and waving wands, illustrates how project planners and neighbors have different beliefs about what constitutes a legitimate policy issue. The official public involvement process was not a forum for deliberating a policy agenda (as the neighbors would have preferred), and the neighbors sought out other forums.

5.3.3. Modes of engagement

The official process of public involvement—meetings, public comments, etc.—structured by various federal and state regulations, significantly shaped how neighbors interacted in the policy-making arena. The coalition of neighbors would have had a significantly more difficult time gaining access to the process had it not been for these opportunities. Yet, the public meetings were constraining in specific ways.

For example, the structure of the public open houses and hearings was intentionally rigid in order to facilitate a one-way dialogue. A consultant explained this strategy when he described people who had comments in opposition to the proposed design for the project. He framed them as “opponents,” explaining that:

Meetings are a difficult thing. You know you want people to express their concerns, ok, you don't want them to dominate the meeting. Because an opponent will dominate the meeting. In fact sometimes they'll ask for the mic and then turn their back to you and start talking to the audience. But it's not their forum; it's our forum.

In interviews, community members described the participation strategy as controlled:

It turned out they only wanted you to ask questions, they didn't want you to express opinions. And when it got to a point where people started to express their opinion and kind of rabble rouse the crowd to say what's going to happen, they cut that off right way saying, 'we're not here for that reason.'

Some neighbors said that an ideal public meeting is a forum to discuss things among neighbors and to learn what other people think. Indeed, the broader literature on community development, and the specific literature about public involvement processes in transportation recognize that participants develop a shared knowledge base through dialogue and discussion, and that this mode of participation contrasts with larger public meetings that evoke a sense of “karaoke night” (Grossardt et al., 2003). Despite knowledge about how groups learn, most public involvement processes in transportation are not designed to achieve this objective, and are limited to providing opportunities for neighbors to “give input” into the project. Neighbors suggested a necessary step in giving input should be facilitating learning among the group members. “...to me, the opportunity for public hearing is for the public to come and be actively involved in listening and testifying if they were so interested. That's where you really learn. Everybody learns.” Again this is an example of collective versus individualized public involvement.

Of all the forms of official public engagement, participating in advisory committees seemed especially productive to certain members of the neighbors' coalition. When describing being part of the committees, one neighbor said, “No one was more active than us. It was a hobby for us.” Neighbors were convinced that the DOT was looking for input during the advisory committee meetings, though they qualified this by saying that they felt all along that the project was a “done deal,” but at least the committee meetings were constructive. The DOT also said that the advisory committees were useful for screening materials and alternatives to test whether ideas would be clear or confusing. Such advisory committees are widely used in transportation planning practice, and their function, process, group dynamics, and outcomes vary considerably (Hull, 2010). For the case of Verona Road, participants enjoyed working with the technical design details of the highway project despite knowing that their input would likely not change the outcome of the project. Critiques of advisory committees suggest that they propagate pre-existing political dynamics and interests, and may further institutionalize the interests of dominant participants at the expense of a broader set of interests (Bailey and Grossardt, 2006; Graves and Casey, 2000).

Neighbors sought a third method of engagement: seeking out vertical collaborative networks. Weir et al. (2009) explained the power of vertical collaborative networks in transportation planning, and we adapt their framework to understand neighbors' networks. Building relationships within and across neighborhoods, and with business and property owners, creates a horizontal network, but neighbors also tried to build relationships with policy actors such as state water quality experts, city agency staff, and elected officials. This kind of vertical networking is important in transportation planning because of its intergovernmental nature, and the role of federal policy in particular. Participants in this case acknowledged a similar pattern, saying, “We always joke about requiring an act of Congress, but [these changes] really would require an act of Congress.”

One of the key ways that neighbors created these vertical networks was to work through their elected officials: “...once we formed this association [coalition], we started inviting [elected officials] for candidate forums and we had contact with them about our issues...and that made a big difference, and they were open to our ideas.”

Neighbors said that making these connections with elected officials was critical. When we asked what advice they would give to other groups they said: “...buttonhole that elected representative, get them on your side and try to understand [that] they don't have time to study it. That's why lobbyists have so much power, because they study it and explain it, so we have to be like those lobbyists and explain it to the officials so they can decide if it's worth their time.”

When we interviewed representatives from the state DOT they said that they use the same strategy. As one DOT staff person explained,

...you have to make sure the elected officials are in the feedback loop. You want them to understand things before their constituents complain to them...because a lot of the information they're receiving from their constituency is opinions, not necessarily based on facts.

The relationships with the elected officials helped the neighbors get their ideas into forums where they otherwise wouldn't have been. A specific example was during the public comment period on the environmental assessment. Neighbors' comments were included with the city's own comments, "*We made a lengthy critique asking for changes [to the city's public comment], and [the elected official] helped shepherd a lot of them through the city council so that our comments were taken in as city comments. We didn't get everything, but we got a lot.*" Neighbors believed that if they could plant their ideas into these other networks, then their own interests would have stronger representation when the city negotiated with the state DOT.

Neighbors sought out relationships with the local university, environmental groups, and other public agencies (e.g., the state environmental agency) but these connections were not fruitful; these other groups were not interested in committing resources to the neighbors' organizing. This is where having ongoing community-university partnerships, for instance, could be useful. Instead of reacting to a particular project, an established partnership could participate as needs arise. Municipal and regional planning agencies may also find that such ongoing relationships provide long-term benefits.

6. Conclusions

Professionals who specialize in public participation often lament low turnout at public meetings, or that the audience at meetings does not represent the neighborhood. A common explanation for this problem is that the lay public does not have the capacity—either in time or in expertise—to participate in transportation decision-making. One of the important characteristics of this case of Verona Road is that the organized neighbors did have the capacity to carry out long-term participation. This is a case in which many of the common barriers to public participation were avoided: the lay public wanted to be part of decision making, transportation professionals were coming up with innovative designs to address motorized traffic and infrastructure, and certain elected officials had a stake in the outcome. Despite this, the participation process itself did not successfully introduce neighbors' interests into the design and implementation of the project. We argue that its individualizing, preference-based orientation contributed to this problem.

Neighbors networked with one another and formed a coalition to develop a shared response to a highway reconstruction project. They said that their participation was enhanced by their group preparation: studying the plans and maps, collecting data, investigating precedents and case studies, creating mutual support for a common position, and practicing what to say at a public hearing (developing project messaging). Neighbors described this process as "learning."

To its credit, the official public participation process for the Verona Road reconstruction offered a venue for neighbors to participate in the implementation of a statewide highway plan and the design of a highway interchange in their neighborhood. Yet, the official process also prescribed an individualistic mode of involvement because its forums were designed to give individuals a chance to ask questions and give feedback, whereas the neighbors' collective modes of participation received special scrutiny from and was rejected by the professionals who were responsible for carrying out the official process.

If neighbors had not advocated collectively for their interests in this transportation planning process, they could not have taken full advantage of the public participation opportunities that were available to them, nor would they have been able to work outside of the official participation process to achieve as much as they did. The specific alignment of a frontage road, the alignment of a freeway onramp, the location and design of a pedestrian crossing, the location of a retention basin, and the inclusion of public art are all examples of decisions influenced by years of committed public involvement. To accomplish these things, the neighbors worked outside of the official public involvement process, and subverted it, by developing horizontal and vertical networks with other actors including elected officials.

It is possible that an individualized method of engagement could have produced the same outcomes in a different context, but in this case the interviews show that neighbors' organizing made a direct contribution to project planning, as well as social and political capital in the neighborhood. This finding is consistent with literature about community-driven environmental regulation, which has also found that organized neighbors had a direct effect on policy outcomes, and were more focused on achieving pollution reductions than other actors (O'Rourke, 2002).

The project planners doubted three aspects of the validity of the organized neighbors' participation: the representativeness of the neighbors' coalition, the scope of their policy frames, and their methods of engaging with the public involvement process. This case shows that each of these aspects of public participation—representation, policy scope, and modes of engagement—is created, defined, and contested in the practice of public engagement. The official public participation process—the process that is purported to be controlled, administrative, and fair—actively contributes to this political conflict when the process does not acknowledge or work with underlying political interests. Thus, administrative public engagement processes do not eliminate politics and cannot be considered neutral, inclusive, or fair solely on the basis of their administrative function. The politics of public participation, and the interaction between formal participation processes, individual members of the public, and organized groups need to be considered as part in institutional design for public engagement in transportation.

These findings from the case of Verona Road are consistent with those from other studies that used case examples to examine participatory governance. Fung (2006) identified these same three elements—who participates (participant selection), how participants interact with the process (communication and decision), and the link between public input and policy outcomes (authority and power)—as design elements for public participation institutions. This indicates that

the political conflicts evident in the case of Verona Road are not anomalous, and that the conflicts are part of a larger search for democratic institutions that relate the interests of the lay public to policy decisions that have largely been within the domain of experts.

6.1. *Implications for policy and practice*

Focusing attention on professionals (instead of the lay public) and increasing their capacity to carry out public participation processes early in their professional training is one approach that has been suggested by transportation scholars to improve these processes (Khisty, 1996). Specific types of public involvement have also been suggested, including Structured Public Involvement, which is a “set of guidelines and assumptions... [that] relies on the judgment of the professional... [to select] specific procedures and techniques” that enable “public ownership of the process,” given a pre-defined domain for planning and design (Grossardt et al., 2003). Providing transportation professionals with more training capacity is an important step to take, but if the underlying public participation processes systematically invalidates the participation of certain groups—collectives, and particularly collectives who are likely to represent the interests of socially excluded groups—then the outcomes of cases such as Verona Road would likely not change.

This study identifies how official public involvement processes in transportation could be more effective democratic institutions if they would deliberately open channels for collective action. For instance, organized community groups such as the Verona Road Justice Coalition could be considered an “agency” alongside other agencies with which the DOT must coordinate. This is particularly important for creating official public participation processes in environmental justice communities where collective public participation is a common mode of civic engagement. Limiting the potential of organized environmental justice communities to influence decision-making through the official public participation process contradicts the purpose of public participation and stifles efforts to increase political and social inclusion in transportation.

A complementary approach would be to invest in neighbors’ organizational capacity as a potential pathway to forming a collective idea about the democratic qualities should be present a public participation process and to realizing these qualities. In addition to building this understanding, neighborhood capacity building can also help communities be better equipped to work effectively with officials in the formal public participation process, no matter what form this process takes. Capacity building in group facilitation, technical concepts in transportation system design and the transportation policy process, and community organizing are useful for all participants in public involvement process, including both the lay public and transportation professionals. Community developers do much of this work already, but usually without strong connections to transportation departments and professionals.

At a more general level, this case also reinforces the importance of policy and planning professionals in creating forums in which controversial topics, such as the negative local effects of regional transportation, can be discussed and debated. In this case of Verona Road these topics were not accommodated in the official public involvement process for a highway project. Community-university partnerships are often discussed in the context of technical assistance, technology transfer, and translational research, yet creating such forums for policy discussion may also be an appropriate role for university-community partnerships in transportation if members of the university can effectively facilitate the free exchange of views and develop forums that include and balance the power of the group (Crosby and Bryson, 2005).

6.2. *Remaining questions and future work*

Among the challenging questions that came to light in this project was how to evaluate the outcomes of the neighbors’ participation in the official public involvement process. We have not addressed it here because the scope of the question is significantly larger and different than what we present in this study. It is inadequate to assess the outcome of the process by the number of changes that neighbors made to the project because involvement in political processes has outcomes well beyond what gets built. Some of the additional outcomes include the development of capacity, social and political networks, and network power (Booher and Innes, 2002). In addition, this case raises the question of how we might assess the extent to which policy agendas or planning practices changed as a result of the public participation process. Bickerstaff and Walker (2005) have asked what public participation processes actually deliver, and without a framework for interpreting changes to policy agendas as an outcome, we cannot fully evaluate the effects of or potential for collective public participation. We need additional work to understand how to better design democratic institutions to support transportation systems, including their policy, planning, and design. Researchers and practitioners continue to develop frameworks for evaluating the quality of public participation processes that emphasize defining metrics and outcome measures and validating these across sectors (Rowe and Frewer, 2004; Grossardt et al., 2003). Such frameworks need to account for the politics of collective forms of public participation, including the contested areas of representation, policy scope, and modes of engagement.

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