

## CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC HEARINGS IN VIRGINIA

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(The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the sponsoring agencies.)

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## SUMMARY

Thousands if not tens of thousands of public hearings are held each year in the United States of America. But how much do we really know about the citizens who attend highway hearings? It is rather remarkable that, in a country in which the public hearing is so much an integral part of governmental processes, the literature is so barren of systematic data concerning persons who attend public hearings. It was to supply such data that a series of studies were sponsored by the Virginia Highway Research Council.

The series of studies reported here were specifically focused on public hearings in the highway process. Data were obtained between May 26 and July 15, 1970 at 25 hearings held throughout Virginia and covering urban, primary, and secondary road projects. Questionnaires were handed out to all who attended, and of the 1,170 persons who did, 978 took the trouble to answer the 17 questions that were asked.

The research was designed to achieve three major objectives: To compile descriptive or behavioral data on citizens attending highway hearings; to analyze their comments; and to develop a mode of operation for the conduct of future highway hearings. The results of the study are set forth in this final report comprising three separate parts as follows: A Profile of Citizens Attending Highway Hearings; Citizen Feedback at Highway Hearings; and A Proposed Strategy For Public Hearings. Succinctly, the principal findings of this research are as given below.

Part 1 — A Profile of Citizens Attending Highway Hearings

The results of the anonymous questionnaire confirmed the generally accepted premise that most people who attend highway hearings are "aginnners". Over 84% of those responding had attended two or more hearings and more than 40% had participated in five or more.

Two-thirds of the people who attend highway hearings are in the 35-64 age group. It is the people in this group, of course, who dominate the civic and political life of the community. They appear to view the highway hearing not as a frivolous event, but as a sober, serious occasion for mature citizens.

More than 49% of those who answered the questionnaires were college graduates, and about 44% of the graduates had attended graduate school. Such an education level implies the ability to comprehend the complex issues often involved in highway design and location, an understanding of governmental processes, and access to decision makers. Such factors can be of profound and far-reaching significance in highway hearings.

## Part II — Citizen Feedback at Highway Hearings

Slightly more than 14% of those attending highway hearings testified for the record, and this ratio was almost identical whether the respondents were from urban or rural communities.

As had been expected, analysis of the respondents' comments showed that citizens do attend public hearings to damn rather than to praise. Less than 20% of the comments were of a fact-seeking nature. Almost 40% centered on the physical aspects of a project, with such statement as:

- "The Highway Department is taking too much land."
- "The road has too many lanes."
- "Consider alternate routes."
- "We don't need an additional road."

The second most frequent type of testimony dealt with the way the road was being constructed or the hearing was being conducted or the Highway Department was performing. There were a number of comments expressing distrust of the Highway Department and a feeling that what citizens say makes no difference. Sample responses for this type were:

- "The process is too fast."
- "This is the first we have heard of the project and don't have time to evaluate it."
- "We haven't seen the plans."
- "It doesn't make any difference what we say."

## Part III — A Proposed Strategy for Public Hearings

Based on the results of the first two phases of the study the researchers concluded that the problems which exist in the highway hearing process are to a large degree the result of an outmoded method of operation. Public hearings were originally employed to inform the community of proposed projects. However, today it is no longer sufficient to inform the community, but rather it is now desirable and necessary to establish real two-way communications between the highway decision makers and the community.

The recommendations for a new approach to highway hearings were developed in three stages: Prehearing strategy, formal hearing strategy, and posthearing strategy.

A program should be undertaken to demonstrate to citizens that their participation is not only tolerated but desired and that the Department is responsive to their justified criticisms

The prehearing recommendations involve many types of communication not previously employed. It is suggested that letters inviting informal discussions between citizens and Department personnel be mailed to all local groups 60 to 70 days in advance of hearings.

Project plans should be readily available at times and locations convenient for the citizens, and Department personnel should be available to explain them. Announcements of hearings should be made on radio and TV three or four days ahead of the hearing date, and large signs bearing the time, date, and location of a hearing should be posted at both ends of the project involved in the hearing.

All hearings should be routinely scheduled at night, unless another time is considered better for a specific community. The first phase of the study demonstrated that attendance is substantially larger at night.

The formal hearing suggestions include the use of layman's terms, the use of microphones in the aisles for the convenience of persons testifying, and several other humanistic changes.

The posthearing recommendations indicate that citizen suggestions made at the meeting should be explored, and that the disposition of each one should be explained in writing to the individual or group making it. A letter from the resident engineer should be sent to all who attend the hearing to inform them of the Highway Commission's decision.

It is hoped that this study will contribute to a better understanding of citizen feedback and assist in improving communications between citizens and the Virginia Department of Highways.



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## PART 1

## A PROFILE OF CITIZENS ATTENDING PUBLIC HEARINGS

by

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It is increasingly apparent that highway hearings are becoming more and more a confrontation between highway officials and irate citizens and that, in effect, the highway hearing is rapidly becoming an adversary proceeding, sometimes between bitter antagonists. It is, therefore, incumbent upon highway departments to gather basic data about persons who attend highway hearings and to analyze their comments in order to more effectively communicate to citizens the purpose, nature, and indeed, the desirability of particular road improvements. For without public support, or at least the absence of overt and sustained public hostility, highway construction will be subject to harassment and delay.

Research on the highway hearing process was defined at the outset of the Research Council studies as a three component system:

- (1) Compilations of descriptive or behavioral data on citizens who attend highway hearings;
- (2) Analysis of the comments of those testifying at highway hearings; and
- (3) Development of a suggested strategy for the conduct of future highway hearings.

This part of the report presents basic behavioral information about individuals who attend highway hearings. Accordingly, it is descriptive by design. The authors have no major hypothesis to prove or disprove. The work presented was the first step in the gathering of data necessary for building an appropriate descriptive, and perhaps predictive, model of citizens who come to highway hearings. The potential practical significance of such research is that it may help highway departments better understand their client groups and thereby enable them to better plan strategies which will communicate to and win over such groups.

## THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

Rather than sample public hearings randomly throughout a year or another particular period of time, it was decided to select a several month period and obtain data on every highway hearing held in Virginia during that period. Collection of data was begun May 26 and concluded on July 15, 1970. Thus, the universe was every hearing during an eight-week period for a total of 25 public hearings on the urban, primary and secondary systems in almost every region of the state of Virginia. <sup>1/</sup>

The research instrument was a self-administered questionnaire printed on an oversized postcard. Except for two questions, one dealing with the name of the city or county in which the respondent lived and the other asking the respondent's job, the questions were closed-end. Eligible respondents were defined as those individuals eighteen years of age and older, including government officials, and the respondents were anonymous.

Paralleling the 100% sample for the eight-week period being reported, each qualified respondent was given a questionnaire at the beginning of each highway hearing. Every effort was made to get a 100% return on questionnaires. At the beginning of each hearing either the resident engineer or one of the researchers made a brief announcement about the purposes of the questionnaire and the intention of the research, and ended with a plea for complete returns of all questionnaires. At the conclusion of the hearing the researchers stood at the exit and collected questionnaires, and even on occasion attempted to talk reluctant respondents into filling out questionnaires.

## WHO COMES TO HIGHWAY HEARINGS

Eleven hundred and seventy persons attended the 25 public hearings covered during the eight-week sample. Nine hundred and seventy-eight of those attending returned questionnaires for an overall response rate of 83.6%. <sup>2/</sup>

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<sup>1/</sup> Data collection was extended through August. However, the data for hearings held after July 15 are not reported because they were not analyzed in time for publication.

<sup>2/</sup> It is noted that the authors were unable to ascertain if there was a selective response refusal bias among the approximately 17% non-response. Previous survey research indicates that there is a mail-back bias primarily affecting the lower socioeconomic groups. Whether those respondents who refused to fill out the questionnaires in this particular research are also disproportionately from the lower socioeconomic groups can only be the subject of speculation at this time.

TABLE I

PERSONS ATTENDING, RESPONDING AND TESTIFYING AT  
HIGHWAY HEARINGS AND NONWHITE ATTENDANCE

( N = 1170. Will vary because of differential  
response rates for different questions)

Area	Persons Attending	Questionnaire Response Rate	Percent Testifying	Nonwhite Attendance
Urban	841	83.4%	14.1%	13.0%
Northern Virginia <sup>a</sup>	430	90.5%	15.1%	1.4%
Rural	<u>329</u>	<u>84.2%</u>	<u>14.3%</u>	<u>1.8%</u>
Total	100%	83.6%	14.2%	9.8%

a Extracted from urban category — "urban" is defined according to the Virginia Department of Highways criterion as cities and counties of 10,000 and over population. Northern Virginia was extracted from the urban category because it is part of the Washington, D. C., Standard Metropolitan Statistics Area (S. M. S. A) and is of a substantially greater size than other S. M. S. A.'s in Virginia.

As Table I indicates the difference in the response rates of respondents from urban and rural areas was less than one percentage point. When hearings conducted in Northern Virginia were analyzed separately a somewhat higher response was found, perhaps as a consequence of the controversies attendant upon constructing roads through relatively densely developed suburban areas. The percentage of those testifying at hearings stayed fairly constant at slightly more than one-seventh of those attending. The percentage of nonwhites attending public hearings was quite low as nonwhite groups comprise 20.6% of the population in Virginia.<sup>3/</sup>

Mean attendance at hearings appears to show a relationship to the rural-urban-Northern Virginia continuum, with an increase in mean attendance as urbanization increases. Table II shows mean attendance at all hearings.

<sup>3/</sup> U. S. Bureau of Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1969. (90th Edition) Washington, D. C., 1969, p. 27. An average of nonwhite attendance did not give a full picture of nonwhite absence at hearings. For example, nonwhites were present at only 11 of 25 hearings, and of the total number (121) 98, or 81%, were concentrated at three hearings. These hearings concerned proposals for highways through nonwhite residential areas.

TABLE II

MEAN ATTENDANCE AT HIGHWAY HEARINGS  
( N = 1170)

Area	Number of Persons
Urban	56.0
Northern Virginia	71.7
Rural	<u>33.0</u>
Total	46.8

As Table III indicates the median attendance at the hearings was 30, with rural attendance lagging behind urban and Northern Virginia attendance.

TABLE III

MEDIAN ATTENDANCE AT HIGHWAY HEARINGS  
(N = 1170)

Area	Number of Persons
Urban	37.0
Northern Virginia	38.5
Rural	30.0

The lower rural median is the result of several very large and controversial hearings in the urban areas and in Northern Virginia which skewed the average attendance considerably. The range of persons attending hearings was from 9 to 255, with the median indicating that most hearings are rather sparsely attended.

Median attendance varied by time of hearings. Hearings at night (after 6:00 p. m. ) had the highest turnout, 57; noon hearings (12:00 p. m. - 6:00 p. m. ) had a median attendance of 33; morning hearings had the lowest attendance, 30.



SOCIOECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PERSONS  
ATTENDING HIGHWAY HEARINGS

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One of the provisional hypotheses of the study was that there would be a disproportionate representation of the higher socioeconomic groups at hearings. Further, it was suspected that persons attending public hearings were predominantly white-collar or professional workers, home owners, middle-aged, well educated and economically well-off. In short, those citizens who might be considered "substantial" members of the community.

As Table IV shows, a much higher percentage of respondents who can be classified as white-collar — professional — managerial attend public hearings than can be classified in the same way in the country or in the state of Virginia in general.

TABLE IV  
RESPONDENT OCCUPATIONS  
( N = 844)

Occupation	Percentage
White-collar	58.5
Blue-collar	13.3
Housewife	20.6
Retired or Unemployed	7.5
Other	0.1
Total	100

If one extracts housewives, retired or unemployed, and other from the occupational total, then over 81% of those attending public hearings are in the white-collar — professional — managerial category.

Home owners constitute a much larger percentage (approximately 90%) than they do in the population at large or in the state of Virginia.

TABLE V  
HOME OWNERSHIP  
( N = 933)

Type of Occupancy	Percentage
Own	89.5
Rent	8.1
Other	<u>2.4</u>
Total	100

Based on Table V one may surmise that persons attending public hearings have a direct economic stake in the community and are prepared to represent that stake at least by attending public hearings.

Respondents at the public hearings are primarily middle-aged, with two-thirds of those attending being between the ages of 35 and 64.

TABLE VI  
RESPONDENT AGE DISTRIBUTION  
(N = 933)

Age	Percentage
Under 21	2.5
21 - 29	8.3
30 - 34	10.7
35 - 49	38.0
50 - 64	28.8
65 and over	<u>11.7</u>
Total	100

The middle-aged groups are often those who participate most actively in citizens' groups, civic associations, and the political life of the community. The large representation of this group at highway hearings may indicate that a highway hearing is viewed neither as a happening nor a frivolous event but as a sober, serious occasion for concern by mature citizens.

Consistent with the pattern of high job status, home ownership and middle-aged participation is the high educational level of respondents at highway hearings.

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TABLE VII  
RESPONDENT EDUCATION  
(N = 913)

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Completed	Percentage
0-8	5.9
9-12	21.7
Some College	22.0
College Graduate	27.5 <sup>a/</sup>
Graduate School	21.6 <sup>a/</sup>
Other	<u>1.3</u>
Total	100

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<sup>a/</sup> These percentages of college graduates are larger by a factor of five than the percentage in the nationwide population (49.1% vs. 8.9%). U. S. Bureau of Census, Current Population Report, "Educational Attainment," March 1969, No. 194, February 1970., p. 20.

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If high levels of education (over 49% were at least college graduates) imply the ability to comprehend the complex issues often involved in highway design and location, a greater understanding of governmental processes, and access to decision makers, the implications for the conduct of public hearings and the defusing of public opposition to highways may be profound.

Students of social stratification consider generally that occupation, education, and income are the three major indices by which one can ascertain social class. The third of these indices, income, is consistent with the pattern shown for occupation and education among respondents at highway hearings. The generally high socioeconomic status — that is, social class — of respondents at highway hearings is evidenced by the fact that almost two-thirds of all respondents had total family income in excess of \$10,001.<sup>4/</sup>

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TABLE VIII  
TOTAL FAMILY INCOME FROM ALL SOURCES BEFORE TAXES, 1969  
( N = 756)

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Income	Percentage
\$0 - 3000	4.6
\$3001 - 5000	5.2
\$5001 - 7000	9.2
\$7000 - 10,000	15.6
\$10,000 - 15,000	20.6
\$15,000 - 25,000	26.3
Over \$25,000	<u>18.5</u>
Total	100

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Two additional items of information basic to the behavioral profile of respondents at hearing were ascertained. In response to a question asking where the respondent lived, over 91% of the respondents indicated that they lived in or near the area of the proposed highway. Thus, those attending hearings were "local" in the sense that they lived in jurisdictions impacted by or adjacent to the highway. Not surprisingly, it appears that those in close physical proximity to improvements indicate their concern and interest by attending public hearings.

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<sup>4/</sup> This compares with a nationwide percentage of 34.6% of households earning over \$10,000 in 1968. U. S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, "Household income 1968 and Selected Social and Economic Characteristics of Households," No. 65, October 31, 1969, p. 60.

The pattern of a preponderance of "locals" attending public hearings is paralleled by length of residence in the city or county in which the highway hearing was held, as Table IX indicates.

TABLE IX  
LENGTH OF RESIDENCE IN CITY OR COUNTY IN WHICH HIGHWAY HEARING IS HELD  
(N = 908)

Length of Residence	Percentage
Don't Live In Area	14.1
0 - 3 Years Residence	0.8
Over 3 Years	<u>85.1</u>
	100

Over 85% of all respondents attending hearings had lived in the city or county for over three years. The incidence of such long-term residence suggests that on a "newcomer" versus "oldtimer" dimension an overwhelming majority of those attending hearings are "oldtimers". This goes hand in hand with the evidence that a large number of locals attend public hearings. The authors speculate that these findings may have significant implications in terms of the commitment of oldtimers to the area in which they live and about the degree and extent of their political influence.

The final behavioral data on respondents at public hearings concern the male-female participation. Respondents at highway hearings are represented by males (67.2%) at over a two to one ratio.

#### WHY RESPONDENTS COME TO HIGHWAY HEARINGS

The vast majority of respondents stated that they came to the highway hearing only to listen (81.9%). Of the remainder, 13.2% indicated a desire to testify and, in fact, slightly over 14% did testify. Thus, one may suggest that respondents come to these hearings for one of the most basic of all reasons for conducting a hearing — to gain information rather than to take a position, express opposition, or suggest alternatives.

If it is important to ensure that citizens affected by a highway project learn about that improvement, then it follows that it is desirable to inquire into the respondent's sources of information about highway hearings. The sole requirement of notice for public hearings is the time-honored legal advertisement in a newspaper. However, Table X indicates that in effectiveness a legal ad in a newspaper ranks a poor fifth out of seven sources of information. It is interesting that a large percentage of the "Other" category includes references to the resident highway engineer and his staff as a source of information about the time, place, and subject matter of hearings.

TABLE X  
SOURCE OF INFORMATION ABOUT HIGHWAY HEARING  
( N = 964)

Source	Percentage
Radio	2.6
Newspaper	39.2
Legal Advertisement	8.7
TV	0.4
A Friend	14.3
Organization	18.0
Other	<u>16.8</u>
Total	100

The newspaper story, as opposed to the legal advertisement, was the source of information for almost 40% of those who came to highway hearings. <sup>5/</sup> However, this finding deserves careful qualification. The critical question is, Do the newspaper stories, which publicize the more controversial public hearings, only intensify the reactions which would have arisen anyhow due to the character of the hearing? Thus, one may ask whether the newspaper story is a significant source of information about highway hearings because of the medium itself

<sup>5/</sup> When cross-tabulated by rural-urban residence the percentage rose to 53.6% for rural areas.

because only those highway hearings which promise to be controversial are covered extensively by the newspapers and have a ready audience awaiting them. The ways in which respondents learned about highway hearings suggest that a long, careful, and serious look at traditional means of informing the citizenry about public hearings and disseminating information about highway design and location may be in order.

A major question the research was designed to investigate was whether the highway officials were facing "amateurs" or "pros" at public hearings. The question has practical significance because one may conduct a hearing differently and present material differently to a group of citizens who are attending their first public hearing than to an auditorium full of seasoned and experienced public hearing goers. In response to the question, Is this the first time you have attended a public hearing on any subject?, slightly under one-third (32%) answered "yes". Of the 68% who had previously attended public hearings a follow-up question was asked inquiring about how many hearings the respondent had previously attended.

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TABLE XI  
NUMBER OF HEARINGS PREVIOUSLY ATTENDED  
( N = 615)

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Number of Hearings	Percentage
One	15.6
Two	19.1
Three	14.3
Four	10.2
Five	22.1
Six or More	<u>18.7</u>
Total	100

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The fact that over 40% of those who had previously attended hearings had been to five or more would appear to indicate that a large number of individuals attending highway hearings are sophisticated and knowledgeable about hearing processes and procedures.

In addition to eliciting information on how many public hearings the respondents had attended, the researchers sought to narrow the question to the problem at hand. Accordingly, the respondents were asked if this was the first public hearing concerning a highway that they

had attended. When the question focused exclusively on highway hearings the percentage of citizens who were "professional" at attending hearings dropped below one-half (44.5%). The follow-up question was designed to probe the experiences of respondents at other types of public hearings.

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TABLE XII  
OTHER PUBLIC HEARINGS ATTENDED  
( N = 639)

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Type Hearing	Percentage
City Council Hearings	46.0
County Board of Supervisors Hearings	33.8
Planning Commission Hearings	8.0
School Board Hearings	12.1
Other	<u>0.1</u>
Total	100

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Table XII indicates that experience at public hearings is almost entirely at the local level - in which hearing procedures (and content) are often substantially different from highway hearing procedures.

The radius from which the citizens come to attend highway hearings may be an important source of information for what it suggests about the local (i. e., project oriented and neighborhood oriented) versus the community wide drawing power of highway hearings. <sup>6/</sup>

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<sup>6/</sup> It is reasonable to anticipate that the radius from which people are drawn to a hearing is a function of at least two factors: the controversial nature of the proposed project and the type of road proposed. Thus, one might expect a public hearing concerning an interstate highway to draw citizens from a much larger surrounding area than would one concerning a leg of the secondary system.



In the study just under 50% of the respondents traveled one mile or less to attend the highway hearing. At hearings concerned with improvements to the primary and secondary systems, it appears that those adjacent to or in the immediate vicinity of the project will be represented in substantial numbers. Moreover, the data imply that a substantial majority of citizens attending highway hearings are perhaps familiar with the characteristics of their neighborhood and may require quite specific information from highway officials about the justification for and designed details of an improvement which affects their home territory.

One additional major source of behavioral data was a battery of questions dealing with the organizational affiliation, if any, of citizens at highway hearings. The reasoning behind this battery was the supposition that an audience filled with individuals who were members or representatives of organizations might be a vastly different audience than one comprised of simply curious individuals. With this battery the researchers attempted to probe how organized and prepared citizens were. A general question was asked inquiring whether the respondent was attending as an individual, a member of an organization, or as a representative of an organization.

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TABLE XIII  
ATTENDING HEARING AS INDIVIDUAL, MEMBER OF ORGANIZATION  
OR AS REPRESENTATIVE OF ORGANIZATION  
( N = 940)

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Capacity	Percentage
Individual	76.1
Member of Organization	7.1
Representing Organization	9.4
Other	<u>7.4</u>
Total	100

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Over three-quarters of the citizens attending highway hearings came simply as unaffiliated individuals. However, of the citizens who indicated they came to the hearing as representatives of an organization almost 45% were either president, vice-president or a board member (president — 13.3%; v-president — 11.9%; board member — 19.5%). The data suggest that a large percentage of organizational affiliates attending public hearings represent the official leadership of the organizations concerned enough to send representatives.

Only one normative or opinion question was asked on the questionnaire. Each respondent was requested at the end of the public hearing to indicate whether he thought the hearing had been conducted in a good, fair or poor way.

TABLE XIV  
EVALUATION OF CONDUCT OF HEARING  
( N = 622)

Rating	Percentage
Good	61.6
Fair	31.4
Poor	6.8
Other	<u>0.2</u>
Total	100

Evidently a great majority of those attending highway hearings believed that the hearings are conducted well, or at least adequately. Unfortunately, one brief closed-end question cannot adequately elicit the nuances of response to such a general question.

The major questions were cross-tabulated against variables such as socioeconomic status (income, education, and occupation) age, home ownership, sex, duration of residence and number of public hearings previously attended. At a preliminary level of analysis none of the cross-tabulations against independent variables showed a consistent pattern of response, although against individual questions some differences did appear.

#### OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The preliminary data suggest that highway hearings are attended by the middle and upper socioeconomic groups in numbers disproportionate to their number in the statewide population. This appears to hold in rural areas, urban areas, and Northern Virginia. The sample indicates that citizens who come to highway hearings live in relatively close proximity to the proposed project, and that they are long-term residents of the area. Respondents who attend highway hearings learn about them in almost every fashion except by the traditional legal advertisement in the newspaper.

The vast majority (68%) of the sample had attended public hearings prior to the highway hearing, with many (40% attending 5 or more) respondents having considerable experience at attending hearings. The percentage of citizens who had attended highway hearings previously was substantially lower than the number who had attended other types of hearings, although the percentage of those experienced in highway hearings was substantial nonetheless. Attendance at local government public hearings was the primary source of exposure to the hearing process. Most citizens (over 75%) attended public hearings as individuals and were unaffiliated with any formal organization. However, nearly half of those indicating organizational membership were officers of their respective organizations.

In general citizens believed that the highway hearing had been conducted well, or at least adequately. This favorable evaluation held fairly constant when tabulated against the major socioeconomic and behavioral variables.

The research findings presented are preliminary and tentative. In order to place these findings in proper perspective further research will be required. Additional samples should be drawn over time using the same research instrument and method of sampling. This will allow replication of the basic data and serve as a check against the adequacy of the sampling procedures. Moreover, comparative studies over time will allow the measurement of changes in the types of citizens at public hearings and ascertain the socioeconomic status of such citizens as compared to that of the persons responding in the first study, and thus provide a bench mark for future comparisons.

In depth interviews based upon random sampling of persons at public hearings and those testifying would be desirable. The first phase of the research is general and indicative rather than specific and definitive. The administration of personal interviews will help greatly in closing the gap between the very general data presently available and more specific and perhaps more meaningful data.

Finally, the basic question of the representativeness of citizens who attend public hearings must be investigated. It is of crucial practical significance to politicians, highway administrators, and engineers whether public hearings do indeed mirror the views of those in the community. One way of gauging the representativeness of those attending highway hearings is to sample citizens in areas adjacent to highway projects and compare their socioeconomic status and evaluation of the proposed highway project with those of the persons at the hearings. Ultimately, perhaps, a correction curve for representativeness may be created so that the comments, suggestions, and criticisms presented at highway hearings can be evaluated in proper perspective.



## CITIZEN FEEDBACK AT HIGHWAY HEARINGS

by

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The ostensible purpose or manifest function of a highway hearing is to get feedback from citizens — to learn how they evaluate a project, plan or proposal. However, the hearing process has rarely been the subject of specific analysis to determine the content and substance of citizen feedback.

The intent of this part of the hearing study was to create a foundation of systematic information about citizen comments at highway hearings so that a more detailed understanding of citizen perceptions and preferences could be built.

This part of the report presents a description of the items and content mentioned by citizens who testified at the hearings. It is an initial effort to outline a systematic picture of what citizens' concerns are as expressed at highway hearings. The researchers' long-range purpose is to create a descriptive model of hearing behavior so that, eventually, a model will be available to help forecast citizen conduct at highway hearings. A basic premise of the researchers is that at hearings citizens express openly, candidly, and honestly their opinions, perceptions, and desires. In short, it is assumed that transcripts of hearings record honest and free comments about the highway projects under consideration, and thus the important issues and concerns of the citizenry are reflected in the transcript.

## THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

The data source for the analysis of citizens' comments was the official transcripts of the 25 hearings described in Part 1 of this report. The transcripts of two hearings were not analyzed because no one testified. In addition, the researchers attended all but three of the hearings. Thus, they also developed a feel for the type of comments and the thrust of citizen concern at the hearings.

Eligible respondents were defined as those individuals who testified at public hearings, including government officials. Formal presentation by highway officials was, of course, excluded. <sup>1/</sup>

Based upon the comments contained in the Highway Department's official, verbatim transcript of the hearing, code categories summarizing the content of comments were developed. After the categories were agreed upon the researchers scrutinized the testimony and coded it according to the type and number of comments expressed by the respondents.

### CITIZEN COMMENTS

Slightly over one-seventh ( 170 ) of the citizens attending highway hearings testified for the record. This percentage was almost identical for both urban and rural respondents. A hypothesis the researchers examined was that citizens who testify are concerned about only one or two items — not a range of broad and diffuse issues. Accordingly, a print-out of the simple number of comments per respondent was prepared and is shown in Table XV.

TABLE XV  
NUMBER OF COMMENTS PER RESPONDENT

Number of Comments	Number of Respondents
1	48
2	49
3	29
4	14
5	10
6	5
7	3
8	5
9	4
10	—
11	3

<sup>1/</sup> Government officials were included in the analysis of comments because the government are members of the Highway Department's clientele, just as is the ordinary citizen who is concerned about three feet of his front lawn being taken for right-of-way.

Well over one-fourth of the respondents made only one comment, and a similar percentage made only two comments. Thus, over half the respondents testifying at highway hearings made one or two comments. As Table XVI indicates, some respondents commented on a wide variety of issues and presented extraordinarily rich and complex testimony. However, the vast majority of citizens were quite restricted in the number of comments they made.

Of critical importance to the analysis of testimony was the question as to whether citizens came to testify in favor of or against the proposed project. Based upon the researchers' experiences and discussions with a number of highway engineers well roasted in the heat generated at highway hearings, it is concluded that most citizens come to criticize. Table XVI suggests that citizens do attend public hearings to damn rather than to praise. Most citizens who attend highway hearings oppose a project, usually some particular aspect or detail of it. However the researchers were frankly surprised at the very small number of positive comments — comments which supported the Highway Department's proposal. The researchers had anticipated that a substantial proportion of comments at hearings would be essentially informational in nature, comments seeking facts or more detailed information. But with less than 20% of comments in the informational category, this expectation was not confirmed.

TABLE XVI

NATURE OF CITIZENS' COMMENTS AT HIGHWAY HEARINGS  
(N = 499. Multiple comments were coded for each  
respondent and thus the N exceeds the total  
number of persons testifying, 170 )

<u>Negative,</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Positive,</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Neutral-Information</u>	<u>%</u>
Social	5.2	Social	—		19.2
Economic	6.2	Economic	1.4		
Physical	28.8	Physical	10.9		
Esthetic	10.2	Esthetic	.2		
Process	17.9		12.5		
	68.3				

Almost 40% of all comments centered on the physical aspects of a project. These responses occurred nearly twice as frequently as any other<sup>2/</sup> and were negative by almost a 3 to 1 margin. Positive comments in the physical category generally indicated support of the Highway Department's route, urged speedy construction, or cited the dangers and the discomforts of existing roads.

The second most frequent type of testimony was coded as "process." These comments dealt with the way the road was being constructed, or the hearing was being conducted or the Highway Department was performing, rather than the substance of a particular project.<sup>3/</sup> There were also a number of comments in the process category that suggested generalized alienation, i. e., distrust of the Highway Department, belief that it is unresponsive to the will of the public, and that what citizens say makes no difference.

It was anticipated that a considerable number of persons testifying at highway hearings would stress the negative social impact of the project. Surprisingly, this was not so, except at several hearings where large percentages of nonwhites attended because their homes were slated for taking.<sup>4/</sup> Similarly, it was anticipated that the positive economic benefits of the highway would receive considerable comment. However, the majority of hearing comments stressed high costs and the negative economic impact.<sup>5/</sup>

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- 2/ Sample comments coded physical were: The Highway Department is taking too much land; the road has too many lanes; consider alternative routes; the proposed road cuts off my access; improvement of the existing road is sufficient; we don't need an additional road; the improvement creates a dangerous access point; the improvement will be a danger to children and to pedestrians.
- 3/ Sample responses coded process were: the process is too fast; this is the first we have heard of the project and don't have time to evaluate it; the notice of the hearing was too short; we haven't seen the plans; the information is out of date; it doesn't make any difference what we say.
- 4/ A sample of comments coded social negative were: you are forcing us to move; the road is displacing people; where can we be relocated; don't take my property.
- 5/ Sample responses coded negative economic were: the highway will lower residential property values; it will hurt the area for residential development; the project costs are too high; take cheaper, less valuable land; build the road for less money; the improvements are too costly.



Because of increasing national concern about the environment the researchers expected substantial comment about factors which might be classified as "esthetic." However, the esthetic or environmental implications of a highway were mentioned by only one citizen in ten. <sup>6/</sup>

Based on the distribution of citizen comments it appears that the basic bread and butter implications of a road, perhaps those which might be called engineering considerations, elicited the greatest citizen concern. That is, it is the basic physical aspects of a highway as a structure and as a user of land that generate most worry and most opposition.

#### NATURE OF COMMENTS BY RURAL-URBAN NORTHERN VIRGINIA RESIDENTS

Because highways cut through so many different kinds of areas it was decided to tabulate citizens' comments against a rural-urban-Northern Virginia dimension. The researchers theorized that the more highly urbanized an area, the more critical of a project its citizenry would be.

As Table XVII indicates, the expectation was provisionally confirmed. Although even in rural areas almost half the comments were negative, the proportion of negative comments increased substantially between rural and urban categories and increased yet again when Northern Virginia was tabulated alone. Physical aspects of the highway received the greatest mention in all areas. In the urban areas and Northern Virginia the "process" category was a larger percentage of the total, which suggests a somewhat greater understanding of governmental processes and a more critical attitude toward government agencies than in rural areas.

Tabulation of responses across the rural-urban-Northern Virginia continuum tends to support the hypothesis that persons living at higher densities, in and around urban areas, are most concerned about the quality of the environment and the impact of the highway upon the environment.

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<sup>6/</sup> Sample responses coded esthetic were: landscape the road; the road will destroy a lovely view; the road will remove trees and shrubs; the road will change the rural or residential character of the community; the road is noisy and smelly; the road pollutes the environment.

TABLE XVII  
NATURE OF CITIZENS' COMMENTS BY RURAL-URBAN  
NORTHERN VIRGINIA RESIDENTS

	Rural	<u>Negative</u>		Northern Virginia <sup>a/</sup>
		Urban		
Social	2.9	5.7		4.1
Economic	8.7	5.4		6.4
Physical	24.9	29.9		37.3
Esthetic	1.0	12.7		17.4
Process	<u>10.6</u>	<u>19.9</u>		<u>22.9</u>
	48.1	73.6		88.1
		<u>Positive</u>		
Social	-	-		-
Economic	1.0	1.6		-
Physical	10.6	10.9		6.9
Esthetic	<u>1.0</u>	<u>-</u>		<u>-</u>
	12.6	12.5		6.9
		Informational — Neutral		
	39.3	13.9		5.0
TOTAL	100%	100%		100%
N	104	395		218

<sup>a/</sup> Also included in the urban category

The informational-neutral category accounted for almost 40% of citizen comments in rural areas, a much higher proportion than in urban areas. Several factors, the following among them, may explain this finding. Residents of rural areas may get less media exposure and hence less information than those in urban areas; projects in rural areas appear to be less controversial and thus excite less information than those in urban areas; projects

in rural areas appear to be less controversial and thus excite less interest and less desire for information prior to a hearing.

FOCUS OF COMMENTS

Whether comments of citizens at highway hearings are individually or personally centered, or group or community centered, is a matter of strategic concern to highway departments. One immediate practical consequence of focus is that with individually centered concerns the highway department will be confronting specific, almost idiosyncratic criticisms and suggestions, whereas the group or community centered comments deal with collective problems. In short, the personally centered complaints may bring the highway department into conflict with an individual citizen, while community centered comments may bring the highway department into confrontation with civic groups and community wide organizations. It is reasonable to anticipate that the political implications of the types of opposition might be considerably different. Table XVIII illustrates the focus of comments.

TABLE XVIII  
FOCUS OF COMMENTS  
( N = 170 )

	Percentage
Individually or personally centered comments	31.9
Group or community centered comments	43.9
Mixed personal — community — non-specific comments	<u>24.2</u>
TOTAL	100

When the focus of comments is tabulated against the rural-urban-Northern Virginia categories, a pattern related to the rural-urban continuum emerges as shown in Table XIX.

TABLE XIX  
URBAN-RURAL-NORTHERN VIRGINIA FOCUS OF COMMENTS

	Rural %	Urban %	Northern Virg %
Individually or personally centered comments	44.7	26.6	22.7
Group or community centered comments	25.5	51.7	65.2
Mixed personal —community — non-specific comments	<u>29.8</u>	<u>21.7</u>	<u>12.1</u>
TOTAL	100	100	100
N	47	123	66

There is an emphasis on individual — personal concerns in the rural areas which decreases sharply in the urban areas and then decreases further in Northern Virginia.

Conversely, there is a reverse relationship between rural and urban areas and the group or community centered nature of comments at hearings. The researchers speculate that the rural areas are more "conservative" in the laissez-faire sense, perhaps because of a lesser need for contact and interaction with one's neighbors. Alternatively, perhaps the much higher population density of the urban and Northern Virginia areas compels persons to acknowledge their interdependence and to recognize that individual well being cannot be separated from that of the community.

#### EVALUATION OF PROPOSED HIGHWAY

Because a majority of respondents commented on more than one item at the hearing it was necessary to create a simple mechanical summing which enabled the researchers to categorize the comments. When coding the highway transcripts the researchers totaled the number of comments, either positive or negative, made by each respondent. For example, had the respondent made three comments and two of the comments were negative and the other positive, the overall testimony was classified as negative. Table XX indicates evaluations of the projects.

TABLE XX  
EVALUATION OF PROPOSED HIGHWAY  
( N = 170 )

	Percentage
Generally negative comments	56.1
Generally positive comments	12.9
Multiple comments, cannot categorize	<u>31.0</u>
TOTAL	100

Conventional wisdom has it that most persons who come to highway hearings are "aginnners". The large percentage of generally negative comments coded appears to confirm this intuitive conclusion. This finding may have considerable practical implications for highway departments, for as students of politics have long observed, it is easier to veto an action than to initiate and carry an action to its conclusion. The study evidence suggests that most individuals testifying come to hearings to block or deflect a project perceived as undesirable or hurtful rather than to support an alternative.

When these data are tabulated against the rural-urban-Northern Virginia continuum, there appears to be a relationship between degree of urbanization and opposition to a project. Table XXI illustrates this relationship.

TABLE XXI  
EVALUATION OF PROPOSED HIGHWAY BY  
URBAN-RURAL-NORTHERN VIRGINIA AREAS

	Rural %	Urban %	Northern Virginia, %
Generally negative comments	34.0	64.5	75.8
Generally positive comments	12.8	12.9	13.6
Multiple comments, cannot categorize	<u>53.2</u>	<u>22.6</u>	<u>10.6</u>
TOTAL	100	100	100
N	47	123	66

More opposition and hostility appears likely to occur in urban areas, and the more densely populated the urban area the greater the opposition. Conversely, the much lower percentage of comments in rural areas which were either negative or positive suggests that a crystallization of opinion has proceeded much less rapidly in rural areas.

#### OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Analysis of testimony given at highway hearings suggests that persons attending hearings come because of their opposition to a proposed project. Moreover, the opposition appears to increase directly along a rural-urban-Northern Virginia scale. Citizens in urban areas express much greater concern over the community impact of a highway project.

Whether in rural or urban areas, the physical aspects of highways are mentioned most frequently and, if the frequency of mention is an adequate yardstick, generate the most concern among the citizenry. The highway planning, programming, and construction process --how it is actually done--is of much more concern to urban dwellers than to rural folk. Finally, esthetic factors evoke more comment in urban areas than in rural areas, where virtually no concern is expressed.

Most people testifying at highway hearings comment on only one or two items. It is rare for a respondent to comment extensively or across a wide variety of areas.

The researchers record two interesting phenomena based upon their systematic analysis and personal observations at hearings. There appears to be a "central tendency" to the comments at individual hearings. Thus, a majority of comments at one hearing may deal with concerns about displacement from homes and relocation fears, or about the impact of the highway on the rural character of a community, etc. Related to this is what might be labelled a "follow the leader syndrome." At a number of hearings a strong and well articulated statement by one individual would appear to trigger similar follow-up comments by a number of other individuals. Although data are not available at this time to determine if this relationship is statistically significant, it is of enough potential interest to warrant further investigation.

Comparative studies over time are required to see if the thrust of comments change from physical to other categories in the future. It is also necessary to repeatedly sample to see if the proportion of negative versus positive comments changes over time. Follow-up analysis will of course also help provide some indication of the adequacy of the present sample.

Crucial to a better understanding of citizens' comments at highway hearings is the relating of the socioeconomic and similar variables to the specific testimony of each citizen. This would require follow-up in depth interviews with each citizen testifying, which might provide some insight into the "why" set of questions — those dealing with motivation — rather than summing and recording what citizens have said. It is to these motivational mainsprings of hostility that highway departments must address their concern, for an understanding of why citizens oppose highway improvements may suggest ways in which the highway planning process can be improved.





## PART 3

## A PROPOSED STRATEGY FOR PUBLIC HEARINGS

by

L. Ellis Walton, Jr.  
and  
Jerome R. Saroff

Since the passage of the Federal Highway Act of 1968, highway agencies throughout the country have placed increased emphasis on citizen participation in public hearing processes. This new concern for community feedback coupled with the growth of a society which is well versed on avenues available to block highway projects has required road agencies to reexamine the basic methods of presenting proposed projects to the community.

Formerly a highway department based its route location decisions largely on economic, engineering, and esthetic considerations that were supplemented by evaluations of local elected officials. Today, however, it is a whole new ball game because there is increasing evidence that local officials do not always reflect the "community values" of all of their constituents.

Recognizing these facts, the Virginia Department of Highways approved the proposal of the Research Council to study the public hearing process and to suggest a possible new strategy for conducting public hearings.

The researchers enjoyed two major advantages in the conduct of the study that added greatly to its value:

- (1) The receptive attitude of the Department created a favorable climate for the study. The support of the Department's top management, including the district and resident engineers, ensured the researchers full freedom to examine every detail of the highway hearing. Department personnel freely shared their personal opinions and openly discussed the Department's philosophy of public hearings as the study had been endorsed by the Commissioner's staff.
- (2) The researchers were not involved in conducting the hearings, and thus served as impartial observers. This "nonpartisan" observation of the current strategy enabled the authors to evaluate the Department's present policy with relative objectivity.

## EVALUATION OF PRESENT STRATEGY

The research has revealed that the problems which exist in the highway hearing process are to a large degree the result of an outmoded strategy. Public hearings were originally employed to inform the community of proposed projects. However, today it is no longer sufficient to inform the community, but rather it is now desirable and necessary to establish real two-way communications between the highway decision makers and the community. As a result of this investigation the authors have concluded that the public hearing process must again be updated as it was in 1956, when the Department started on the interstate program. It is believed that perhaps the Department is entering the second generation of public hearings, which will require some modifications in order to meet the changing needs of the community.

## FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

1. Plans for the proposed project are not generally easily accessible to the communi

The legal notice, which is distributed to groups such as PTA's, posted in conspicuous places, and published in newspapers, indicates that the plans are available in the city or county engineer's office and the highway residency and district offices. However, these offices are open to the public only during the hours that John Q. Citizen is working. To examine them he must take time off from work.

If the average citizen has not examined plans in detail prior to the public hearing, how can he contribute informed feedback at the public hearing? One can only expect to receive his initial reaction, which is often confused and defensive. The researchers observed many occasions when the first time citizens actually saw the plans was during the public hearing.

2. Highway hearings as presently conducted are too formal and technical.

The general pattern of a hearing starts with 20 to 30 minutes of official rhetoric, which is required by the Federal Highway Administration. This is generally set forth in technical terms that are basic to the engineer's vocabulary but are not understood by the layman. In addition, there are required statements such as project number, etc., which must be included in the manuscript.

3. Current procedure for receiving testimony tends to intimidate some citizens.

The usual format for a highway hearing in Virginia is to have a table in the front of the room at which two or three somber highway engineers are seated, with a tape recorder and a microphone placed in front of the table.

On numerous occasions it appeared to the researchers that Mr. John Q. Citizen was intimidated by the fact that he had to walk to the front of the room (in some cases to a stage) to speak, and then, in addition, a tape recorder and at least one stenographer were recording his comments.

The necessity for an exact transcript of the hearing is recognized. Perhaps participation could be encouraged if mikes were placed in the aisles for the public's convenience. In addition, the recording could be made on a small tape recorder, which would assist transcribing but might not intimidate the citizens as might an imposing array of recording equipment. In addition, the use of a small dictating recorder would facilitate the transcription in that the stenographer could transcribe directly from the tape.

4. Visual aids should be upgraded again.

Just as it was necessary in 1956 with the advent of the interstate system to upgrade visual aids it is the opinion of the authors that the Department should again consider more imaginative visual aids. To illustrate, many of the hearings attended attempted to orient the citizens with the type of visual aid shown in Figure 1. In other hearings the type of visual aid shown in Figure 2 was used.

While some people attending highway hearings are familiar with engineering plans and aerial mosaics, many seem to have difficulty orienting to the exact location of the project. The addition of eye level color photos showing the before and after view at key points would help John Q. Citizen visualize the road in familiar surroundings. These would not have to be expensively mounted photos, but could be inexpensive 35 mm color slides, which are easily visible when properly exposed and shown by modern projectors. The before slides could be taken at the time of the preliminary engineering survey.

In some hearings, small-scale line drawings of the proposed facility were used. A much more effective map, or at least an aerial mosaic with a proposed route shown in some color, would greatly improve the citizen's orientation to the project.

5. Less than 9% of the citizens responding to the questionnaire indicated that they learned of the public hearings by legal notices placed in the newspapers.

Publication of the legal notice in the newspaper appears to serve little practical purpose other than to comply with statutory requirements. Conscious of this fact while the study was in progress, the Department changed from a small classified ad to a two-column six-inch display ad type of legal notice. However, the preliminary findings indicate that even this type ad will have little impact on better informing the public.

The researchers were unable to measure the impact of letters to civic groups such as PTA's, but note that the hearings having the largest attendance appeared to be the ones in which civic associations had actively encouraged participation.

1906



Figure 1. Proposed project in city of Charlottesville.

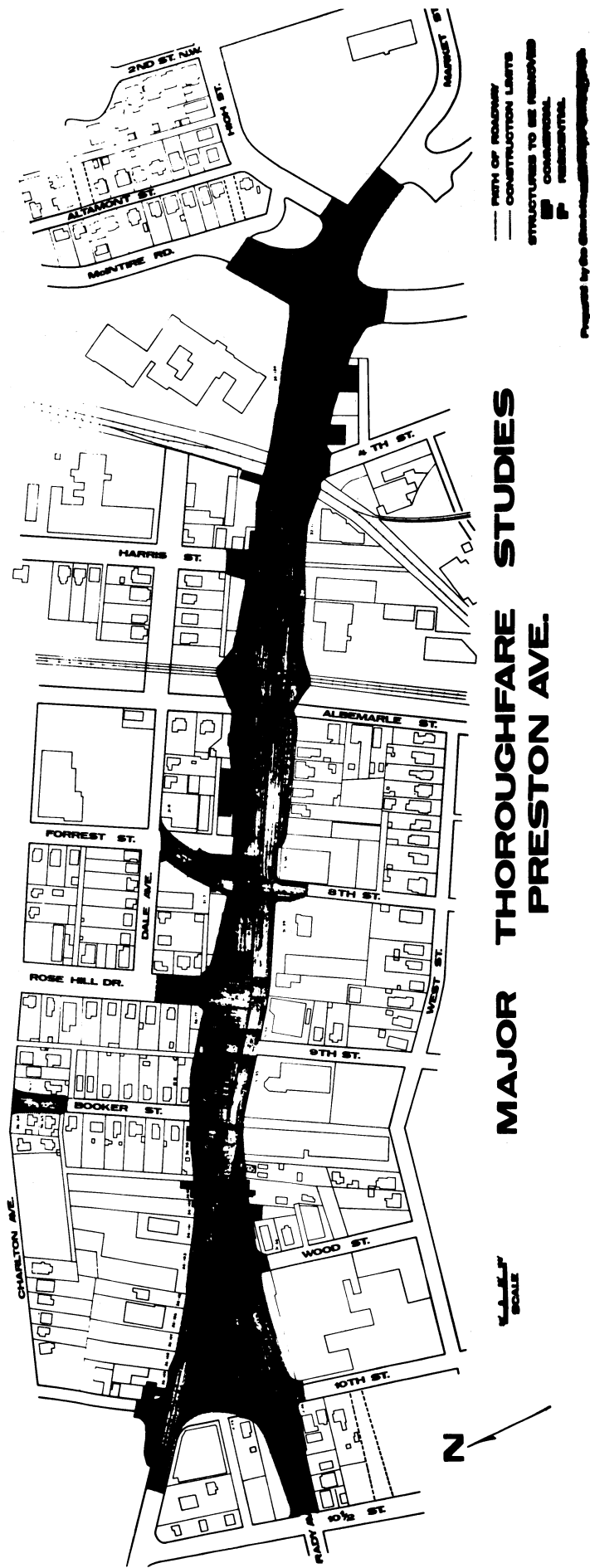


Figure 2. Proposed major thoroughfare in city of Charlottesville.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NEW STRATEGY

To optimize the public hearing process serious consideration should be given to demonstrating to the public that its feedback is an integral part of highway planning. Based on observations of the citizen participants at public hearings, the researchers conclude that basically the citizens believe that highway hearings are pro forma and few changes will result from the opinions expressed. The authors' premise is that a major overhaul of the current modus operandi could enable highway departments to enhance their planning by maximizing citizen feedback.

The new strategy suggested in this paper should not be considered as a panacea and its effectiveness should be evaluated in follow-up studies. Part of the problem with the present process is that highway departments appear to have complied with Federal Highway Administration directives as if they were edicts instead of adapting them imaginatively to meet the needs of the Department and citizens alike.

The strategy recommended here is divided into three phases:

1. Prehearing Strategy
2. Formal Hearing Strategy
3. Posthearing Strategy

#### Prehearing Strategy

If the Highway Department is to receive the maximum benefit from citizen feedback then John Q. Citizen must be well informed on the problem, the alternatives, and the solutions. One possible shortcoming of the present procedure is that it does not consider that the engineers work with the plans for several years, yet John Q. Citizen is expected to evaluate the project after a 15 minute technical presentation.

Based on the study observations, it is apparent that most citizens attending public hearings in Virginia may have very limited knowledge of the proposed facility. Those citizens who do understand the proposed project have gained the knowledge through their own hard work and initiative. In addition there were instances in which the Department engineers were unaware of some community values. For example, at one hearing, citizens were thought to be objecting to sidewalks but actually their opposition was to the width of the sidewalk, which would have required destruction of handsome shade trees.

These comments are not meant to be merely negative, but to emphasize that highway engineers are too involved in day-to-day operations to develop an effective outreach program of community relations. The recommendations offered here may be implemented by assigning additional responsibilities to present personnel, but this action would not be as effective as assigning the responsibility to personnel employed and trained for such tasks.

The following recommendations should considerably increase citizen feedback at highway hearings.

#### Recommended Organizational Strategy

1. Establish a special public hearing unit in the Central Office to handle all matters pertaining to highway hearings. This unit should be staffed with professionals who are well versed in public speaking techniques and diplomacy. This group should either be part of or work closely with those persons conducting environmental studies for the Department.
2. A public relations program should be undertaken to demonstrate to the public that citizen feedback is not merely tolerated but actually desired by the Department.
3. The public hearing group should be prepared to tour the proposed project areas with interested citizens.

#### Prehearing Recommendations

1. Announce all urban project hearings 90 days in advance.
2. Mail letters to all local groups, such as civic associations, garden clubs, PTA's, churches, etc. 60 to 70 days in advance of the hearing date. The letters should express the desire of Department personnel to discuss the proposed project prior to the scheduled hearing.
3. Mail letters to all owners and occupants of properties within  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile of the proposed project. (The Department might consider entering into a contract with a professional mailing service to handle this task.)
4. Arrange for project plans to be readily available at times and locations convenient for the citizens in the immediate community. Also Department personnel should always be available to explain plans to the citizens.
5. Issue news releases whenever Department personnel discuss the proposed projects with citizen groups. This practice should help ensure press coverage, and therefore inform more people and perhaps improve the Department's image.
6. When possible, arrange for frequent 30-second announcements on radio and TV three or four days before the hearing, particularly in prime times.
7. Routinely schedule all hearings at night, unless another time is considered better for a specific community. (An analysis of daytime versus evening hearings indicated that attendance is significantly higher at evening hearings. Therefore, since the Department sincerely wants public feedback, evening hearings appear to offer a better opportunity to get it.)

8. Erect four feet by eight feet signs at both ends of the project. These should show the time, date and location of the hearing. The signs could be made reusable by just changing the time, date and location. These signs would be similar to the ones currently used and entitled "Your Highway Taxes at Work." An example of the proposed wording is shown in Figure 3.
9. Announce that highway department representatives will be present several hours prior to the hearing to informally answer questions. (Based on the researchers' observations, this is a critical point in the development of a successful strategy for highway hearings. Some of the advantages of this approach were demonstrated by an experiment conducted by the Department during the course of this study. An experimental hearing was scheduled for two nights instead of the usual one. The first night was set aside for the highway engineers and the citizens to attempt to establish a meaningful dialogue on the proposed project before the formal hearing was held. The researchers talked informally with many of the citizens who, while objecting to some of the alternatives, were appreciative of the Department's efforts to present the fact as viewed by the engineer. The experimental hearing was the largest and one of the most controversial meetings analyzed by the researchers, yet more than 59% of the persons attending indicated they believed that the hearing was conducted in a good manner by the Department. While this approach appeared to be useful, perhaps a separate night might not be necessary and a question and answer session prior to the hearing might serve to establish the desired dialogue.)



THIS SECTION OF HIGHWAY BEING CONSIDERED FOR IMPROVEMENT

PUBLIC HEARING

OCT. 1, 1970

7:30 P.M.

MANCHESTER HIGH SCHOOL

YOUR ATTENDANCE AND VIEWS ARE SOLICITED

SCALE 1"=1'

Figure 3. Proposed sign for advertising public hearings.

Formal Hearing

If the prehearing strategy has been effective then the hearing should be largely a formality. Nevertheless, the Department should plan the agenda as soundly as the prehearing activities.

1. The district or resident engineer should preside, but a representative from the hearing unit should present the engineering and environmental considerations and field most of the questions. The district or resident engineers should be used as moderators only. The district or resident engineer should not present the proposed projects since he is involved on a day-to-day basis with the local people and might lose some of his effectiveness if exposed to unnecessary controversy. (Most adverse comments about proposed projects were directed at the Central Highway Office in Richmond and not the local engineer. However, when the local man is asked to make the formal presentation he then becomes part of the controversy instead of remaining neutral.)
2. A twenty-minute time limit should be established for testimony from individuals, and this limit should be stated when the meeting is opened. If anyone requires more time he should be encouraged to submit a written statement.
3. The audience should be welcomed and given the explanation that the primary reason for the meeting is to receive the views of the community on the proposed project.
4. Each person should be requested to complete a registration card. It should be explained that the cards will be used to determine those desiring to testify and to advise them of the Highway Commission's decision on the project.
5. Microphones should be provided in the aisles for the convenience of persons testifying.
6. Presentations should be in layman's terms and not in technical jargon.
7. The professional team should explain briefly:
  - (a) How traffic counts are taken,
  - (b) Origin and destination studies,
  - (c) Traffic forecasting, and
  - (d) Impact on existing streets if no action is taken.

(A number of citizens expressed ignorance of how the Department arrived at its projections and expressed disbelief in the traffic counts used to justify the proposed project. A brief explanation might minimize these objections.)

8. Self-addressed envelopes should be provided for persons submitting written statements. (This practice should make it easier for the public to respond and would demonstrate that the Department is sincerely seeking opinions.)
9. Arrangements should be made to have representatives from the following agencies present after the meeting for individual conferences:
  - (a) Relocation section
  - (b) Small business administration
  - (c) Virginia Employment Commission, to provide employment counseling with relocatees if necessary.
10. Use more imaginative visual aids.

#### Posthearing Strategy

The posthearing strategy is as important as that for the prior phases. The Department should impress upon the public that their views are essential to highway planning and will be seriously evaluated. The following recommendations are minimum and should be expanded to fit local needs.

1. Department personnel should be available after the meeting to discuss individual problems.
2. Any important feedback from citizens should be followed up. Suggestions made in the meeting should be explored and the disposition of each suggestion should be explained in writing to the individual or group making it.
3. A letter from the resident engineer should be sent to all persons attending the hearing to inform them of the Highway Commission's decision on the project. This action would be good public relations and would tend to minimize the citizens' feeling that highway hearings are pro forma.

