

Steering Towards Inclusion: Lessons Learned on Steering Committees for Inclusive Transit Planning

By Grayson Lee
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Inclusion in transit planning often begins with a steering committee, but what is a steering committee? How is a steering committee formed? What contributes to its success? In this brief, [Transit Planning 4 All](#) (TP4A) explores inclusive strategies and lessons learned for developing steering committees that increase trust, strengthen communication and ultimately, improve coordinated transportation services for older adults and people with disabilities.

Transit Planning 4 All is an inclusive transportation planning project that funded a series of [pilot projects](#) across the nation. For each project, a steering committee that included people with disabilities, older adults, and other stakeholders helped guide the project. On August 31, 2023, Transit Planning 4 All [held a virtual roundtable](#) where project managers from three past TP4A projects discussed challenges and successes in forming their steering committees.

Virtual Roundtable: Panelists

- **Angel Bond** manages the Mobility for All (M4A) program in Boulder County, Colorado. Through a TP4A planning grant, M4A implemented a volunteer driver program in the mountains and launched a technology education project. [Learn more about the M4A project here.](#)
- **Margo Iñiguez Dawes** works with the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) in Seattle, Washington. SDOT worked with TP4A on an inclusive Mobility on Demand project. The project provided vouchers to older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers to use with pre-existing on-demand ride services. [Learn more about the SDOT pilot implementation here](#) and [learn about the SDOT inclusive planning process here.](#)
- **Estella Hollander** is a transportation planner at Mountain Line, the public transit agency in Flagstaff, Arizona. Through a TP4A Mobility on Demand grant, Mountain Line implemented a microtransit pilot in an area of Flagstaff with over 10 health & human service agencies which was previously unserved by public transit. [Learn more about Mountain Line's project here.](#)

WHAT IS A STEERING COMMITTEE?

A cornerstone of inclusive planning, steering committees are a group of community stakeholders that guide a project. Steering committees are often made up of participants (individuals from the community) and partners (representatives of stakeholder organizations). While similar in name and function to advisory committees, David Bernstein, a member of the [Transit Planning 4 All team](#), often makes an important distinction: “Advisory committees *advise*. Steering committees *steer*.” A well-formed and well-run steering committee doesn’t simply advise, but is an essential part of the project team. While a successful project engages many members of the community, the project works most closely with participants in the steering committee, so involving the committee in activities like engagement and implementation creates a more inclusive and cohesive project.

TP4A defines inclusion in transit planning as “the active and meaningful involvement of older adults and people with disabilities in transit planning and operations.” Active and meaningful involvement means that participants are not only included, but share in decision-making and hold leadership roles. The [Pathway to Inclusion](#) is a graphic tool created by TP4A that can be used to measure the inclusiveness of program activities. Inclusion, however, is not the only important aspect of inclusive planning. When forming a steering committee, remember to focus on diversity and equity as well. A steering committee should reflect the diversity of the community impacted by the project and include potential riders of a transportation program. Reach out to populations in the community historically underserved by transit, which may include older adults, people with disabilities, caregivers, people of color, and people with limited English proficiency, among others.

FORMING A STEERING COMMITTEE

Forming a steering committee begins with outreach. Contact people your organization is already connected with, such as people involved in previous programs or committees, as well as seeking new partners. If advertising publicly, social media can be a great resource for reaching new committee members.

Consider using a steering committee application process and a formal membership, as it solidifies commitment to the project.

→Mountain Line sent letters to existing paratransit clients asking if they would be interested in the steering committee.

→To get connected with new people, Mobility for All posted about the steering committee on the social app Nextdoor.

SDOT’s Steering Committee: A Grassroots Approach

SDOT’s process for forming their steering committee differed from traditional outreach, as the project was initiated through an individual stakeholder approaching SDOT. Given the grassroots nature of the project, they didn’t use an application process, but rather formed the committee mainly through word of mouth and personal connections, focusing on including people with disabilities and older adults.

Tips for Diverse Steering Committees

When conducting outreach and weighing applications, remember the importance of having a committee with a diversity of perspectives and experiences. Before selecting the members of the steering committee, consider the makeup of the community and the goals of the project. Will the project serve people with limited English proficiency? Will it include driver education? While not always useful, an application or interview process can help with creating a committee with a balance of perspectives.

→ The Mobility 4 All pilot operated in a region with urban, suburban, and mountain areas, so they made sure to form a committee with geographic diversity.

SDOT's committee had members with a diversity of experience in engaging with government. Some members were used to contacting government through advocacy work, while others had no experience.

"We want to hear from people that we've not historically heard from, but in order for their input to be meaningful and effective, we want them to have enough context and background to really understand what the opportunities are in the government.... So, we spent a lot of time developing background and familiarity. How does the city of Seattle work? How does the Seattle Department of Transportation work? How do new transportation programs come to be? How are decisions made? How does funding work? All of this before actually diving into the details of what type of program we are going to come up with. What are all of the parameters going to be? We wanted to make sure to set the context and answer people's questions so that they had enough information to be dangerous, so to speak." – Margo Iñiguez Dawes, SDOT

LEADING A STEERING COMMITTEE

Check out other TP4A briefs for ideas on strengthening communication and building partnerships:

- [Brief on Partnerships](#)
- [Brief on Communication](#)

Leading a steering committee effectively is just as important as forming it. Think outside the box for meeting formats, and consider holding meetings in a neutral place, outside of a government agency.

SDOT's advice is to work on building trust, but don't rush. Their steering committee spent the first 20-30 minutes of each meeting on icebreakers. While spending intentional time getting to know each other is always important, Iñiguez Dawes explained that it was even more vital in their virtual setting, as in-person interactions are naturally less formal.

Leading a steering committee can also mean giving leadership over to members of the steering committee. Encourage committee members to take on leadership roles and form subcommittees where their interests lie.

Angel Bond, from Mobility for All, explained that managing expectations is a key part of leading a steering committee. Be sure to keep committee members updated on how a project is progressing (or not progressing) through bureaucracy.

“If you really want a successful steering committee and to really get inclusive planning where the group feels like they're making decisions and their decisions are actually influencing the outcomes of the project, then you need to give up decision-making control to an extent. Obviously, some things our board had approve, like fares – how much the microtransit costs for a rider.... But as you delve more into inclusive planning, look at those policies or look at what the CEO needs to approve and maybe switch some of that control over to the steering committee.” – Estella Hollander, Mountain Line

Another important aspect of leading a steering committee is thinking through the process for decision-making. Estella Hollander, from Mountain Line, advocates for letting go of some control and letting the steering committee know what decisions they are authorized to make.

COMPENSATION

Compensation is another important element of successful steering committees, as it shows respect for the time and expertise of participants. SDOT's steering committee was compensated using grant funding, a stipulation that was present in their original grant. Margo Iñiguez Dawes from SDOT said that it can sometimes be difficult to compensate participants using grant funding, but putting into their original application helped give them the authority to use funding in that manner.

Angel Bond from Mobility for All also advocates for compensating committee members. “People are giving something to you that you can't get without them, right? They're giving you their knowledge, they're giving you their experience, so value that. If you can't find a way to compensate and make it worth their while, don't expect people to just volunteer endlessly because the net selects people who already are engaged and already feel the privilege of being engaged in the process.” – Angel Bond, Mobility for All

SDOT also compensated at an hourly rate, instead of giving a stipend, which allowed for different levels of participation from different steering committee members. They advertised that participation in the steering committee could range from 3-12 hours per month. The minimum showed potential members the necessary commitment, while the maximum allowed members to participate more in the project while being compensated fairly. If monetary compensation is not possible, there are other ways to demonstrate respect for the committee member's time and expertise. See examples from Margo Iñiguez Dawes below.

“Demonstrating the value that you place in the input that you're getting from impacted stakeholders is critical to the success of a really inclusive program. That can be through compensating people's time with money. ... That's really the most valuable way, but there are other ways to demonstrate that you value their input. That can be through co-partnership models, where you have a project co-lead who is outside of the government agency. It can be through giving people leadership opportunities like within a steering committee. ... Making sure that you're providing food when there is in-person engagement and making sure the food is good and just really valuing people's time, making it easy for them to get there, and treating them the way that you would a respected colleague.” – Margo Iñiguez Dawes, SDOT

More Lessons Learned from Transit Planning 4 All Projects

Steering committees have been a central feature of all of TP4A's inclusive planning demonstration projects. Here are more lessons learned from TP4A's projects.

- Establish expectations of the community and steering committee members as clearly as possible in the early phases. ([Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington](#))
- Forming additional work groups that focus on a specific component of a project creates an opportunity for individuals with specific interests and expertise to focus this expertise and their energy on specific aspects of the project. ([Ride Connection](#))
- Plan the membership of your Advisory Panel [Steering Committee] so that it reflects the diversity of your community both in stakeholder programs and individual members. ([Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington](#))
- Create a culture that welcomes engagement and involvement of participants in the planning process by soliciting feedback on an ongoing basis and using a variety of methods (verbal solicitation, polls, affinity processes, etc.). ([Mountain Line Liaison](#)).

Transit Planning 4 All is a transportation planning project focused on promoting inclusive planning. TP4A is a partnership between the Administration for Community Living, the Community Transportation Association of America, USAging, the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston, and DJB Evaluation Consulting.

