INTRODUCTION

The Southern Gateway (TSG) transportation improvement project was undertaken by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to develop a locally-preferred plan of action to solve transportation problems along the IH 35E/US 67 corridor in southern Dallas County.

Knowing and understanding the community’s issues and concerns was critical in maintaining project momentum and led to a successful public outreach program for TSG project. Through the use of public outreach tools, the team was able to acquire first hand information from stakeholders who may have silenced during the initial process, but could have potentially opposed at the end.

Stakeholders interested in the project included residents, commuters, businesses, property owners, civic groups and other community organizations. Each stakeholder played an important role in offering ideas to improve the transportation situation in the project area.

Through positive, proactive community involvement and genuine interest in community input, TSG has proven that open communication between all parties can lead to a community solution that is socially and environmentally acceptable.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

IH 35 was constructed in the late 1950s through the early 1960s as part of the interstate highway system developed throughout the United States. IH 35 extends from Mexico to Canada and is a vital corridor for intrastate, interstate and international movement of people and goods.

In the Dallas/Ft. Worth area, IH 35 splits into two separate legs: IH 35W which travels through Ft. Worth and IH 35E which travels through Dallas.

The current US 67 freeway was upgraded to accommodate the expanding population and commerce in southwest Dallas County and in Ellis County.

Recently, TxDOT and Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) have constructed interim High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes along IH 35E and US 67 from downtown Dallas south to IH 20. These HOV lanes provide immediate partial relief to the current congestion along these highways, especially during peak hours. These lanes were designed to be temporary until a complete transportation solution is developed.
PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROCESS

By utilizing a successful public involvement process, TxDOT and HNTB Corporation were able to reach a consensus solution that would provide transportation improvements with the minimum possible impact to adjacent property owners as well as being socially and environmentally acceptable.

Early Coordination

The TSG team, along with the TxDOT Dallas District Project Manager, conducted various individual meetings with public officials who represented districts within the study area. Representatives were presented a packet of information and were given a brief overview of the project. These meetings allowed public officials to provide early input into the project and identify issues of concern to the officials and their constituents.

One of the goals of TSG project was to provide a decision-making process built on the consensus of the stakeholders. The stakeholders for this project include community interests (residents, commuters, businesses, freight carriers, environmental groups, and others), local elected officials, and involved agencies. While “consensus” does not mean a unanimous decision, every effort was made to satisfy the concerns of all groups. A consensus approach does not give veto power to individuals, nor does it allow the concerns of a group to be swept aside by a simple majority of the participants. The goal was to formulate a plan of action which has broad acceptance from the community at-large, and which addresses and balances the legitimate concerns of the involved parties.

Identification of interested groups enabled the study team to receive critical input from stakeholders who were interested the project. A letter and a nomination form were mailed to various organizations requesting the appointment of a representative to a suggested work group. TSG Study team began meeting with the work groups March 2002.

The following sections highlight some of the tools used in this process.
Policy Work Group

The Policy Work Group was comprised of political representatives and senior staff of local agencies considered to have a role in funding, permitting, and processing transportation improvements within the study area. The responsibilities of the Policy Work Group members were to:

- Offer suggestions and guide the development of the study
- Receive and access reports on progress and schedules
- Coordinate with their respective agencies
- Provide oversight of major activities associated with the study

The work group was composed of the following organizations:

- The Cities of Dallas, DeSoto, Duncanville, Lancaster, and Cedar Hill  
  [www.dallascityhall.com](http://www.dallascityhall.com)  
  [www.ci.desoto.tx.us](http://www.ci.desoto.tx.us)  
  [www.ci.duncanville.tx.us](http://www.ci.duncanville.tx.us)  
  [www.ci.lancaster.tx.us](http://www.ci.lancaster.tx.us)  
  [www.cedarhilltx.gov.org](http://www.cedarhilltx.gov.org)
- North Texas Tollway Authority  [www.ntta.org](http://www.ntta.org)
Staff Work Group

TxDOT conducted monthly meetings with members of the Staff Work Group (SWG). This group was composed of representatives from agencies and local government which could possibly have a role in funding, permitting and/or planning, and implementing any proposed transportation improvements within the project’s study area. Letters of invitation were mailed to identified agencies to appoint a representative to serve on the SWG for the duration of the project.

The role of the SWG included providing input on policy decisions and guiding on the technical development of the project. In addition, the responsibilities of the SWG involved:

- Receiving and assessing reports on the project development
- Providing oversight on major activities associated directly with the project and/or within the project study area
- Assisting in the detailed development and evaluation of alternatives, reviewing project activities and findings and coordinating agency activities associated with the study

The SWG was composed of the following organizations:

- Federal Highway Administration www.fhwa.dot.gov
- Federal Transit Administration www.fta.dot.gov
- Federal Railroad Administration www.fra.dot.gov
Community Work Group

During the initial phase of the project, the team developed and worked closely with a Community Work Group (CWG). The CWG was an integral part of TSG project development. These evening work groups offered an opportunity for members of the community to provide input and opinions on issues that guided this development. CWG membership was determined from an adjacent property owner’s database. Notices and handouts regarding the meetings were sent to each person on the mailing list obtained from the database.

The primary role of the CWG was to monitor the study process from the community perspective, and provide input, ideas and concerns to the study team. The CWG met on a monthly basis during the study, from March 2002 to March 2004. The group was composed of representatives from each of the following sectors of the community:

- Neighborhood Associations and School Districts
- Business Interests and Land Owners
• Environmental and Recreational Interests
• Civic Group, Chambers of Commerce, and Churches
• Community Leaders
• Economic Development Corporations (Dallas, DeSoto Cedar Hill, Lancaster, and Duncanville)
• Texas Department of Transportation
• Consultants

Early in the project, the team identified adjacent neighborhoods and their representative organizations to incorporate into the CWG. Although nomination letters were mailed to various organizations requesting an appointment of their own representative to the group, additional members joined the committee as interest in the project grew. The shaping of the CWG was closely coordinated with staff from area cities to ensure appropriate representation.

The final make-up of the CWG for TSG Study comprised some 67 members. In addition, many of the represented groups provided alternate members to attend in case the primary member was absent. All meetings were open to the public.

PUBLIC OUTREACH TOOLS

Project Web Site

A customized, professional, and interactive public information Web site was also created for TSG. This Web site was designed to keep the public informed on project development and progress. The Web site was also updated regularly to include upcoming dates for formal meetings and hearings and informal gatherings. The Web site is located at www.thesoutherngateway.com. Information on this Web site is offered in both English and Spanish.

Information on the Web site includes:

• Project Overview
• Community Involvement
• Study Map and Graphics
  o Includes the Environmental Assessment document, photographs and plan schematics
• Project News
• FAQs
• Related Links
**Project Information Packets**

Also utilizing the adjacent property owner database, project information packets were hand-delivered to businesses and residences located directly adjacent to the project’s existing freeway. These information packets were made available in both English and Spanish. This information packet was delivered to over 450 adjacent property sites. Click here to view examples of this packet. LINK?

**PROJECT NEWSLETTER**

There were four editions of a bilingual newsletter published during the course of the study. The newsletters were intended to keep the public and interested organizations informed of the study progress, and of the dates, times and locations of public meetings. Newsletters were also distributed at various locations and were made available to stakeholders interested in TSG project. A copy of the 2005 newsletter can be found both in English and in Spanish on TSG Web site [http://www.thesoutherngateway.com/servlet/com.hntb.cs.servlets.NewsDocumentManagement?option=1&projectid=21](http://www.thesoutherngateway.com/servlet/com.hntb.cs.servlets.NewsDocumentManagement?option=1&projectid=21).

**PUBLIC MEETING SERIES**

Three series of public meetings for TSG project were held at key points in the study process—April 2002, July 2002, and November 2002. In each of the three series, there were two meetings, identical in content, but held in separate locations to facilitate involvement from a wider geographic area. Each meeting opened with an approximate one-hour open house to display drawings and maps as well as answer any questions regarding the project. The open house was followed by a technical presentation, summarizing the issues being addressed by the project, the status of public involvement activities, and the study’s development of alternative solutions. After the technical presentation, the attendees were asked for their questions and comments. All of the meetings provided an opportunity to interact with the study team, as well as opportunities for spoken or written comments from interested citizens. Information provided during these meetings can be found on the Web site at [http://www.thesoutherngateway.com/servlet/com.hntb.cs.servlets.NewsDocumentManagement?option=1&projectid=21](http://www.thesoutherngateway.com/servlet/com.hntb.cs.servlets.NewsDocumentManagement?option=1&projectid=21).
PUBLIC HEARING SERIES

Proposed improvements were presented at two public hearings held during August 2005. The redesign of IH 35E (8th Street to IH 20) and US 67 (IH 35E to FM 1382) consists of adding freeway lanes, adding HOV lanes, lessoning the sharp freeway curvature, providing full shoulders on the freeway and HOV lanes, and redesigned ramping. The environmental affects of the proposed improvements were documented in an Environmental Assessment (EA). Individuals included in the previously mentioned database and all interested parties were invited to attend these hearings.

Each hearing opened with an approximate one-hour open house to display drawings and maps and to answer project-related questions. The open house was followed by a technical presentation of proposed traffic congestion solution. After the technical presentation, the attendees were asked for their comments. Identical information was presented at both hearings. Information provided during these hearings can be found on the Web site at [http://www.thesoutherngateway.com/servlet/com.hntb.cs.servlets.NewsDocumentManagement?option=1&projectid=21](http://www.thesoutherngateway.com/servlet/com.hntb.cs.servlets.NewsDocumentManagement?option=1&projectid=21)

CONCLUSION

The public involvement process put forth by this project provided TxDOT, the lead transportation planning authority, and other participating agencies, a method for including stakeholder input while at the same time addressing transportation needs in the IH 35/US 67 corridor. This process enabled transportation professionals to plan with the public, and consider public input as part of the decision. This pro-active approach helped to streamline the decision-making process in achieving public and agency consensus on a locally preferred plan of action.

Building on the success of TSG project, TxDOT and the Dallas/Plano HNTB team have initiated the Gateway Horizon project—US 67 Improvement Study. This project will extend the limits of TSG south to the proposed US 287 bypass and will directly involve the cities of Cedar Hill and Midlothian.

The goal of this and all future highway improvement projects is to contribute positively to the economic development of the affected project areas through full understanding of the positive and negatives impacts of the suggested alternatives throughout the lifetime of the project.