



Early Public Involvement



Verona Road/West Beltline Needs Assessment Study

WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

assessment process, with special efforts to involve Allied Drive neighborhood residents.

WisDOT's efforts to engage Allied Drive community residents in the needs assessment study process help answer three key questions about involving low-income and minority populations in transportation planning efforts:

- What is the value of public involvement from a transportation planning perspective?
- How is meaningful public involvement best achieved?
- What are the difficulties of conducting effective outreach to a low income, transient community?

Ultimately, WisDOT's creative and persistent efforts to involve stakeholders — including low-income and minority residents — early in the planning process provided several important benefits. Not only were a number of key issues and concerns identified that might otherwise have been overlooked, but also public support for the process was mobilized through the participation of a wide variety of groups. Although it was occasionally difficult to attain meaningful public involvement, WisDOT's commitment of time and effort enabled this project to advance from a dialogue that strictly addressed needs and concerns to a discussion of possible solutions — with surprisingly little public acrimony. In a community such as Madison, which has been reluctant to embrace major transportation projects, establishing this type of open communication and cooperation is a significant accomplishment.

Introduction

In 1997, Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) initiated a process leading to a transportation needs assessment study of Verona Road and the West Beltline, two of the City of Madison's most heavily traveled corridors. Over the years, congestion problems at the intersection of these two highways have increased significantly. The configuration of the intersection of Verona Road and the West Beltline essentially isolates the predominantly minority community of Allied Drive from the rest of Madison.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) does not require a needs assessment study for highway projects. However, given the political sensitivity of implementing major public works undertakings in the progressive community of Madison, WisDOT decided to undertake this effort *before* entertaining any discussion of an actual project. The purpose of the study was to analyze the Verona Road/West Beltline corridors from numerous road user perspectives, including drivers, pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users, and those of neighborhood residents and businesses. WisDOT initiated a variety of public outreach strategies to obtain public input into the needs

The Madison Region and Community

Madison is the capital city of Wisconsin and home of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, one of the Nation's largest universities. With a population slightly more than 200,000, Madison is Wisconsin's second largest city. Madison is located in Dane County, which apart from the city and the surrounding metropolitan area, is largely rural and agricultural (see Snapshot of the City of Madison).

Madison has a relatively diverse economic base. The public sector is the area's largest employer. Approximately 66,000 individuals — one-third of the Madison metropolitan area's workforce — are employed in local, State, and Federal government. The University of Wisconsin provides many of these jobs. Because of the university, Madison is also emerging as an important high-tech employment center. Most notably, the university plays an integral role in research and development for Wisconsin's dairy and agricultural industries, and Madison remains a leading center both on- and off-campus for this essential state industry.

Madison has long had a reputation as a stronghold for liberal thinking and civic activism, and there is usually intense public involvement in decisions affecting public schools, land-use questions, historic preservation, and other issues. Madison is home to a substantial number of public interest organizations, and major public decisions typically require a consensus of many groups, a situation that frequently leads to gridlock. For example, it took 50 years to successfully site and complete the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center, a building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

The Allied Drive community is an exception to the vast majority of Madison neighborhoods, which are primarily stable and middle class. Located in the southwestern portion of the city, Allied Drive is home to approximately 4,000 residents. The neighborhood has a significantly greater proportion of minority and low- to moderate-income residents than the rest of the

Snapshot of the City of Madison

Location:

- Wisconsin State Capital
- Main campus of University of Wisconsin

Population: Over 200,000 Persons

Racial and ethnic composition:

- Minority Population - 10.5 percent
- African American - 4.2 percent
- Asian - 4.0 percent
- Hispanic - 2.0 percent
- American Indian - 0.3 percent

Median household income: \$29,240

Households earning less than \$20,000: 26 percent

Source: 1990 U.S. Census

Snapshot of the Allied Drive Neighborhood

Location:

Southwest Madison, at the intersection of Verona Road and the West Beltline

Population: 4,000

Racial and ethnic composition:

- African American - 70 percent
- Southeast Asian - 15 percent
- Hispanic - 5 percent
- Other - 10 percent

Median household income: \$21,600

Households below poverty line: 30 percent*

Transportation concerns:

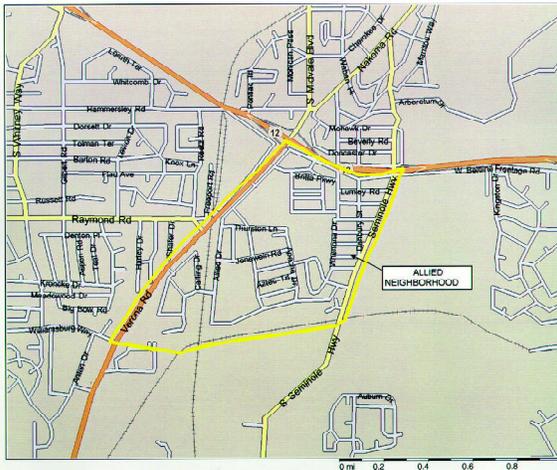
- 80 percent of residents do not own vehicles.
- The neighborhood is served by only one bus line.

Sources: 1990 U.S. Census.

Preliminary Estimate of Weighted Average Poverty Thresholds for 1999, U.S. Census Bureau, 1999.

Vehicle data from Allied-Dunn's Marsh Neighborhood Center.

* The U.S. poverty threshold for a family of four was \$12,674 at the time of the 1990 U.S. Census. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates the comparable poverty threshold at \$17,028 in 1999.



The Allied Drive neighborhood has a higher proportion of minority and low-income residents than other parts of Madison.

city, a fact which is common knowledge in Madison (see Snapshot of the Allied Drive Neighborhood).

The Allied Drive neighborhood was originally developed in the 1960s with construction of more than 1,500 residential dwelling units. The neighborhood remained largely middle class until an influx of low-income minorities to Dane County in the 1990s. Allied Drive became an entry point into the Madison area for many of these individuals. The neighborhood developed a transient character as many residents moved out as soon as they were able to find alternative living arrangements.

The isolation of the neighborhood caused by the intersection of Verona Road and the West Beltline also separates Allied Drive from the rest of Madison, helping to concentrate poverty in the area. Transportation deficiencies were clearly among the multiple causes of the Allied Drive neighborhood's increasing economic distress. Approximately 80 percent of residents do not own a vehicle, and only one bus line serves the neighborhood. Limited transportation options help explain the "working poor" status of many Allied Drive residents because they simply do not have access to jobs that pay more

than minimum wage. Lack of reliable, efficient transportation also makes it difficult for parents to participate actively in their children's schools.

What Happened

In 1997, WisDOT initiated a process to assess the needs of the Verona Road and West Beltline corridors. While the issues confronting the Allied Drive neighborhood were only one part of a broader set of area transportation problems, the specific needs of these residents could easily have been ignored without proper outreach and attention. Targeted community involvement throughout the needs assessment process helped WisDOT keep sight of the Allied Drive neighborhood's particular concerns.

As noted, Verona Road and the West Beltline are the two principal arterial roadways serving the west Madison area. The West Beltline was built during the 1950s and Verona Road dates to at least the 1920s. These two highways were originally constructed across primarily rural and agricultural areas outside of Madison serving as entry points into the city from the south and the west. Since the 1950s, however, the expansion of Madison's western fringe has gradually incorporated the two corridors into the Madison metropolitan area. Increasing traffic volumes on Verona Road and the West Beltline over the years have begun to place serious strains on both arterials and cause major delays, congestion, and diverted traffic onto neighborhood streets.

While the purpose and need for transportation projects must be described as part of the NEPA impact assessment process on projects that require Federal funding or permits, the NEPA process is not always the best forum for an initial assessment of transportation needs. WisDOT was mindful of the potential role of pre-NEPA transportation studies to identify and build support for transportation solutions acceptable to a diverse set of stakeholders. Recognizing that a project of this magnitude would be difficult to advance in the highly politicized community of Madison, WisDOT

Project Chronology

1948-53

West Beltline is constructed as a 2-lane roadway.

1997

WisDOT initiates process to assess the needs of the Verona Road and West Beltline corridors.

1997-99

Meetings held to obtain public input into the needs assessment process.

May 1999

Verona Road/West Beltline Mayor's Advisory Committee is formed.

June 1999

A charrette presents the needs assessment study's findings to the public and begins to identify solutions.

July 1999

Verona Road/West Beltline Needs Assessment study is released.

March 2000

Mayor's Advisory Committee issues recommendations for short-term improvements to the Verona Road and West Beltline corridors.

May 2000

Mayor's Advisory Committee introduces resolution into city council advising WisDOT to initiate the NEPA process for the Verona Road and West Beltline corridors.

determined that a thorough evaluation of needs should precede any discussion of solutions. It was also clear that the needs assessment phase would require extensive public involvement to build the constituency necessary to advance recommended projects to the next stage. Thus, a major public outreach effort over a 2-year period from 1997 to 1999 began the needs assessment.

During the course of this public outreach process, extra efforts were made to involve the predominantly minority community of Allied Drive just south of the West Beltline along Verona Road. With relatively few vehicle owners, this neighborhood was concerned chiefly with pedestrian, bicycle, and transit issues. A neighborhood open house at the Allied-Dunn's Marsh Neighborhood Center was held to explain the study process to neighborhood residents and obtain input from the community. In addition, a representative from the Center was appointed to a committee convened by the mayor of Madison as an advisory group to the project.

Participating Allied Drive residents voiced concerns about safety and accessibility, including:

- The section of Verona Road adjacent to the Allied Drive community had no sidewalks, although residents pointed to the presence of well-worn footpaths as evidence of significant pedestrian traffic.
- Allied Drive residents found it difficult to cross Verona Road to access retail establishments on the west side of the street. Efforts to cross 7 lanes of traffic frequently left pedestrians stranded halfway across the intersection because the light changed before they had time to reach the other side.
- Traffic and pedestrian issues not only contributed to the isolation of the Allied Drive community from the rest of Madison, but they also presented a serious safety threat to community residents. In winter 1998, an 11-year-old girl trying to cross Verona Road to reach a convenience store on the other side was struck and seriously injured by a hit-and-run driver.

The Verona Road/West Beltline Mayor's Advisory Committee

The Mayor's Advisory Committee played an important role in advancing the Verona Road/West Beltline planning process beyond the needs assessment phase. The committee, which included city council members, neighborhood organizations (including Allied Drive), and business groups, served as a forum for building a constituency around the project and as a vehicle for moving the project forward.

A March 2000 committee report asked WisDOT to begin implementing short-term improvements for the Verona Road and West Beltline corridors. Several

months later, the Committee introduced a resolution into the city council advising WisDOT to initiate the NEPA process. The resolution calls on WisDOT to develop transportation solutions consistent with the goals identified through this very public needs assessment process. If the city council passes this resolution, it will be a significant milestone in Madison's transportation history, illustrating the importance of meaningful public involvement by all stakeholders, including low-income and minority residents, in the earliest stages of the transportation planning process.

An important aspect of WisDOT's outreach to the Allied Drive neighborhood was a partnership with Akira Toki Middle School, which is attended by children from Allied Drive and a number of other west Madison neighborhoods. WisDOT staff worked with students and teachers to develop a transportation and land use curriculum, which included having students prepare a pedestrian needs assessment for the Verona Road corridor. As part of the project, students conducted traffic counts and speed studies, interviewed community residents, and inventoried facilities. Students presented their findings to parents, WisDOT staff, city and county officials, and other interested individuals in a group presentation at the Madison municipal building.

The needs assessment study of Verona Road and the West Beltline incorporated comments and suggestions of Allied Drive community residents, together with those of the many other groups and individuals contacted through the public outreach process. Study findings were introduced to the community during a charrette at Akira Toki Middle School in June 1999. Roughly 150 neighborhood residents, business owners, public officials, and other stakeholders packed the school gymnasium on a hot, rainy summer evening to hear a presentation about the study and provide feedback.



Akira Toki Middle School students learn firsthand the challenge of community-based transportation planning.

The charrette served both as a forum for introducing the study's findings to the community and as a bridge to Phase II of the project — identifying solutions. Workshop participants were asked to brainstorm about short- and long-term solutions, and their ideas were collected, organized, and presented to the Verona Road/West Beltline Mayor's Advisory Committee. Some short-term improvements identified by charrette participants were implemented the following year,

including two pedestrian improvements along Verona Road adjacent to the Allied Drive neighborhood:

- A new pedestrian-activated signal at the median to facilitate safer and quicker pedestrian crossings of Verona Road.
- Improved accessibility to a pedestrian signal previously activated only by stepping over a guardrail.

WisDOT's efforts to involve representatives from Allied Drive in the decision-making process ensured that issues and concerns important to the neighborhood were recognized and acted upon even as the project moves beyond needs assessment to identifying and evaluating solutions.

Effective Environmental Justice Practices

The Verona Road/West Beltline Needs Assessment study provides important lessons about engaging members of the public in transportation decision-

The Verona Road/West Beltline Needs Assessment Community Outreach Process

- Held approximately 70 meetings with neighborhood organizations, local businesses, elected officials, and other stakeholders.
- Conducted in-the-street interviews to help identify pedestrian and bicycle deficiencies throughout the study area.
- Used creative engagement of local schools and children to identify pedestrian needs.
- Conducted a design charrette to explore needs, present study findings to the public, obtain feedback, and identify solutions.



Short-term improvements resulting from community outreach efforts included creating access to a pedestrian signal previously activated only by stepping over a guardrail.

making processes. Efforts to promote public involvement should begin at the earliest planning stages that identify purpose and need. WisDOT's aggressive public outreach during the needs assessment phase of the project, including nearly 70 meetings, sensitized decision makers to community concerns and helped foster community buy-in to the project. Later on, the Mayor's Advisory Committee served as an additional vehicle for public participation and kept decision makers informed about community concerns about the project.

WisDOT and its partners used creative strategies to engage the public in the process. In addition to public meetings and the design charrette, WisDOT produced a 13-minute video to describe the needs assessment study. More than 200 copies of the video were distributed to city council members, local media, neighborhood organizations, business groups, and other stakeholders. In addition, involving local school children in the needs assessment process provided a sidewalk-level view of the world and produced a



Roughly 150 neighborhood residents, business owners, public officials, and other stakeholders packed the school gymnasium to learn about the study and provide feedback.

number of useful suggestions that were incorporated into the study.

Involving the Allied Drive community in the project presented special challenges. Because of the rather transient character of the area, it was difficult to identify leadership with well-established community roots. Three different neighborhood representatives served on the Verona Road/West Beltline Mayor's Advisory Committee in just over a 1-year period. Community residents, many of whom did not have long-standing commitments to the area, were not always eager to become involved.

Securing meaningful Allied Drive community involvement in the study process proved to be an uphill battle and required persistent efforts on the part of WisDOT and its partners to ensure that neighborhood interests and concerns were incorporated into the planning process:

*I feel a personal involvement,
an ownership of the solution.*

– Design charrette participant
Akira Toki Middle School, June 1999

- A neighborhood open house at the Allied-Dunn's Marsh Neighborhood Center explained the study process and obtained feedback.
- To reduce barriers and attract participation by Allied Drive residents, the Akira Toki Middle School charrette offered free child care and free transportation to the event.
- Project managers worked to ensure that the Allied Drive neighborhood maintained a presence on the Mayor's Advisory Committee, despite the loss of several representatives during the previous year.

Challenges Ahead

The needs assessment phase of the Verona Road and West Beltline corridor analysis featured efforts to identify concerns of the Allied Drive neighborhood and to involve its residents in the decision-making process. However, needs identification is only the first step in a more comprehensive vision for transportation improvements in the study area. To meet the letter and spirit of Title VI and the Executive Order on environmental justice, WisDOT and its partners must reaffirm their commitment to the Allied Drive community in subsequent phases that involve project development and environmental review, preliminary and final design, right-of-way, construction, and operations and maintenance.

In the event that WisDOT moves forward with the environmental review process for the Verona Road and West Beltline corridor project, further analysis will be required to assess the impacts of proposed solutions on the local community. This analysis, whether in the form of an Environmental Impact Statement or Environmental Assessment, will need to pay careful attention to the interests and concerns of the Allied Drive neighborhood. Ongoing efforts to involve Allied Drive residents in project design and implementation will help ensure that the needs of this community are understood by project planners and incorporated into all decision-making processes.

“In a complex project, it is essential to get ideas from the public first. Involving all stakeholders early in the process should help identify important issues that otherwise might not surface until preliminary decisions are made. Transportation agencies need to recognize that the residents of an area know the transportation problems and have ideas for solutions.”

– Susan Fox

Wisconsin Department of Transportation
*(in American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials,
Best Practices in Environmental Partnering:
Raising the Bar, Washington, DC, 2000, p. 54)*

Lessons Learned

When initiated, the Verona Road/West Beltline Needs Assessment Study process faced significant hurdles. Notwithstanding the politically turbulent community of Madison, the project advanced with remarkable speed. Moreover, it incorporated the needs and concerns of a low-income and minority neighborhood within the study area. The project’s success provides three important lessons:

- Effective public involvement is best achieved through a variety of techniques. WisDOT and its partners held public meetings, open houses, and a charrette. They also produced a video to explain the study and engaged local school children in the study process.
- Meaningful public involvement helps ensure that solutions respond to genuine needs. The involvement of the Allied Drive neighborhood in the study process raised awareness of pedestrian, transit, and bicycle needs in the study corridors that otherwise might have received less attention. The transportation needs articulated reflected the community’s sincere interest in creating a more livable community. This is a vital example of the

way in which environmental justice enhanced the decision-making process.

- Facilitating the involvement of low-income and minority residents in the decision-making process may require special attention. Involving Allied Drive residents in the study process resulted only from persistent outreach efforts that involved significant time and resources investments by WisDOT and its partners.

The Participants

Key agencies and groups involved in the Verona Road/West Beltline Needs Assessment study:

- Wisconsin Department of Transportation
- City of Madison
- City of Fitchburg
- Dane County
- Verona Road/West Beltline Mayor’s Advisory Committee
- Allied Dunn’s Marsh Neighborhood Center
- Akira Toki Middle School

Benefits from Environmental Justice in Decision Making

For the Neighborhood:

- Allied Drive residents' issues and concerns were incorporated into WisDOT's *Verona Road/West Beltline Needs Assessment* study.
- Allied Drive residents won several short-term improvements that addressed their concerns for safety and more pedestrian-friendly traffic signals along Verona Road.
- Knowledge and experience gained through participation in the needs assessment study process will better equip Allied Drive residents to participate in future public decision-making activities.

For the Agencies:

- WisDOT's effective public involvement efforts — including outreach to Allied Drive — helped build the constituency necessary to move the planning process forward.
- Allied Drive's participation helped identify needs and concerns that might otherwise have been overlooked.
- WisDOT representatives gained experience working with low-income, minority communities that will be useful in future planning and project development efforts.
- Addressing needed short-term improvements builds trust between residents and agency that may prove helpful as other projects move forward to implementation.

References

Verona Road/West Beltline Needs Assessment, Wisconsin Department of Transportation, July 1999.

Verona Road/West Beltline: Short-Term Recommendations to WisDOT, Verona Road/West Beltline Mayor's Advisory Committee, March 2000.

Contacts

Susan Fox
Program Planner and Analyst
Wisconsin Department of Transportation
4805 Sheboygan Avenue
Madison, WI 53707
(608) 267-4473

Mary Kirkendoll
Executive Director
Allied-Dunn's Marsh Neighborhood Center
4705 Jenewein Road, No. 2
Madison, WI 53711
(608) 274-7006

Susan Hamblin
Co-Chair, Verona Road/West Beltline Mayor's Advisory Committee
Common Council Office
210 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Room 417
Madison, WI 53709
(608) 266-4071