Exploring New Technology:
Results of the Oak Hill Parkway Virtual Open House

Background

State planning and transportation agencies continually face the escalating problem of increasing needs, coupled with limited financial resources to meet those needs. In this difficult fiscal environment, the importance of meaningfully involving the public in the decisions that shape the future of our cities and regions becomes even more amplified. Proactively working with the public to gain buy-in from the early stages of the planning process is one of the most effective strategies to reduce project costs. The traditional process in which state planning and transportation agencies have engaged the public is becoming a less effective or efficient model because public meeting attendance has consistently decreased. As technology continues to shape the way that the public communicates with each other and their government, the onus falls on state planning and transportation agencies not only to continue to provide the traditional methods of engagement, but to look for new and innovative ways to gain increased public participation in the planning process.

The traditional methods of public engagement will always be an important part of the planning process, but discovering the effectiveness of emerging technologies in order to develop new best practices for public engagement is the charge of the future. The Oak Hill Parkway project in Austin, Texas, provided a unique opportunity to test a new and innovative method

Oak Hill Parkway Representative Responding to Virtual Open House User during Real-Time Chat Session.

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to engage the public. This pilot project tested the effectiveness of re-creating a traditional open house in a virtual or online setting in order to provide additional opportunities for engagement and to understand what role emerging technology will play in the engagement process.

What the Researchers Did

In order to replicate the experience of a traditional open house in a virtual setting, the research team developed a website, called a virtual open house. All of the materials presented at the May 23 Oak Hill Parkway traditional open house were presented to visitors of the virtual open house through concept videos and text. The concept videos featured visuals of schematics with voiceovers from project staff for the nine roadway concepts under consideration for Oak Hill Parkway, including the seven newly developed concepts, a no-build alternative and an alternative developed during a previous study of the area. Users were directed to the virtual open house through both traditional and online media coverage, as well as advertisements on Google and social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter.

Upon entry to the virtual open house, users were directed to watch an introduction video that explained the purpose of the virtual open house and directions on how to use it. Once registered, users were sent to an overview page, where background information on the project was provided. From there, users were able to choose any of the nine concepts (shown as thumbnails at the top of the page), watch the informative
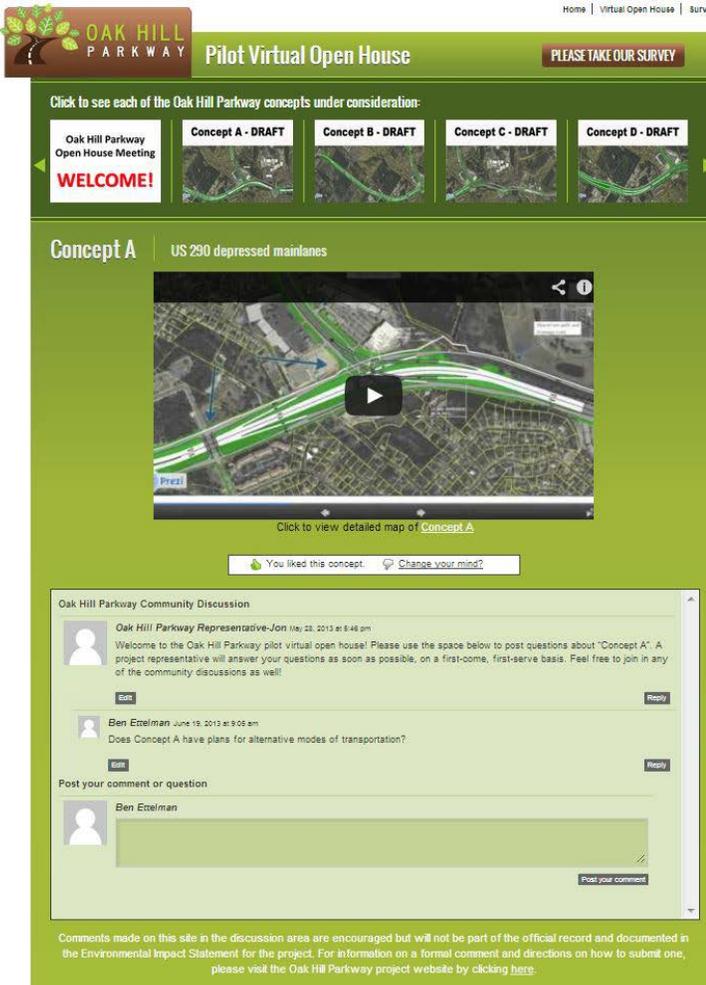

Command Center during Real-Time Chat Session.

video, and click a thumbs-up or thumbs-down button depending on their feelings toward the concept.

The virtual open house went live on May 23, the day the traditional open house was held, and was open until the close of the official comment period, 12 days later on June 3. During this period, there were two, 2-hour-long real-time chat sessions, where each of the nine concept videos and the overview page featured chat boxes that were staffed by an Oak Hill Parkway project representative. During the real-time chat sessions, visitors were able to provide comments, ask questions directly of Oak Hill Parkway project representatives, and receive answers in real time. During the remainder of the period that the virtual open house was live, users were able to provide comments and questions through a link to the Oak Hill Parkway project website.

Researchers were able to gauge the effectiveness of the virtual open house by using Google and YouTube analytics to evaluate the attendance

Concept A Video Page during Real-Time Chat Session.

The analytical tools also provided researchers with the ability to gauge the quality of participation during the virtual open house. Researchers were able to measure the average amount of time that each user spent in the virtual open house per day in order to gain insight into not only how many visitors came through the door, but how long those visitors actively engaged with project materials while visiting. The average number of pages viewed per visitor provided researchers with an additional metric to gauge how effectively users interacted with project materials while visiting the virtual open house.

What They Found

The researchers found that, based on the robust number of attendees of the virtual open house over the entire 12-day period that it was live, providing a virtual, web-based alternative for the public to learn about the Oak Hill Parkway project is an effective and efficient way for government agencies to augment the public engagement process. In addition, based on increased attendance and participation levels during the real-time chat sessions, as well as survey data collected at the traditional open house, providing options for the public to interact directly with planning representatives is an effective way to increase public participation.

Unexpectedly, researchers also found that a large percentage of traffic to the virtual open house came from the social media platform Twitter. The majority of these users used mobile devices

and quality of participation. To evaluate the attendance of the virtual open house, researchers tracked the number of visitors by day, which provided insight into how well attended the virtual open house was during the entire period it was live. In addition, researchers were able to evaluate how attendance changed during the real-time chat sessions as compared to the rest of the period the virtual open house was live, based on the measurement of how many pages within the virtual open house were viewed per hour for each day that the virtual open house was live.

(smartphones or tablets), and, with users accessing the virtual open house via mobile devices, participation levels suffered (lower average visit duration and pages per visit). This led researchers to understand the importance of optimizing future virtual planning spaces for mobile devices because, as in the case of the Oak Hill Parkway Virtual Open House, a large segment of users were interested in participating with mobile devices.

The large segment of traffic that was referred to the virtual open house from Twitter also bolstered the researchers' understanding that promoting both virtual and traditional forms of public engagement via social media platforms is an effective and efficient mechanism to increase public awareness, and in turn public participation.

What This Means

The cost of developing and implementing virtual planning spaces is not a barrier that inhibits the creation of future virtual open houses, etc. In fact, the development of future virtual planning spaces is low-hanging fruit for planning agencies. The materials and software used to develop the Oak Hill Parkway Virtual Open House website and content videos were developed with software that was free or extremely reasonably priced using schematics and materials that had already been developed by the project team. Based on strong attendance and quality participation from users, augmenting the public engagement process with virtual planning spaces is an extremely efficient way to increase public participation in planning processes.

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