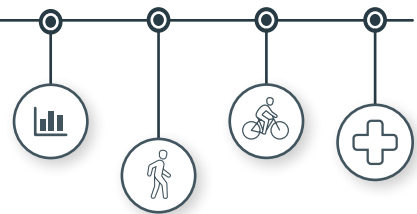


Las Cruces High School students cross El Paseo Road at Boutz Road during a lunchtime break. Photo by Anayssa Vasquez/Las Cruces Sun-News.



CASE STUDY: LAS CRUCES, NM

Engaging underserved communities to focus on building more complete streets



THE BOTTOM LINE

The Mesilla Valley MPO built trust and public interest in its planning process by engaging constituents through a nonprofit with an active presence in the community. With this familiar channel of communication in place, the MPO successfully improved public engagement by building a community-led process for expanding active transportation infrastructure in the Las Cruces metro area.

THE CONTEXT

With a population just over 100,000, Las Cruces is the second largest city in New Mexico, which is the second poorest state in the nation. Located just up the Rio Grande from the U.S.–Mexico border, the region is bilingual and has a significant number of working poor. Nearly 25 percent of the population of the city of Las Cruces lives below the poverty level.

Doña Ana County, where Las Cruces is located, includes 36 colonias — unincorporated, unregulated settlements with limited infrastructure. For these colonias, the county is the only form of local government structure. The Mesilla Valley MPO is responsible for transportation planning in Las Cruces, Mesilla, and part of Doña Ana County, and in this capacity also serves half of these colonias.

THE PROBLEM

Though area jurisdictions passed Complete Streets policies all the way back in 2008, few if any Complete Streets projects were being built — even though scores of residents depend on walking or biking as a daily lifeline to get around on incredibly dangerous streets that are ill-suited for anyone not traveling in a car. Both the Mesilla Valley MPO’s Transport 2040 long-range transportation plan and Doña Ana County’s unified development code (recently passed by the county commission) included and promoted complete streets principles. However, those policies have not led to the construction of safer streets, because, despite the urgency to make the streets radically safer, the public was not deeply engaged in the effort.

In 2015, the Mesilla Valley MPO undertook an effort to reach new community members in its transportation planning process. By doing so, the MPO hoped to build up a local (and logical) constituency to support the push to build safer, more complete streets to better serve the needs of the area’s residents.



This pedestrian would have to walk more than a third of a mile west along W. Picacho Ave., a fairly typical arterial in Las Cruces, to find the next marked crosswalk from this intersection with Alameda Blvd. Imagery from Google Maps

WHAT THEY DID

To bolster community engagement, MPO staff partnered with the Empowerment Congress, a regional nonprofit representing underserved populations, and a project of the Ocotillo Institute for Social Justice. Ocotillo's mission is to advance quality of life for the people of Doña Ana County by building on individual capabilities and addressing conditions that create root barriers for escaping poverty. The Empowerment Congress seeks to both empower community members and address any barriers to engagement in local public processes.

Ocotillo has been especially influential in engaging the residents of the colonias in the political process. Ocotillo gives these individuals the confidence to come to their commission and be a voice for their community. Through the Empowerment Congress, community members collectively chose public transportation as the first countywide issue to tackle because of how severely it affects health, economic stability, and access to education and civic activities.

To improve community input, the Mesilla Valley MPO built upon Ocotillo's existing efforts, especially in the colonias. This reinvigorated meetings and changed the trajectory of transportation projects during the planning phase to better address community members' priorities. One example is the extension of Missouri Avenue, which currently ends at the edge of town. Because of community pushback and high turnout at public discussions, the project now includes consideration of a bicycle boulevard instead of an extended roadway.

As part of their partnership with the Empowerment Congress, MPO staff attended a Leadership Academy held by the nonprofit and took part in some of their committees. And instead of holding separate meetings, the MPO integrated its outreach into Ocotillo's ongoing schedule of meetings and went to the people, rather than asking the people to come to them. Bringing the MPO's activities to the community in this way boosted attendance at meetings, garnered more productive conversation and feedback, and strengthened the community's relationship with the MPO.



Photo courtesy of the Mesilla Valley MPO.



HOW THEY DID IT

In the spring of 2015, MPO staff participated in the Empowerment Congress's Leadership Academy on collaborative leadership and effective engagement of Spanish-speaking residents. This training covered the following useful principles:

- **Hold public meetings at times when people will be able to attend.** If you know that another group is effective at bringing people together, coordinate your meeting with one that is already happening.
- **Advertise your meeting through multiple means of communication,** especially since a lot of people do not have internet access.
- **Present problems in an open-ended way, without providing options for how the problem may be solved at the outset.** This approach allows the public to arrive at the preferred solution, which creates a sense of ownership and builds trust between the people and the government.
- **Provide professional interpreters for non-English speakers.** Having informal volunteers translating for a group in the back corner of the meeting room only further marginalizes that group. Incorporating professional interpretation into the formal presentation promotes inclusion. It is the presenting agency's responsibility to provide these services, not the community's.
- **Create an environment that encourages the public to talk with you.** Avoid using jargon. Ask people questions about their experience and set up the meeting room so people are facing each other rather than sitting in a classroom or in a lecture style set-up where meeting organizers are talking at the public.

Shortly after participating in this academy, the MPO convened a group of 25 community members to listen to one of Smart Growth America's complete streets webinars and led a subsequent 30-minute follow-up group discussion.

That same year, Ocotillo changed the name of its Public Transportation Committee and expanded its scope to be the Complete Streets Committee. This committee has worked to demonstrate the importance of investing in a variety of modes of transportation by taking actions such as getting the public to submit letters to the editor and gathering 15 to 30 people to advocate for safer streets at each relevant public hearing.

Ocotillo's Complete Streets Committee and the MPO collaborate closely. The committee has helped the MPO improve communication with communities. With the committee's support, the MPO keeps a contact list of advocates and contacts who can assist with community engagement to improve and inform the MPO's outreach. The list also identifies community leaders in each neighborhood. Having an asset map that identifies the trusted, respected people in the villages, colonias, and neighborhoods who help disseminate information has helped improve the effectiveness and inclusiveness of the MPO's public communications.

KEY PARTNERS

- The Empowerment Congress, a project of the Ocotillo Institute for Social Justice

The Ocotillo Institute for Social Justice is a regional nonprofit representing underserved populations, especially Latinos. Their Empowerment Congress is partnering with the MPO to identify transportation projects – including complete streets projects – that are priorities of community members. The Empowerment Congress and the MPO then organize community members to advocate for their multimodal priorities.



Cooperation between the Empowerment Congress and the Mesilla Valley MPO over the past few years has resulted in considerable benefits for both groups. The MPO brought important transportation information to the residents of the rural communities in Doña Ana County and the Empowerment Congress brought greater participation to MPO projects. Reaching out to and participating in local community organizations can have a significant impact on the work of MPOs throughout the United States.

— Sharon Thomas, Mayor Pro Tem Emerita, Las Cruces, New Mexico

RESULTS AND BENEFITS

As a result of these efforts, the average number of people attending the MPO's meetings increased, and overall, public awareness of the key functions of the MPO in transportation decisions grew. In addition, between May 2013 and January 2014, nearly 200 people participated in the Empowerment Congress's community meetings and committees on transportation issues. Through these forums councilmembers and local elected officials have been able to identify new ways to help the community, spread the word about existing services and collect feedback from their constituents about their transportation challenges and their ideas to address them.

Residents have shaped local transportation projects beyond what the MPO expected. For example, when the MPO recently presented the community with options for a new roadway project, the community responded that they did not want a new roadway project at all. Instead the community was interested in a bicycle boulevard, which the MPO determined would only cost \$50,000, significantly less than the roadway project.

Another key win was the addition of complete streets principles to Doña Ana County's recently passed Unified Development Code. This win was made possible in part by the engagement of the Empowerment Congress's members and the increased attention on the need for better implementation of the local Complete Streets policy. This amendment has helped the MPO to improve sidewalk and trail access to bus stops that are being installed by a new rural transit service.

One of the community's top goals is for the MPO to utilize Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funds to complete a multi-use path around the city. Another goal is to address connectivity gaps for those traveling on foot and bicycle. Understanding these community-defined priorities helps the MPO to focus their efforts in pursuit of this vision. Staff have developed an online tool showing a map of suitable routes for bikes, which can also help people identify more preferable routes where bike paths may not yet exist. Considerable public interest has developed for this project and there are now several committees working on different aspects of the plan.

Meanwhile, the introduction of a transit ballot measure further demonstrates the power of Ocotillo's community engagement. In 2015, a referendum was held to enact a small tax increase to generate additional revenues for the South Central Regional Transit District. While the referendum did not pass, the Empowerment Congress successfully activated community members in a push to bring transit service back after buses stopped running in rural Doña Ana County. After state representatives provided funding for the purchase of four new buses, the Empowerment Congress helped convince the county commission to provide additional funding for the transit service, securing \$500,000 in grant funds for the current fiscal year and an anticipated \$750,000 in the next fiscal year. This service will connect several communities that did not previously have access to transit. Improved collaboration with the community via the Empowerment Congress helped make this victory possible.

LESSONS LEARNED

Las Cruces offers the following advice to other MPOs:

1 Dialogue starts in the planning process.

A plan is a discussion. To make sure that a plan does not sit on a shelf but rather continues to be a guide for development, the entire community needs to be involved in the discussion from the beginning.

3 Make it more grassroots.

Work to ensure that you are not overseeing a top-down process. Try to recognize trends and movement of where your community is trying to go and then go along with that natural flow.

2 Advocate for inclusion.

Partner with organizations that specialize in community engagement to broaden your MPO's outreach. Make sure that you are interacting, connecting, and networking with many different groups within your community. If certain groups of people are not attending meetings or speaking up, consider why. What could you do (or who could you reach out to) to help engage those groups? Also, speak in a manner that is easy to understand when translated.

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