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## The Colorado Story: Community Engagement Is Not an Afterthought

The state of Colorado is among the nation’s most successful adopters of the public-private partnership (P3) project delivery method to facilitate much needed, high-profile civic and transportation projects.

Since 2007, various groups have teamed with private partners to initiate multiple P3 projects including the U.S. 36 Express Lanes Project, the Regional Transportation District’s FasTracks mass transit program and Denver’s Union Station redevelopment. State and local agencies are also working together and planning to use the P3 approach to begin redevelopment of the National Western Center, a Colorado landmark and heritage site.

The positive experiences have resulted in fast-track project deliveries, local and regional economic development, and continued successful operations.

Political, agency and private sector leaders believe the success of these projects is directly attributed to their focused emphasis on community outreach programs – programs that have evolved since the early days of P3 initiation a decade ago. The following stories spotlight some of the community engagement best practices that continue to enable the success of the region’s P3 project delivery.

## Corridor Connections

The U.S. 36 Express Lanes Project, one of Colorado’s first P3s, was a multi-modal project led by the Colorado Department of Transportation, the High Performance Transportation Enterprise (HPTE), the agency charged with running the State’s transportation P3 program, the Regional Transportation District (RTD) and Plenary Roads Denver (PRD), the private partner and concessionaire.

Completed in 2016, the project links the city of Boulder at the University of Colorado, Boulder’s main campus to downtown Denver. It incorporates a new express lane for Bus Rapid Transit, carpool vehicles and tolled vehicles, as well as two free general purpose lanes in each direction, a bikeway and the reconstruction of aging bridges. The delivery of the project was split into two phases: a \$318 million first phase procured as a design-build contract, and a \$179 million second phase procured as a P3, with PRD as concessionaire to finance, design and build phase 2 and operate and maintain the entire system once built out.



The complex project required coordination with a number of cities along the route including Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Louisville, Superior and Westminster. Funding for the project was also multi-sourced with some Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA) financing, as well as anticipated toll revenue.

In terms of community engagement, the project began like many others, with a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process, both of which required intense and lengthy participation from local governments and the public.

HPTE Director David Spector recalls, “We followed the NEPA rules regarding public involvement, engagement and education. We engaged all of the stakeholder communities up and down the corridor, which included multiple municipalities, counties, towns and cities. We provided annual reports to our state legislature. We did exactly what we were supposed to do based on all of our experiences with other project delivery methods, and quickly found out that it wasn’t enough.”

In fact, CDOT and HPTE faced many questions and some backlash from the community and public figures with regards to transparency, that the state legislature developed and passed a bill that would have required, among other things, greater transparency measures on P3 projects. While the bill was vetoed, the Governor issued an Executive Order, which mandated appropriate transparency measures with regard to outreach and education for the P3 delivery method and the associated financing.

Spector says, “Essentially, we failed to provide enough education about how a P3 project works, and who pays. Since then, we’ve introduced public outreach programs that are far more extensive.”

Standard community engagement methods that CDOT and HPTE have deployed on the Central 70

P3 project range from RFPs that are posted online at every stage of the process along with notification press releases, bilingual messaging points, open outreach at community clubs such as rotary clubs, and conducted telephone town halls.

Spector: “We’re very focused on real-time communications such as telephone town halls.”

He notes that normally, a project follows the NEPA requirements that include hosting a town hall meeting, where maybe 100-200 people might show up. A telephone town hall reaches people in the convenience of their homes. Here’s how it works: A group of subject matter experts sits in a room and calls all of the phone numbers in the affected area, connecting them to the town hall discussion. Individuals are able to listen in and ask questions.

The group just hosted a telephone town hall for the Central 70 Project, followed by an in-person town hall. While the in-person town hall had about 100 in attendance, the telephone town hall reached over 2,200.

Spector believes the forum makes it easier to ask questions. “Sometimes public town halls can be very intimidating to quieter folks. We have found the telephone town hall to be extremely successful in terms of active outreach. Now, we’re continually looking for new ways to reach out to folks.”

One possible direction could be forums such as Facebook Live. The group is also focused on finding ways to engage the community directly with the project. For instance, the Central 70 team is contributing to the redevelopment of an elementary school that abuts the highway, and providing funds for affordable housing projects in affected communities; they have invited local artists to paint murals on the viaduct via a community festival, and will be providing fresh food access to the neighbors in the impacted communities during construction.

Spector says, “We’re doing everything that we can think of to engage a community in many different ways. Bottom line, no matter the project delivery method, we found that the public engagement process, and the community stakeholder engagement process have to be bigger than NEPA requirements. It’s got to be more holistic and take advantage of many different communication methods.”

He also reminds others involved in P3 projects not to forget to engage after construction is complete, adding, “You can’t underestimate the power of operational success. Share the metrics derived and continue to answer questions about financing and operations.”

## Eagle RTD, FasTracks

Eagle RTD FasTracks connects downtown to the airport using a light rail system that provides unparalleled access. The result of a multi-county referendum by the voters back in 2004, Eagle used the P3 procurement method to develop and deliver the first of its kind partnership for mass transit. Even today, as new lines are being prepared to open for business, the team uses innovative community engagement and outreach techniques.

The telephone town hall approach allowed the system and local political leaders to reach thousands of metro Denver residents. They were able to participate in the RTD Board of Directors’ series of live interactive town hall meetings for 2016, which took place March 28-April 13, immediately prior to the opening of the newest line at the time.

Residents received the newest information about RTD’s three new commuter rail lines and one new light rail line that have already opened or are due to open in the near future. They found out what’s coming next with the RTD FasTracks transit expansion program and other RTD projects. The latest updates and news on existing bus and light

rail services were also part of the discussions. Stakeholder engagement for Eagle went back even earlier. The public was invited to provide input to and feedback related to the early planning process. As RTD developed the Request for Proposal for the Eagle P3 Project, stakeholders were asked to participate in an online survey designed to seek input into the RFP. The staff then evaluated the input and determined what is appropriate to incorporate into the RFP. Communications is a critical component of any successful public works project.

## The Union Station Renaissance



The Union Station Transit Improvement Project for the 120-year-old iconic train station was a P3 between the city and county of Denver, the Regional Transportation District, the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), the Denver Regional Council of Governments and Union Station Neighborhood Company, the master developer team comprised of East West Partners and Continuum Partners. The Union Station neighborhood team included Skidmore Owings & Merrill, Lead as the architect, AECOM as lead engineer, Kiewit as the general contractor and Hargreaves Associates as the lead public realm designer.

The goal of the \$500 million project was to transform Denver’s Union Station into a regional multi-modal transportation hub. Diane Barrett, Chief Projects Officer for Denver’s Mayor Hancock, says, “While not a conventional P3, in

many ways this project laid the groundwork for the future of P3 in Colorado, particularly in the way of public outreach.”

As part of the public outreach effort, the team created the Union Station Advisory Committee, which included 96 members working in conjunction with the NEPA process. To streamline this 96-member team’s effectiveness, it was divided into focused breakout groups, each concentrating on an area such as financing, housing, design, or economic development.

Barrett explains, “Those smaller groups became much more useful because they felt they had a voice and ownership in their area of expertise or interest. They felt very much invested in decisions made.”

When it came to public outreach, Barrett says they focused on reaching people on their home court. She explains, “It’s very hard to get constructive, useful feedback from communities about projects. We’ve tried a number of approaches, but one of the most successful is to reach people in their familiar environments. So instead of hosting a town hall where the same 60 people show up, we attend a meeting that someone else is hosting.”

The private sector partners also have an obligation to build on community engagement initiatives.

Joe Wingerter, Vice President of Development with the Kiewit Infrastructure Group and frequent P3 partner with Colorado public sector owners on projects such as the Union Station Transit Improvement Project, adds, “One of the things that we’ve been quite impressed with is how hard the public sector agencies in Colorado work to build consensus and thereby ensure a high probability for obtaining success from start to finish.”

He notes that by the time private partners join the team, those agencies have typically spent

years, if not decades, communicating with their constituents, completing the NEPA requirements and the many different mitigation measures.

Wingerter concludes, “So when we’re fortunate enough to be selected to support these projects, it’s incumbent upon us to further inspire public confidence, not only in project delivery, but also to honestly address the potential impacts to the community during construction. We continually look for ways that we can engage with communities on behalf of our clients in the public sector and our partners because it’s our responsibility to build on the confidence that our public sector partners have put forth. As these projects turn into operational systems, we have to continue to communicate about service and operations so that the value of that asset is tangible.”

## **A Pioneering & P3 Spirit**

The National Western Center is a 250-acre site located at the northern front door of the city of Denver. The Center is home to the National Western Stock Show, which just celebrated its 111th year in Denver. Founded by the farming and ranching industry as a celebration of Colorado’s heritage, today around 800,000 people a year celebrate the event over a 16 day period.

Kelly Leid, Executive Director of the Mayor’s Office of the National Western Center, says, “There was some concern that when Mayor Hancock came into office in 2011, the Stock Show would leave Denver and we would lose this important celebration of our heritage. The Mayor assembled a group of Stock Show, civic and business leaders to find a way to keep the event in Denver.”

What this group proposed provided that assurance and much more. Essentially, they reimagined the Stock Show and its venue, the National Western Center, as well as the surrounding communities.

In 2013, Mayor Hancock created a Memorandum of Understanding with five partners: the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, National Western Stock Shows, Colorado State University, History Colorado, City and County of Denver. He also formed the North Denver Cornerstone Collaborative (NDCC), to strategically align major redevelopment efforts for six portfolio projects including the National Western Center and the Globeville, Elyria and Swansea neighborhoods to better connect communities and residents to resources and opportunities.

To date, the group has raised over a \$1 billion for the multi-phase project to convert nearly 3 million square feet to a year-around entertainment, education, and experiential learning center focused on the agriculture business. Colorado State University, one of the major partners, already has three facilities on the campus—a water resource center, the CSU Center, and an equine sports medicine facility. NDCC is looking for ways to integrate the work in those facilities with rural and urban interests. Leid explains, “For instance, from a community engagement standpoint, we’re working with experts in the equestrian and livestock worlds to make sure we’re not only maintaining safe places for guests, but also for the humane treatment of animals.”

The site also includes a handful of historical buildings, which History Colorado (the state’s historical society) is helping to preserve, and also restore treasures of a bygone era within the framework of the overall site.

Leid says, “We’ve been together since 2013, seeking ways to make sure that the depth and breadth of this immense effort is realistic and meets the needs of residents, businesses and the Stock Show future. Outreach has been a combination of grass roots conversations and more conventional methods.” Key in the effort, the Stock Show organizers established a citizen’s advisory committee of 27 members

made up of people that live and work in the surrounding neighborhoods. Leid and her team have been meeting with this group for over four years. “Those same 27 individuals show up every month and are actively involved in helping us shape this project.”

He notes that the group knew from the outset that they were going to have to acquire 38 private residential and commercial parcels to complete the project. “It was really important to our team that we put a face to the process,” he continues. “I personally sat at the kitchen table or in the offices of over 70% of the property owners. Obviously some of those conversations were uncomfortable, but we felt that it was really important to meet them in their space. The process has been a thoughtful and respectful effort because we did that extra work.”

The group has also captured the attention of more partners including Denver Water, Colorado Cattlemen’s Association and other agriculture associations from around the country.

“Our challenge is to engage the local agricultural industries at many levels to make sure that we understand the mechanics of building a global destination for agricultural heritage and innovation,” says Leid. “Our success will absolutely depend on public/private relationships and, down the road, P3 procurements. We’re essentially creating the Silicon Valley of agriculture.”

Kiewit’s Wingerter believes that the high success rate of P3s in Colorado are in large part because those in responsible positions in public agencies and the stakeholders are committed to working together, to finding resolution to some challenging problems.

He adds, “In my experience, every P3 project requires three things – supportive public agencies, a project champion and a financially feasible revenue case. Colorado groups have managed to do all three very, very well.”