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Contesting the North Williams Traffic Operations and Safety Project

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CONTESTING THE NORTH WILLIAMS TRAFFIC OPERATIONS AND SAFETY PROJECT



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Portland State University
2013



Author's Note:

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The views presented in this paper are solely to views of the authors of this report and do not represent the perspectives of the Portland Bureau of Transportation. For additional questions or more information, please contact the primary authors:

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Executive Summary

The North Williams Traffic Safety Operations Project, overseen by the Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT), was proposed in 2010. With an initial budget of \$370,000, the project was designed to reduce conflict between buses, bicycles and motor vehicles on North Williams Avenue and improve the overall safety and accessibility of the street. As is common practice, PBOT's first step in this project was to organize a stakeholder advisory committee (SAC) of interested business owners, neighborhood association representatives, residents, and key stakeholders living or working along North Williams Avenue who would be tasked with advising the city on the project. However, despite an extensive outreach effort, when the initial SAC convened in early 2011, of the 22 members on the committee, only four were people of color. This lack of diverse representation, when coupled with historical legacies of racism and inequality that characterized the African American experience in the North Williams area, served as a catalyst for community grievances around this project to emerge.

During the Spring of 2011, it became evident that there was a highly motivated contingent of cyclists who, emphasizing safety and access, were pressing for improvements in cycling infrastructure on North Williams. These plans included the reduction of automobile traffic to one lane along its entire length. As it became clear that the potential alterations to the street could be extensive, a number of community members expressed concern to PBOT about the project's goals and the relatively small number of non-white SAC members engaged in decision-making. Many felt that the SAC was not representative enough of the historically black neighborhood. Tensions emerged regarding the historical legacies of racism and inequitable development in North Portland, the composition of the SAC, and the design of the street. This controversy received local and national media attention.

The PBOT project management for the North Williams project decided that the SAC process should be slowed down and efforts should be made to include additional minority members of the local community during the Summer of 2011. The SAC and PBOT project management team made a concerted effort to enable the African American community members to voice their ideas about the planning process at a community meeting in mid-June. At this meeting, the contentiousness of the project and the public outreach efforts became fully evident. There were three key issues of community concern that emerged at this meeting: (1) inadequacies of the public outreach process; (2) historical grievances related to city planning policies and practices; and, (3) a sense of "us versus them" divisiveness between cycling advocates and African American community members in attendance. Some SAC members reported their feeling that their perceived exclusion from the planning process was compounded by historical practices that had previously marginalized blacks in the North Portland area.

As this counter-narrative of injustice and exclusion emerged from African-American community members, efforts were made by PBOT and initial SAC members to expand the SAC. Additional participation was sought through extended outreach efforts that included more active recruitment at public meetings, open houses, and local churches. By late summer 2011, the SAC had been expanded to include a more diverse group of people, with 27 members, twelve of whom were people of color.



For many SAC members, PBOT's decision to slow down the decision-making process, expand the SAC, and appoint a prominent community member as chair of the committee were all seen as positive developments. PBOT's efforts to acknowledge historical grievances and build new relationships was a first step in generating trust between community members and the city, as well as among residents themselves. The creation of a guiding statement allowed the committee to acknowledge past grievances while developing a set of criteria for moving forward, while the development of "project outcomes" (which clarified the SAC's priorities) gave the whole committee an agreed upon set of criteria by which to judge potential changes to the street. In addition to these important personnel issues, the introduction of innovative 3-D animations illustrating different design options enabled the SAC process to move forward.

The SAC committee's final recommendations stress the importance of considering not only the need to solve issues relevant to bicycle traffic but to include addressing pedestrian safety and the overall speed of traffic on North Williams avenue. The final report and final recommendations can be found on the PBOT website.¹ The thirteen recommendations offered by the SAC are included in the appendix of the above report, and stress the importance of considering not only the need to solve issues relevant to bicycle traffic but to include addressing pedestrian safety and the overall speed of traffic on North Williams avenue.

When asked what practices they would encourage PBOT to improve upon in the future, SAC members emphasized the need for creative outreach efforts. Appropriate forms of outreach must also be combined with more flexibility in the times and days that public meetings are set. Furthermore, the city must take extreme care to ensure that all stakeholders are represented from the start of a project, and that the city must actively facilitate the opportunity for all perspectives to participate equally in decision-making. Along with this, planners and city staff must make efforts to understand the social context of each Portland neighborhood. Specific efforts must be made to bring an historical perspective into decision-making, particularly when issues of racism or classism have contributed to persistent structural inequalities.

Broadly speaking, the North Williams project demonstrates that issues of transportation and safety are not limited to mere changes in infrastructure, but may include discussions of race, history, and ongoing social injustices. City decision-makers must take care to recognize these issues and their ongoing impact on community members.

(1) <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/417219>

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Report Scope & Aims

This report presents a summary and analysis of the Stakeholder Advisory process for the North Williams Traffic Safety Operations Project overseen by the Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) in 2011-2012. The project, whose initial outreach began in 2010, was part of a larger series of development projects in the city. The information reported here is based upon a review of relevant public documents, observation of public meetings related to the project over the course of 2011-2012, and interviews with 19 individuals involved in the decision-making process. The voices included here feature members of the Stakeholder Advisory Committee (twelve total), PBOT staff or consultants (five total), and actively involved neighbors (two total).² The goal of this report is to offer a synthesis of the perspectives heard throughout this process and to provide an organized overview of the key issues encountered. The experiences of PBOT staff and SAC members presented here also offer suggestions and ideas for future decision-making processes at PBOT and for the City of Portland, more broadly.

Accordingly, the following report presents the range of suggestions, thoughts, and concerns voiced throughout this process so that future advisory processes and bikeway development projects might have a clearer and more informed understanding of the dynamics inherent in planning processes in the City of Portland. Specifically, we hope to 1) clarify key events that affected the overall process; 2) review the key turning points that helped the SAC create a proposal that included the voices and concerns of each member; and, 3) offer some “lessons learned” that are culled from interviews with project participants. The insights provided by the participants throughout the course of this research shed light on problems and opportunities in public participation processes as well as the potential for more inclusive and dynamic public engagement models.

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(2) The names of stakeholder advisory committee members will remain confidential. However, PBOT staff or consultants who agreed to be identified may be quoted by name.

Project Context: North Williams Traffic Safety Operations Project

North Williams Avenue is home to one of the few north-south bike lanes in North Portland and serves as a major bike commute route for North and Northeast Portland residents. In the past, the bikeway had been considered one of the best in the city³. Between 2006 and 2011, however, bike traffic increased dramatically, reflecting overall trends in Portland, and led to increased conflict between different modes of transportation.

In 2010, PBOT identified the North Williams corridor as a key site for bikeway development due to the co-occurrence of heavy traffic from motor vehicles, bicycles and buses (with an estimated 700 to 1,000 motor vehicles/hour throughout the corridor and certain segments experiencing 3,000 bicycle trips each day)⁴. In addition, the Portland Bicycle Plan for 2030, which aims to increase bike ridership throughout the city and expand the network of bikeways from 630 to 962 miles, categorized the North Williams-Vancouver corridor as a major city bikeway. A report prepared by Kittleson and Associates, Inc. for PBOT on the existing conditions of North Williams noted that conflict between modes of transit on the street—motor vehicles, buses, bicycles and pedestrians—was a significant safety issue needing attention, particularly at the Fremont and Cook intersections.



(Source: BikePortland.org)

The initial North Williams Traffic Safety Operations Project, with a budget of \$370,000 from PBOT’s Cycle Track Development fund, was designed to reduce conflict between buses, bicycles and motor vehicles and improve the overall safety and accessibility of the street. As is common practice, PBOT’s first step in this project was to organize a stakeholder advisory committee (SAC) of interested business owners, neighborhood association representatives, residents, and key stakeholders living or working along North Williams Avenue who would be tasked with advising the city on the project. The proposed SAC meetings were to be convened for four to six months, after which time the committee would conclude by presenting their recommendation of how the city should proceed. However, as this report details below, the North Williams project planning and SAC processes were anything but typical. Numerous tensions emerged regarding the historical legacies of racism and inequitable development in North Portland, the composition of the SAC, and the design of the street. This controversy received local and national media attention, led PBOT to reconfigure the original SAC and extend the project planning phase, and ultimately resulted in an exciting new design for North Williams Avenue. Before detailing how these tensions emerged and how, eventually, they were settled, we turn to a brief discussion of the social and historical community context, which served as an active part of the public participation process.

(3) P Bower, Dan et al. 2007. *Portland's Platinum Bicycle Master Plan- Existing Conditions Report*. Retrieved December 16, 2012 <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/369982>

(4) Coleman, Mike and Jessica Horning. 2011. *North Williams Existing Conditions*. Retrieved December 16, 2012. <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/338799>

N. Williams Neighborhood History and Context



I-5 Freeway through North Portland, 1964.
(Source: City of Portland Archives)

For many residents of the N. Williams area, the inequitable infrastructural development, long-standing history of disinvestment and recent displacement and gentrification in the neighborhood served as a barrier to embracing city development plans on the street. The redlining and discriminatory lending practices that plagued many American cities post-WWII resulted in the de facto segregation of Portland's African American community within the North Portland area. As a result of these practices and the subsequent consolidation of African American businesses, homes and churches in one area of the city, the major infrastructural changes to the neighborhood surrounding North Williams over the past 60 years yielded

devastating impacts on community well-being. The clearance of large areas of the neighborhood to make way for the subsequent construction of Veteran's Memorial Coliseum in the early 1950's, Interstate 5 (which cut through the middle of North Portland) in the mid-1950s, and the erection of Emanuel Hospital in the 1960s⁵ resulted in the destruction of large numbers of housing units, the displacement of many residents, and the closure of a number of local businesses, many of which were owned by African Americans.⁶

Since the 1990s, Portland has experienced rapid population growth that has facilitated processes of gentrification in the North Portland area. The influx of many young, white, middle-class residents has substantially shifted the demographic characteristics of North Portland, such that certain swaths of the neighborhood that were once majority black are now majority white⁷. This change in the demographics of the neighborhood has not only reduced the affordability of housing, but also resulted in a significant change in the makeup of retail stores in the area with many of the historically African American shops closing.⁸ Sociological research in this part of the city demonstrates that there are competing and contrasting viewpoints on the costs and benefits of gentrification in the neighborhood. For example, although new demographic developments may have led to the decline of segregation in the area, there remains a deep divide between white residents and residents of color which is, in part, influenced by historical legacies of displacement and power.⁹

“First you took our businesses, then you took our homes, and now you want to take our street.”

These issues remained alive and present throughout the project. As one Stakeholder Advisory member noted, there was a palpable sentiment during meetings that was often expressed by longtime residents as: “First you took our businesses, then you took our homes, and now you want to take our street.”

(5) Gibson, Karen J. 2007. “Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000.” *Transforming Anthropology* 15(1):3–25. Retrieved June 20, 2012.

(6) Roos, Roy. 2008. *The History of Albina*. Roy E. Ross.

(7) Shaw, Samuel and Daniel Monroe Sullivan. 2011. “White Night: Gentrification, Racial Exclusion and Perceptions and Participation in the Arts.” *City and Community* 10(3): 241-64; Sullivan, Daniel Monroe and Samuel Shaw. 2011. “Retail Gentrification and Race: The Case of Alberta Street in Portland, Oregon.” *Urban Affairs Review* 47(3): 413-32.

(8) Ibid.

(9) Ibid. For a more extensive review of the history of the Albina Neighborhood see: Gibson, Karen. “Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000”, in *Transforming Anthropology* 15(1) : 3-25, 2007.

The historical legacy of inequitable development in North Portland and recent population displacement in the area, coupled with an initial community outreach process by PBOT that, although intensive, was not able to create a representative group of stakeholders, brought long standing issues related to racism and participation in decision-making processes to the surface. We now turn to a more detailed discussion of the project and the SAC process, highlighting how this social and historical context emerged and acted to shape perspectives and the redesign of the project.

Key Events: N. Williams Traffic Safety Operations Project

In this section of the report we provide a brief overview of the project in order to highlight specific aspects that became cause for community concern. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of events, but rather a broad depiction of key events.

INITIAL OUTREACH: LATE 2010

To begin the outreach process, PBOT hired Alta Planning + Design, who in turn hired sub-consultant Michelle Poyourow to guide recruitment of SAC members. In pursuit of a diverse group of participants, Poyourow employed a range of outreach techniques including canvassing door-to-door, having PBOT staff mail postcards to all residents and businesses along the street, and sending emails to local neighborhood associations and community organizations. Open meetings were also held to solicit community participation, and the African American churches on or adjacent to the street were also contacted. Despite this extensive outreach, when the initial SAC convened in early 2011, of the 22 members on the committee, only four were people of color.¹⁰

This lack of diverse representation, when coupled with historical legacies of racism and inequality that characterized the African American experience in the North Williams area, served as a catalyst for community grievances around this project to emerge. Poyourow noted that she had acquired a relatively expansive list of community members that indicated interest, excitement or concern about the project. These individuals were largely cyclists, property owners, and those already actively involved in their neighborhood associations. As Ms. Poyourow noted, “The most available and responsive people I encountered when going door-to-door were those who were already involved in their neighborhood association, owned property, or were developers and architects working on the corridor.”¹¹ Even at this early stage of project development, therefore, Ms. Poyourow and PBOT project management encountered difficulties in attracting members of the African American community.



The Stakeholder Advisory Committee holds a vote.
(Source: OregonLive.com)

(10) At the first meeting in 2011, however, only 16 members were present, including three persons of color.

(11) Poyourow, Michelle. Email communication to Amy Lubitow, 28 Aug. 2012

SPRING 2011: GROWING CONCERN

On April 16, 2011, PBOT hosted an open house in order to present some options for the project at Immaculate Heart Church. At this public meeting, it became evident that there was a highly motivated contingent of cyclists who were pressing for improvements in cycling infrastructure on North Williams. SAC meeting notes highlight the tension among users of different modes of transportation: “many people at the Open House expressed their concern that the proposals in this project are meant to serve other people who are just ‘passing through.’...[P]eople who primarily drive express...concern about bicyclists, and people who primarily bike express this concern about drivers, and neighbors express this concern about all travelers on the street.”¹² During this meeting, technical discussions occurred regarding the expansion of cycling capacity. Many cycling advocates articulated a strong desire for PBOT to reduce automobile traffic to one lane along its entire length. The open house made it clear to many community members that the potential alterations to the street could be quite extensive. Advocates for changes to cycling infrastructures were vocal at the meeting, and subsequently a number of community members expressed concern to PBOT about the project’s goals and the relatively small number of non-white SAC members engaged in decision-making.

Following this meeting, the SAC reconvened on May 3, 2011 to discuss public comments from the open house, particularly the one lane option. At the close of the meeting, an informal vote occurred regarding whether PBOT should study the one lane proposal. Several SAC members, in recounting this event, noted that all of the African American SAC members rejected the idea. Ellen Vanderslice, PBOT Project Manager, stated that this was when she fully realized the social and historical dynamics that were bearing on the project: “This is much deeper than I really had understood before....we’re going to need to do some kind of digging in here.” Much of the initial concern was related to a lack of diversity on the SAC, but also hinged on historical marginalization of the black community in Portland.

“I can’t believe the city didn’t go out and do a better job to see if they could find people of color who’ve lived in this community; who don’t ride bikes and have been here for many, many years.”

One SAC member recalled her efforts to highlight the fact that the SAC was not representative enough of the historically black neighborhood: “I actually sent the city an email [to say], ‘This makes me uncomfortable. This is an area that’s been disregarded over time. There aren’t enough people of color on this committee. I can’t believe the city didn’t go out and do a better job to see if they could find people of color who’ve lived in this community; who don’t ride bikes and have been here for many, many years.’”

It was after this May 2011 SAC meeting that the PBOT project management for the North Williams project decided that the SAC process should be slowed down and efforts should be made to include additional minority members of the local community. At the next SAC meeting on June 6, 2011, Ellen Vanderslice suggested that PBOT would extend the public process for this project and abandon the July deadline for beginning construction: “We are broadening our outreach and doing more listening to ensure that we achieve the first objective for the project: to conduct an open planning process through which all voices can be heard by the City.”¹³

(12) SAC (May 3, 2011). “North Williams Traffic Safety and Operations Project” [Meeting Minutes] Retrieved Dec, 16, 2012 from <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/356787>

(13) E.Vanderslice, 9 June 2011, letter to the SAC

SUMMER 2011: EXPANSION OF THE STAKEHOLDER ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Given the obvious public concern and growing levels of tension around public process and the legacies of historical inequity, PBOT made additional efforts to bring a more diverse group of people to the SAC during the Summer of 2011. The first attempt to expand the SAC and begin to address growing community concern over the project occurred at a community meeting at the Billy Webb Elks Lodge on June 23, 2011. The SAC and PBOT project management team made a concerted effort to enable the African American community members to voice their ideas about the planning process for the North Williams corridor. At this meeting, the contentiousness of the project and the public outreach efforts became fully evident. There were three key issues of community concern that emerged at this meeting: (1) inadequacies of the public outreach process; (2) historical grievances related to city planning policies and practices; and, (3) a sense of “us versus them” divisiveness between cycling advocates and African American community members in attendance.

In the interviews done for this study, participants echoed the concerns that were expressed at the community meetings. Specifically, they stated that the methods employed for outreach process did not result in the participation of a diverse group of stakeholders. In particular, the language used to initially frame the project focused on safety and traffic conflicts and failed to convey the potential impacts it might have on those members of the community who do not bike (or who do so infrequently). For example, the use of the phrase “traffic safety and operations” in the context of a bike lane development project may resonate with cyclists that utilize North Williams, but may not be perceived as particularly important by those who use the street as pedestrians or drivers. As a result, many residents did not make the connection between the stated goals of the project and the actual implications that might result from their implementation. This may have acted as a deterrent to participation for some. For example, an African American resident shared his initial perceptions of the project and outreach efforts:



Mayor Sam Adams listens to citizen concerns at Billy Webb Elks Lodget meeting.

(Source: Jonathan Maus, BikePortland.org)

“I was going in there [to the community meeting at the Billy Webb Elks Lodge] thinking, ‘we’re going to be talking about lighting on the street, you know, talking about pedestrians having access to get across.’ I’m thinking that this was gonna be maybe at most a couple months of work, or of meetings. I had no idea [what] the whole thing was...and I didn’t know that a bicycle plan exists for the city of Portland, I didn’t know that the city was looking to [be]come, a cutting edge cycling city in America. I mean, I didn’t know that.”

One interviewee, who later joined the SAC, described the concern over the lack of discussion about racial dynamics and historical inequities. She recalled her response at the June 23 meeting where race was not overtly discussed. At that meeting, she stated:

“We need to talk about this [neighborhood dynamics] right now.” And so the City consultant said “Well, we have 25 minutes left. Do you want to talk about racism right now?” And I just said “That’s really insulting. I mean, to cap it for one thing, but also I think what I’d like to see is I’d like to see this 25 minutes being used to build an agenda that’s a more equitable agenda. You guys have what you want to talk about, the community has what they -- we’re at odds here. We’re not going to move forward until we can have a real participatory process.”

Some SAC members reported their feeling that their perceived exclusion from the planning process was compounded by historical practices that had previously marginalized blacks in the North Portland area. Thus, past and present issues were merged into a more complex narrative about race and decision-making. One SAC member who joined the group after its expansion offered:

“It goes back to where freeways were built. There are only two houses left on the street right in Eliot where my family grew up because they built the high school, the freeway, and the coliseum. The homes were just wiped out, and nobody had a say. The same thing has happened with Emanuel [Hospital] where it’s just taken over an entire community of wiping out houses, but it’s all for the good of the community... So it doesn’t surprise me, but it’s still very disturbing and angering to see that happen in 2013.”

As this narrative emerged from community members, efforts were made by PBOT and initial SAC members to expand the SAC. Additional participation was sought through extended outreach efforts that included more active recruitment at public meetings, open houses, and local churches. By late summer 2011, the SAC had been expanded to include a more diverse group of people, with 27 members, twelve of whom were people of color.¹⁴

(14) SAC (August 2, 2011) “North Williams Traffic Safety and Operations Project” [Meeting Minutes] Retrieved Dec. 16 2012 <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/361693>

Despite some shuffling of the SAC participants throughout the reorganization, the final group was 27 people with 12 people of color participating. At one earlier point in time there were 12 African American members and one Latino member.

SPRING & SUMMER 2011: CYCLING & DEVELOPMENT NARRATIVE

While the above-noted narrative of past and present injustices was visible during the course of this project, the voices of stakeholders who were concerned about cycling infrastructure and safety tended to dwarf the voices of community members who expressed concern over these injustices. This highlights a critical challenge for PBOT, as well as for other Portland bureaus and organizations. Portland is home to many active communities and civic groups—focused on issues ranging from transportation and environmental stewardship to anti-uridation and marijuana legalization—that have extensive experience in engaging with city government, business and other sectors to build support for their positions. This can create a “shadow effect” wherein other voices that may not have the same connections to city leaders or are not as effective in building support are either ignored or inadvertently looked over.

With its heavy bike and pedestrian traffic, North Williams was already very familiar to Portland cyclists as a major bike thoroughfare with serious conflicts between bikes and other modes of transportation. The skills and experiences the bike community had (including the development of popular websites such as BikePortland.org) allowed many individuals to quickly and publically voice support for the project while providing detailed feedback on design elements. This seemingly overwhelming support from the bike community effectively masked the concerns of community members who were critical of city infrastructure development processes and policies. This dynamic was exacerbated by the way in which the project was initially perceived by much of the community—as a minor traffic and safety project rather than a broader bike lane project that would substantially alter the design of certain segments of N. Williams Avenue.

This demonstrates that the city must take extreme care to ensure that all stakeholders are represented from the start of a project, and that the city must actively facilitate the opportunity for all perspectives to participate equally in decision-making. Along with this, planners and city staff must make efforts to understand the social context of each Portland neighborhood. Specific efforts must be made to bring an historical perspective into decision-making, particularly when issues of racism or classism have contributed to persistent structural inequalities.



Commuter traffic on N. Williams.

(Source: OregonLive.com)

Key Turning Points

In this section, we articulate the range of actions taken by PBOT that served to help the SAC move towards resolution. We highlight the specific activities that SAC members recognized as important to the progress of the group and the ability for a collective agreement on the street's design to emerge.

BUILDING TRUST

For many participants in this process, PBOT's efforts to acknowledge historical grievances and build new relationships was a first step in generating trust between community members and the city, as well as among residents themselves. The process of tackling a problem in a collective fashion demonstrated to SAC members that the city was serious about taking their opinions into account and also provided a venue for residents from different backgrounds to get to know each other in new ways. Processes like this can aid in the healing of past injustices and can provide new experiences and create new relationships. As one SAC member offers:

“I think what’s happened over the years is that there has been this culture of distrust that has been built up, and to break down those barriers is difficult. I’m hoping this project goes most of the way towards finishing that so that when the next project comes, it won’t be as contentious as this.”

Overwhelmingly, the members of the SAC who were interviewed agreed that PBOT, despite initial missteps during outreach efforts, made a range of successful decisions. Most importantly, the efforts made to slow down the decision-making process and to expand the SAC were seen as important actions. As one SAC member noted, “I felt the city did well to recognize that they may have been on a time track, and revised that time track, and revised it again, and again.” Similarly, another member reported that,

“The city’s approach was...excellent in one way--because they were driving home to a conclusion, and they backed off. I give them a great deal of high marks for that... for saying, ‘It’s pretty obvious that we are not representative enough, and therefore we need to add other people to the board.’”

As noted by this SAC member, PBOT staff was willing to step back from the process and recognize that the SAC was not the representative group they had hoped for and took action to change that. The call to slow down the SAC process until a more representative group could be assembled was initially made by Debora Leopold Hutchins, a SAC member representing the group Sistas Weekend Cyclers, who agreed to become chair of the expanded SAC.

More than half of the interview participants for this project noted just how vital Leopold Hutchins was to achieving resolution with this project. As a lifelong active and involved member of Portland's African American community, she was able to encourage the participation of a diverse range of community members and demonstrated PBOT's commitment to developing an inclusive process of decision-making. One member of the SAC sums up the feeling of other participants in saying,

“I feel the city has done a very good job in refocusing the conversation ... giving Debora the chair of the committee was one of those brilliant moves... She is a prominent African American woman. To have her be the chair of the committee has certainly been probably the greatest driving force, in my opinion, of bringing the African American conversation back to the SAC.”

HONORING HISTORY

The expanded SAC felt that discussing historical grievances was vital to the project’s evolution. The use of some meeting time at both SAC meetings and at open houses and public meetings to describe and discuss the North Portland neighborhood’s evolution and the repeated marginalization of black residents was critical to building trust. Making space for discussion of the social context of the neighborhood was particularly important in building rapport amongst members of the SAC, but also served to clarify to the community more broadly that PBOT was committed to an inclusive decision-making process. As an SAC member noted in an interview:

“As we started through the process, honoring the history of North Williams Avenue became a real important issue to the African Americans on the committee. And what we were able to do was demonstrate to the rest of the stakeholder advisory committee members the importance of that. And I know for a fact many of them embraced that. They understood it. Their heart really understood that. And so just through the education of having different people come in and talk about what was there and making references to the different books for people to read and all the different resources that were made available. I think the committee, the staff got it.”

Another SAC member spoke of the efforts of PBOT staff, after expanding the SAC, to integrate discussions about the history of the community into the ongoing discussions about the safety project:

“The very first SAC meeting we had opened with a PBOT staff member saying, I want to say at least half of that meeting, the history of the neighborhood, talking about I-5 the hospital, Albina, red-lining and various other aspects of the pain and suffering that this neighborhood has occurred. That was part of the conversation, and part of the awareness of the SAC at that time.”

In providing this space to discuss the social history of the neighborhood and some of the specific experiences of members of the SAC, PBOT allowed members to better understand one another and move forward with a clearer sense of collective purpose:

“[...]I feel like a lot of the key leaders on that committee, so were really good about like, you know, talking about any of the tension and like the history of the community and the racial dynamics and all sorts of stuff... I mean that community has an identity the way it is because of a history of racist Portland. So it’s not possible to have a conversation about that project without bring race into it or the history into it. And, if you think that there is then you have no cultural context.” –SAC Member

The above points illustrate how candid discussions of race, social history, and the context of individual neighborhoods are critical to neighborhood development processes. The North Williams project demonstrates that this is even more important in neighborhoods that have been marginalized or subject to discrimination throughout the course of the city’s history.

DEVELOPMENT OF SAC “GUIDING STATEMENT” AND “PROJECT OUTCOMES”

Along with the recognition that historical dynamics have contemporary impacts, the development of a “Guiding Statement”¹⁵ (which in turn helped to establish a transparent decision-making process was essential to the resolution of this public engagement process. The creation of this statement brought both original and new SAC members together in pursuit of a common goal. The development of such guidelines allowed the committee to acknowledge past grievances while developing a set of criteria for moving forward. As one SAC member noted:

“The purpose of the guiding principles were to say let’s figure out a way to one, embrace and help people understand that we respect the past, we don’t like it but we respect it, and we don’t want to do work like that again. I give the city high marks for saying not only do we want to do that here, but it’s possible, I will say even probable that the city has done that in other neighborhoods as well, so that these guiding principles could potentially be used elsewhere.”

As another member noted, “We developed the guiding principles that you have seen. In my view what was important about that is the first three or four meetings...we spent the majority of the meeting listening to people.” Although other SAC members reported feeling that the Guiding Principles took too long to devise, most agreed that they served the goal of bringing the committee together and devising a way to move forward in a collective fashion. The principles provided a clear set of agreed upon ideas that brought the committee together, while also clarifying how the historical dynamics of the neighborhood continued to impact the SAC process. The Guiding Statement is also a critical aspect of this process as it made future requests to the city that would serve to remedy some of the problematic aspect of the North Williams outreach process. These requests are further discussed in a later section.

Along with this process-oriented document, in February 2012 the SAC adopted their “Top Ten Outcomes” for the project. Given the range of interests and perspectives on the committee, the development of a set of outcomes served to clarify priorities for changes to the street. Rather than thinking about what would work for each segment or portion of the street, the SAC worked to think about the most important issues the project, as a whole, should seek to address.¹⁶ These outcomes were as follows:

- 1. Increase convenient pedestrian opportunities to safely cross Williams**
- 2. Mitigate conflicts between all modes**
- 3. Reduce motor vehicle speeds**
- 4. Improve visibility of pedestrians**
- 5. Reduce the risk of cyclists being struck by opening vehicle doors**
- 6. Create opportunities for people bicycling to pass other cyclists without entering the motor vehicle travel lane**
- 7. Manage conflict between bus and bicycle operations**
- 8. Reduce all crashes in the North Williams corridor**
- 9. Maintain or improve ease of transitions [for] bicyclists making turns**
- 10. Maintain access and operability for TriMet LIFT vehicles and private lift-equipped vans**

The development of these series of outcomes was vital to the SAC process as it gave the whole committee an agreed upon set of criteria by which to judge potential changes to the street.

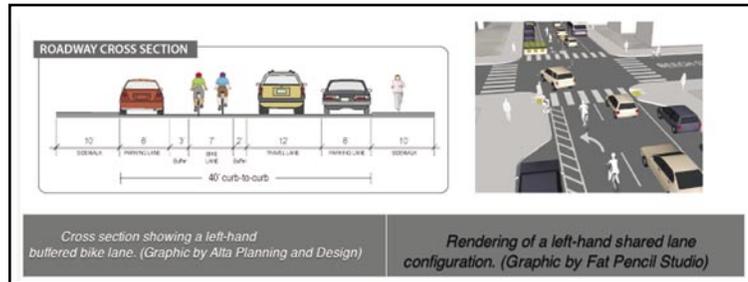
(15) Adopted January 10, 2012, for detailed meeting notes see <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/384363>, to see the document: <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/381521>

(16) Stakeholder Advisory Committee Outcomes Working Group. *Top Ten Outcomes and Measures for North Williams Avenue Traffic Operations Safety Project*. February 7, 2012. Retrieved Dec 16, 2012 <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/385767>

FAT PENCIL STUDIOS AND 3-D ANIMATIONS: SPRING OF 2012

For many SAC members interviewed for this report, PBOT's decision to slow down the decision-making process, expand the SAC, and appoint a prominent community member as chair of the committee were all seen as positive developments that resulted in the successful resolution of the project. In addition to these important personnel issues, it is clear that some technical aspects of the project were also fundamentally important to the success of this project.

Following PBOT's efforts to reconstitute the SAC and move forward with the project planning, the SAC spent a great deal of time discussing and weighing different options for the design of North Williams. In the spring of 2012 participants were hard pressed to come to a decision regarding their recommendations for the street. Through the introduction of innovative 3-D modeling rendered into animations illustrating different design options, the SAC process was able to move forward. This was in fact a pivotal element in the process. This sentiment was evident in many of the interviews. One member of the SAC expressed that:



Fat Pencil Studios rendering of proposed street design.

(Source: PBOT N. Williams project page)

“Oh my gosh, those visuals were a serious eye opener. This is an amazing program. ...You talk about taking something that you can visually see and appreciate; adding buildings, taking buildings away, putting buses in places where you want to see how the interaction will be. It was amazing. And I walked away going, I got it. I got it. This is what I'm going to go on. And I think everyone at that meeting got it.”

Through the dedication of the SAC to expanding the group and working as a team to achieve their goals, many individuals came forward with ideas that helped to move the process along. It was not always easy or comfortable, but the lessons learned during the process may be vital to the success of future projects in the city.

PROJECT CONCLUSION: APRIL 2012 & JUNE 2012

The committee's recommendations stress the importance of considering not only the need to solve issues relevant to bicycle traffic but to include addressing pedestrian safety and the overall speed of traffic on North Williams avenue. The final report and final recommendations can be found on the PBOT website at <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/417219>

The thirteen recommendations offered by the SAC are included in the appendix of the above report. The last recommendation presented requests that the city work to secure the entirety of the funding needed to complete all of the recommendations made. In seeking to meet the ten key project outcomes, the small budget that was originally allocated to this project was deemed insufficient. The SAC therefore concluded their list of recommendations by advising PBOT to apply for additional funding to see all aspects of the SAC's suggestions realized. PBOT followed through with this request, and in March of 2013, was granted \$1.47 million by the Oregon Department of Transportation. The funds will be available on July 1, 2013, and construction is likely to begin in the spring of the following year.

Looking Ahead: Learning from the SAC Process

When asked what practices they would encourage PBOT to improve upon in the future, SAC members had a range of ideas. We synthesize the most commonly repeated ideas and comments below.

IMPROVE PUBLIC OUTREACH PROCESSES

Many SAC members discussed the need for outreach efforts to incorporate a wider range of practices. Many SAC members felt that, although PBOT engaged in an extensive outreach process that involved email, door-to-door canvassing, and direct mail, the process was perceived as unsuccessful initially because it failed to attain a truly diverse group. As one SAC member noted,

“The city does some things very well, runs in some grooves very well, but it does use the same tools over and over and that gets the same people.”

There may be a need for PBOT to develop practices that re-evaluate the methods used in public outreach to ensure that new pools of participants are being recruited. A primary source of recruitment is e-mail lists, and on that topic, one PBOT representative noted:

“It’s the email resource lists from the office of neighborhood involvement, you know, ultimately from the neighborhoods. There are certain email distribution lists from the Portland Development Commission that they use, the Bureau of Transportation had its own that it uses. All of those tend to be squeaky wheels.”

Additionally, one African American woman stated:

“I’ve gotten picked up on a few different email lists, and I’m not sure how [I] got on, but I’ve been thankful that I have been. If that’s the process, that’s not really fair, because it’s just been by chance that I’ve been on them, so there’s a lot of people left out.”

There are many factors that are important to recognize when trying to build an inclusive community group such as the SAC. As noted above, methods to locate and engage *all* members of the community must be scrutinized. It is clear that the initial outreach efforts did not succeed in creating a diverse group of stakeholders. The city must make efforts to ensure adequate representation of minority community members and must do so from the very beginning of their outreach process. Appropriate forms of outreach must also be combined with more flexibility in the times and days that public meetings are set.



The N. Williams Stakeholder Advisory Committee.

(Source: PBOT N. Williams project page)

One SAC member summed up their thoughts on outreach efforts:

“[In thinking about future outreach] I say...: A) canvass, B) get a very representative group, C) don’t turn your back on the people that say ‘hey, you know what? I can’t do that.’ Still take the people who can do that, create a way, ...realize that that is a core group of people, maybe six to ten, whatever, that are business owners, pedestrians who walk the area, some people who drive the area a lot, some people who ride the bus, some people live right in the area. I think you can get a representative group, [if you can] figure a way to get input from them that makes it so that they will actually engage, because you won’t get them at the table.”

Another point illustrated by this quote is that methods of communication and outreach are likely to be area-specific. What works in West Portland may not work in Southeast Portland and what works there may not get the needed results in North Portland. A large part of this is the language used to elicit engagement from the community. While words like ‘safety’ may resonate with those that ride bicycles, that word does not necessarily give the same impression to others. This misunderstanding can lead to people in the area not understanding the implications the project will have on their own lives and thus not feel inclined to participate. A prominent African American man shared his experience that also echoed that of others:

“Really it was considered in my thought . . . that [the North Williams project] was for safety on the street. Now, I had no idea that . . . the intention here was all the while to move this to more of a cyclist sort of super highway or whatever.” Despite some concerns with how the outreach process began, SAC members were largely pleased with PBOT’s commitment to an open and inclusive outreach process, even if it required more time, energy, and resources than was initially intended. However, future outreach efforts should actively work to secure the most diverse set of participants possible. This means that outreach efforts may require more time and more resources on the front end, but if done appropriately will contribute to more equitable and just public process.

IMPROVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS: SAC'S GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The work done by the North Williams Stakeholder Advisory Committee provides a unique opportunity for the city to develop best practices for future development projects. As noted above, in the document titled “Guiding Statement for the North Williams Avenue Traffic Operations Safety Project”¹⁷ the SAC members developed principles to utilize not only for their specific task but also offered insight to the city for future endeavors. The committee highlights four main recommendations that would improve future public participation processes. These include:

1. The recommendation that the City of Portland critically evaluate its public participation efforts and stakeholder input processes to determine who in a particular community is not being heard in the process and ask why they are not being engaged, and furthermore to question how those with little power can be more actively engaged.
2. The recommendation that the City start future projects from a place of community need with early input and guidance. The City needs to be responsible to all communities, especially those which are under-served communities, or culturally disadvantaged communities, when considering project sites, and that the history, land use, and prior planning efforts be considered and questioned while engaging in these projects.
3. The recommendation that the City right past wrongs by studying the North Williams Transportation Operations Safety Project, its success and failures, utilizing a formal facilitated evaluation process, to guide new policy on engagement processes that ensure that all voices are heard.
4. The recommendation that the City recognizes the opportunities and challenges inherent in planning efforts, and to strive for an outcome that is truly sustainable.

Overall, the document itself contains a prescription for future city decision-making process. The development of an inclusive process that develops ways for community members to be engaged in the planning of projects is critical to future city projects. It would behoove the city to take seriously the recommendations developed by these stakeholders as they have emerged directly from public process mechanisms. Developing a citywide commitment to a more adaptive model of public engagement is critical to meeting the city’s desire to incorporate all members of the community in planning processes.

“Change in engagement relates to things we are thinking about, let’s make sure all of our city families of departments or bureaus really come together and understand these are values and principles we have.”
–SAC Member

(17) To view document, visit: <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/381521>

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

Given the fact that much of the tension surrounding this project stemmed from a legacy of exclusionary practices on the part of the city, it is clear that in moving forward, PBOT (and other city offices) must make every attempt to honor and recognize the inequitable development that has occurred in the past. The open house format of the initial outreach processes, which served as an ideal venue for community members to voice concerns over bikeway development, did not occur until the project was already underway.

Several members felt that an inclusive discussion process needs to be included in all city projects of this nature. One SAC member expressed the concern voiced by many interviewees:

“If you’re engaged in a process where you know something is going to happen, we’re going to lease a second store front, we’re going to tear up this road, we’re going to close that building, we’re going to move that, whatever it is, then people from different ethnicities, backgrounds, races, classes, experiences, are going to feel different about it. And if they’re going to feel differently about it, it’s the perfect place to have those conversations. Bring them all in and say, ‘Hey, we don’t need to get this done tomorrow, but let’s talk.’”

Many participants felt that city planning processes could and should do more than merely address infrastructural issues. These processes also have the potential to deal with social injustices in the broader community and move forward a broader, more inclusive dialogue. As one SAC member stated:

“We know what happened [in the past]. Not that we ever need to forget it, but at the same time, there needs to be an understanding that the people that lived there before need to be engaged in the processes of what is going on in the community now. It doesn’t do enough justice for the city to say, ‘We’re going to bring those people in and let them tell their story, and everyone is going to feel sorry.’ That’s not the purpose. It’s to understand that history, and then use it to move forward.”

Many community members felt that the process itself served as a preliminary mechanism to rebuild trust and understanding between black residents and the city. One city staff member reported the healing and community building that emerged as a result of this project:

“Despite the length of this process... [it] allowed people...to deeply understand each other’s motivations and concerns, and it didn’t go smoothly all the time. People felt threatened by other people in the committee at various points and so forth. But in the end, [as another committee member noted] when we were having our picture taken, she said, ‘just look at all the relationships that have come out of this’. That whole thing of building the relationships, I think that is probably turns out to be the key to the whole thing. I mean, the key to our success in actually arriving at a recommendation, but also the key to beginning to address some of these larger concerns.” –PBOT Staff Member

From these comments, it is clear that planning and development practices must consider both the past and present neighborhood dynamics; each Portland neighborhood has its own unique story and that evolution must be taken into account as planning efforts move forward. Failure to consider the social context, the trajectory of neighborhood development, and the ongoing social dynamics of each community risks the sort of oversight or exclusion that characterized the early stages of this project. On the other hand, it is evident that these community processes are vital social spaces that can actually improve community cohesion and generate a sense of inclusion. These processes are critical spaces for discussion and imagination, but only when a fully representative and diverse group of people are invited to the table.

BROADENING ISSUES OF PLANNING TO ISSUES OF POLICY

Despite initial conflict surrounding PBOT's outreach efforts and the varied social dynamics of the North Williams area, the Stakeholder Advisory process ultimately succeeded in generating some concrete suggestions for project implementation. However, throughout the year and a half long process, a number of issues arose that demonstrated how transportation is a much more complex issue than street design, roadway signage, or traffic lights.

Separating transit issues from community issues was no longer viewed as viable means of city development and planning. Issues of community vitality, livability, and social justice came into many SAC discussions about the plans for North Williams Avenue. Often tying into calls for affordable housing and business loans for minority residents, SAC members spent meeting time considering the role that the city could, or should, play in broader issues of equity and justice. Although the SAC ultimately declined to incorporate these types of action items in their final recommendations, it is critical that the city recognize the expansive nature of transportation planning and policy. As one PBOT transportation official stated:

“I think we’ve been obsessed with the [infrastructure] issues and by the questions, and wondering whether we’re going to have money to do this sort of thing again...I guess my take-away is that we need to know our community better. ... There is no such thing as low hanging fruit. Every project is [complex]... don’t trust those people who say, “It’s easy.”

The SAC process raised a number of current, past, and future issues that city planners should take into consideration. Broadly speaking, the North Williams project has demonstrated that issues of transportation and safety are not limited to mere changes in infrastructure, but may include discussions of race, history, and ongoing social injustices. Critical to future planning processes is the recognition that neighborhoods have a story and a history that is uniquely their own. City decision-makers must take care to recognize these pasts, work to recognize previous injustices and their ongoing impact on community members while recognizing that transportation planning efforts may involve complex processes of discussion and debate.