

Innovations in Public Involvement
Structured Interview Report
Alameda-Contra Costa Transit's
Accessibility Advisory Committee

Date: June 8, 2016

Staff Interviewers: Ted Ritter, Brian Morgan

Interview Subjects: Kimberly Ridgeway (Accessible Services Specialist)

What it is: The Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) was established by AC Transit to review, comment, and advise the Board of Directors and staff regarding the implementation of planning programs and services for seniors and people with disabilities in the Oakland metro area. The AAC holds formal, monthly meetings to address relevant accessibility issues and consists of volunteer members who routinely use AC Transit's fixed-route service, are of senior or disabled status, and are willing to devote time to attend meetings.



Interest to NJTPA: NJTPA has expressed interest in further expanding its outreach to seniors and individuals with various disabilities. Advisory committees are an ideal way to engage community members who are eager to offer ideas, but who are more comfortable in situations where they are not the minority. By establishing an advisory group comprised solely of seniors and individuals with disabilities, NJTPA can create a safe space where they feel their voices are not only valid, but welcomed.

Major Takeaways:

1. **Both a tool for gaining representative approval and a forum for initiating change:** Because all committee members are also members of senior and disabled communities, the committee provides important input and feedback from those who will be directly impacted by potential actions or policy changes. The committee also has the ability to independently devise and request program implementations or other actions that it believes would be important to the communities it represents.
2. **Low-cost tool for representative input with minimal maintenance:** Committee members are volunteers and meetings require little or no direct expenses. The meetings take place in reserved public spaces and only require minimal staff time to prepare an agenda and facilitate a discussion. There is a small staff that assists with operational aspects of the program, but apart from staff hours, there are almost no maintenance costs.
3. **Highly transferrable paradigm:** A committee like the AAC could be created for any region, city or municipality that wants to improve or increase senior and disabled mobility. In fact, this model could be used for other distinct demographic groups as well, such as members of minority communities or low-income residents.
4. **Potential for long-standing membership, for better or worse:** Some members of the AAC have been with the committee since its inception over 25 years ago. This has provided stability to the committee and ensures that at least some members have significant institutional knowledge. However, with such familiarity, the committee also has the potential to see meetings as merely routine and become stagnant. It helps to have a mix of experienced and new members to keep energy high and make sure new ideas are brought to the table.
5. **Less about engaging the broader public than about engaging specific individuals of a certain demographic:** While the committee is comprised of members from certain demographics, the members do not always speak for the other members of their communities. Some members join the committee because they are personally affected by transit-related decisions (and are offered free transit passes) rather than a desire to provide representation on behalf of a larger subset of residents with similar needs.
6. **Reliable vetting/nominating processes and a clear delineation of expectations/duties of committee members is essential:** Because membership can be long-standing, it is important to have a thorough process for ensuring that potential members have an appropriate temperament for serving on an advisory committee. Clear guidelines for etiquette at meetings should be drawn up to keep meeting civil and disciplined. Further, the committee should be reminded consistently that it is advisory in nature: The committee should not come to expect that all of its suggestions and requests will come

to fruition or it may lead to anger when other authoritative bodies take a pass on its ideas.

Discussion:

The AAC has been around for over 25 years. Is it a recognizable presence in the community?

Various agencies that work in tangent with the AAC are very familiar with it. However, the general public probably isn't too familiar with the AAC unless they are seeking out specific information about accessibility concerns. Information about the committee is available both on the website and in our accessibility guides, so if anyone is looking for it, they'll find it. But it probably isn't as widely known as we would like it to be. That said, it being widely known isn't necessarily integral to its purpose.

What resources are required to keep the AAC in place?

We have a staff of three people that oversee the committee (director, manager, secretary). AC Transit helps to fund East Bay Paratransit, which has a big community meeting room where we hold our meetings. Overall, there are very few maintenance costs. We use very little multimedia. There are some members who are blind, so we have to convert our agendas and attachments into brail for them. It is a relatively simple and low-cost structure.

Who is on the AAC? How do they become members?

The committee is made up of 14 people, seniors and people with disabilities, and they all must ride fixed AC Transit routes. Technically the term for a committee member is one year. However, they are asked annually if they would like to continue to participate, and most of the time those who respond affirmatively are reappointed, unless there is a problem with attendance. Two individuals have been on the committee since its inception, but two others became members this past April. Once someone is on the committee, they can pretty much stay on as long as they like.

Does the stability of members on the committee end up being a good thing or would you prefer a bit more competition for membership?

It's a double-edged sword. It's nice to have "new blood" that can be a pair of fresh eyes, but it's also nice to have people on the committee who have extensive institutional knowledge.

Why do people tend to get involved with the AAC?

Mostly because they are affected community members who want to get involved in driving decision making. Each member is also given a badge that allows them to use AC Transit services for free. However, there aren't any reimbursements for travel or anything like that.

Have there been any difficulties with participation due to the fact that members are seniors and disabled?

We actually haven't had any issues with attendance. Sometimes, someone who has a health issue brings a health attendant with him, but it doesn't affect the meeting in any way.

What is the format of the meetings? What is addressed? Does the public attend?

The committee meets once a month, and it is a public meeting. It tends to be pretty casual, but it is formal in that there is a set agenda and minutes are kept and made public on our website. There is very high participation and we rarely run into a situation in which there is not a quorum. In terms of public attendance, more often than not members of the general public are not in attendance, though the committee does welcome people to join. We always have an item on the agenda for public comment, but we rarely have them. However, we do have a mailing list, so we can still get the information discussed at the meetings to our subscribers without their needing to be there.

Can you gauge if committee members are real representatives of the greater public? Or do they tend to participate as individuals?

It's a mix of both. We do have folks who are heavy advocates and then others that have joined because of personal issues or issues that family members have had with fixed route travel.

How is the agenda determined?

The AAC has a chair and vice-chair. The vice-chair works with the Accessibility Services Manager to formalize the agenda, which is then approved by the chair. The final agenda item at each meeting is always a discussion about what will or should be talked about at the next meeting, so most of the time there are no surprises. However, sometimes something will pop up, for instance, a new automated voice announcement system, and it gets added to the agenda so the committee can provide input. The ACT recognizes the importance of the AAC, so certain staff members will show up to their meetings to provide a report or present an idea and elicit suggestions.

What specific policy implementations has the AAC weighed in on and impacted?

One of the things the AAC was very heavily involved in was when the ACT decided to adopt a "buy American" policy in which we were going to have brand new, American-made busses.

Through every single step of the process, staff came to the AAC to get input about each aspect like seating, signage, ramps, etc. Staff even brought in different busses from other properties so the committee could see the difference between ramps and weigh in about which was better. It may not bring every single decision to the AAC, but the ACT seriously values its input.

Does the committee inspire any further public engagement outside of meetings?

With certain projects, we will do onboard surveys to get public input and sometimes the questions are created by or approved by the committee. However, most of the ACT's community outreach tends to be broader in scope and isn't necessarily something that originates from the AAC. The individuals on the committee do speak with members of their communities and bring back that input, but the AAC is not a place where extensive outreach is planned.

Was the AAC created because of unique circumstances in your area? Or is it fairly translatable?

I think this could be a useful tool anywhere. The only thing, in my opinion, that is unique to this area is that the director of ACT is one of three nation-wide that is elected. It's possible that forming a committee like this back in the 90s was thought to be a political advantage because it was right after the ADA passed, so that may have provided some incentive. However, there is an even higher focus on accessibility today, so it shouldn't be a difficult program to initiate.

Have there been any notable difficulties with the AAC?

The most difficult problem recently has been some of the attitudes of a few individual committee members. It is very important that individuals are being vetted. We absolutely want different opinions to be represented on the AAC. But at times there is outright disrespect that can be a bad thing. I actually had to create AAC etiquette guidelines in order to combat things like that. It's also important to make sure that members will have something to offer. Sitting in a seat without bringing anything to the table is not very helpful. We want our actors to be very active. The secretary to the committee annually sends out recruitment information through agencies and individuals on the mailing list, but we don't see many new board members because existing board members usually reappoint the folks who are already there, assuming that they want to continue. It might be a good idea to have someone or something in place that can regularly evaluate the board members to ensure that the person you've appointed is being effective.

Does the fact that the AAC has been around for 25 years result in any level of stagnation? How does the AAC develop new, effective methods for itself?

In general, we have a really good committee that stays pretty involved. Recently they implemented new bus operator AAC classes to help train drivers in how to deal with seniors and

people with disabilities. Also, they created a subcommittee to determine what kind of improvements they could make to the transit user manual. All of these are things that they are coming up with as opposed to things that we are bringing to them. It can get stagnant at times, and has gone through periods of time where there was very little initiative to try new things. But in recent years the committee has been much more proactive.

Are there any factors that limit your ability to maximize public involvement?

I would like to see more specialized outreach. I am the only outreach personnel in my department, and it would be helpful to have others available to broaden the net we cast and involve more members in the community. Most of our community outreach takes place as a method to get input from the community as whole. It might be more effective to have outreach aimed toward more specific groups.

In general, are you satisfied with this committee and its impact? Is there anything you would change about it?

Yes, it has been pretty successful as a communication tool and as a way of making the right kinds of improvement along the way. One thing I would change is the frequency of our meetings: Monthly meetings are too many, in my opinion, and bimonthly might be more appropriate. If you were to start a similar committee, definitely have a serious vetting process. Also, make sure members have a clear understanding of their expectations and the role they will play. If they understand in advance that they won't get everything that they want to implement due to budget constraints, there will be fewer issues. It would also be helpful to have a good facilitator at the meetings. Overall, it can be a very valuable committee.

Is there a feedback mechanism to let committee members know when their voices have been heard so that they understand that what they do is valuable?

Usually a staff member will come back to the committee with a report, which is on the agenda. But there is always a follow-up process.