Public Participation: Madison Metro Transit

Report Findings
An effective public participation process is needed to ensure Metro Transit provides equitable service. Metro Transit is unable to secure the level of government funding necessary to expand its service to meet growing demand. Despite this capacity shortfall, Metro Transit must still comply with federal regulations that require it to provide equitable service throughout its territory. Because Metro Transit cannot simply build more bus capacity to simultaneously maximize ridership and ensure equitable service in all areas of the community, it must decide how to split its limited resources. Therefore, community members must engage in decision-making processes so Metro can allocate its resources appropriately.

Metro Transit’s process for soliciting public participation makes it difficult for disenfranchised members of the community to influence agency decisions. Transit and Parking Commission meetings currently provide citizens with the best ability to influence decisions. Academic research and community feedback indicate that these meetings make it difficult for citizens to provide meaningful input. Community members can also provide input by leaving written comments on Metro Transit’s website or by calling a customer service hotline. Although these methods provide opportunities to influence decisions, they do not foster proactive dialog between Metro Transit and the community.

Report Recommendations
This brief recommends four strategies that Metro can use to improve its public participation solicitation process: 1) improving the accessibility of Transit and Parking Commission meetings, 2) upgrading Metro Transit’s website, 3) engaging in proactive outreach in the community, and 4) incorporating reliable feedback mechanisms in existing mobile bus apps. The authors developed these recommendations by researching transit agency strategies in peer communities that address issues with Metro Transit’s current process.

The first two strategies aim to improve Metro Transit’s participation processes. Metro Transit can improve accessibility and encourage better participation at commission meetings by varying meeting times and taking time to hold small group discussions at the meetings. Additionally, Metro Transit can upgrade its website to enhance navigability, use it for solution crowdsourcing, and translate content into other languages.

The other two strategies provide Metro Transit with new ways to engage members of the public. Metro Transit can engage in proactive outreach to incorporate the input from disenfranchised groups. By developing relationships with community groups, holding informal meetings in local neighborhoods, and employing methods of tactical urbanism, Metro Transit can reach members of the community that have difficulties providing input. Finally, Metro Transit can use existing mobile bus apps as a means of receiving input from riders about changes to Metro’s service.