



The First New Jersey Smart Choices Leadership Institute (Spring 2007) Lessons Learned

(This document describes outcomes, successes and areas for improvement based on evaluations completed by the participants at the Smart Choices Leadership Institute, a follow-up telephone survey and staff discussions.)

Ensure that the Program is Facilitated by an Expert

Expert facilitation was essential to the success of the program. Judy Brown, facilitator and leadership expert from the University of Maryland's National Center for Smart Growth Research, provided the right balance of structure and spontaneity to the program. She created a relaxed and non-threatening environment that encouraged collaboration and informal interactions among the participants.

Secure Similarly Suitable Facilities for Future Institutes

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation facility was excellent for conducting the Institute. The courtesies extended by the Foundation's staff and the audio-visual technical support were outstanding. Similar facilities should be sought for future institutes.

Continue to Provide Activities that Enhance Leadership Skills and Encourage Creative Thinking

The Leadership Institute provided participants with strategies for building public support through activities that involved leadership, team building, negotiations, and identifying and engaging interested parties very early in the process. For one participant, the Institute helped him realize the importance of stepping back and looking at the big picture of city planning while at the same time, keeping one eye on the details. For another, it was the concept of identifying champions within the community and using them to spread the word rather than doing traditional outreach.

Dedicate More Time for Discussion of Each Municipal Team Project

Provide ample opportunity for participants to "dissect their issues and plans; allow more time for brainstorming ideas and give feedback to the teams." Ensure that the subject matter experts, speakers and state agency representatives rotate through the team tables to listen and share their expertise instead of working exclusively with one team. Consider taking the participants on a field trip to each of the communities to get a better understanding of the project area. Ensure that the appropriate state agency representatives participate to learn about the issues first hand.

Improve the Participant Recruitment Process

With respect to future Institutes, there is a need to explore and implement means to identify and recruit participant municipalities and enlist their participant representatives who are interested and committed to the Institute and the wider process. Working more closely with the Office of Smart Growth (OSG) and its Plan Endorsement process is one way to be effective in this regard.

Improve Institute Preparation by Producing and Distributing Summaries of Projects Prior to the Start of the Institute with More Thorough Project Team Involvement in that Process

Incisive summaries based on project team interviews ought to be developed, circulated and discussed in sufficient time in advance of the Institute. Summaries for this Institute were produced, but they should receive greater attention and be distributed earlier in the process in the future. These summaries are important for both the municipal project teams and the Institute's other participants. The teams ought to be thinking about the challenges/obstacles/perceived needs of their respective projects prior to arriving at the Institute.

Acknowledge the Important Role Played by the Smart Choices Advisory Group

The Smart Choices Advisory Group met in January 2007. It counseled that the Institute program as initially proposed and largely fashioned by the Smart Growth National Center at the University of Maryland was insufficiently tailored to the New Jersey context. The group emphasized that the New Jersey local public officials are relatively sophisticated and familiar with Smart Growth concepts. They craved hands-on, technical support, not lecture on theory. Consequently, a rapid re-thinking took place to ensure that the program was New Jersey focused and more hands-on. This decision proved to be crucial to the success of the program.

Improve Integration of the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) into the Process

PPS should be involved in preparations so that its presentation is better integrated with specific projects being proposed. PPS Institute involvement was successful and clearly resonated with the municipal participants. However, its participation might have been further enhanced if it had incorporated examples of its successes in other locales that closely aligned with what Institute municipal participants were proposing. The timing of the PPS Group Exercise could have been conducted more effectively as well.

Add Structure to Team Project Presentations

Initial team project presentations might have been improved by providing the teams with more questions to which they would be required to respond. This type of structure will facilitate more disciplined presentations and facilitate cross-project comparisons. It is recommended that more time be devoted to specific projects that individual municipalities bring forward. Roundtable discussions were relatively brief when compared with other pieces of the workshop. It is recommended that longer and more intensive facilitated sessions be held to discuss particular projects.

Size and Weight Participants Appropriately

The importance of properly sizing and weighting the Institute in terms of its participants was raised as an issue. Firm conclusions were not reached. It was conceded that to engage in meaningful dialogue, it is important to ensure active participation by all the participants. To encourage serious problem-solving, careful consideration ought to be given to the size of the Institute as well as weighting the representativeness of its participants. There was mixed opinion about whether optimal circumstances were attained for this Institute. Were there too many participants? Was the number just right? In addition, although it was conceded that participation by the State departments was beneficial, (New Jersey Department of Transportation was represented by approximately 10 participants daily plus two additional representatives from the New York Department of Transportation), there was concern that the balance between local government and State participants needs to be considered. If the appropriate balance is not struck, attention may be taken away from local government project problem-solving.

Involve State Departments and Agencies for Optimal Results

Participation by the State departments and agencies was outstanding and requires special note. The dialogue that emerged among State departments and agencies and municipal participants was a high note of the Institute. It was noted by more than a few of the participants. This aspect of the Institute should be expanded and made a central part of future institutes. The State departments and agencies panel on the last day of the Institute was also a highlight. The concern and candor of the State department and agency representatives was noted by numerous participants. The idea of a State department or agency representative “adopting” a municipal project to serve as a future contact within the State bureaucracy was a stroke of genius and ought to be continued in the future.

Involve Counties in Future Institutes

At least two projects involved county roads. References were made to the need for county involvement. County participation in the preparation and participation of future Institutes will likely prove beneficial.

Display Visuals Including, but not Necessarily Limited to Maps

The Institute suffered from a lack of visuals, especially maps. However, the employment of visuals should go beyond just maps. Maps would have been especially helpful for the non-New Jersey participants. Displays of relevant photographs/sketches of public spaces, successful and relevant projects, and sketches of proposed projects would have enhanced the Institute.

Construct a Complete & Inclusive Participant List with E-mail Addresses Ought to be Compiled and Distributed Earlier in the Institute Process

This was attempted, but constant changes that continued through the start of the Institute made it difficult. Nevertheless, attempts to improve this situation should continue. It is important to cross-communication among participants and the project teams.

Change the Format of Evaluation Forms

Use a numeric evaluation system similar to that used by Leadership NJ which quantifies the responses to the questions so that results can be presented graphically.

Remind Participants to Submit Evaluation Forms at the Conclusion of Each Day

Only little more than half of the participants submitted evaluation forms at the conclusion of each day's activities. If evaluation form collection proves difficult, it is important to convene at the end of each day and conduct a brief assessment of the day's activities.

Consider Follow-up Retreats

As was suggested by several Institute participants, benefits will be derived by future follow-up sessions to monitor and assess the implementation of what emanated from the Institute.

Dedicate to Ted Stiles Memory

In light of remarks made by Martin Bierbaum at the outset of the Institute and again at its conclusion, the fact that this Institute was very much consistent with Ted Stiles' vision for the Municipal Land Use Center and that most unfortunately, Ted passed away just a few days before the start of the Institute, it might be appropriate to name the Institute for him, assuming that institutes of a similar nature will take place in the future.

NJDOT Staff Insights, Identified Opportunities and Suggestions for Future Institutes

- Toms River's presentation demonstrated the importance of "treasured" places in towns and their importance to encourage tourism.
- The state agency presentations were valuable in pointing to state funding sources.
- Creative and proactive planning on the part of municipalities was exhilarating and demonstrated a preferred alternative to simply reacting to developer proposals.
- Through the leadership discussion by Judy Brown, a program manager gained valuable insight into the difficulties faced by decision-makers at the local level. He was able to put himself in their shoes and actually feel their "pain." He was impressed by their enthusiasm as well.
- One DOT survey respondent reported becoming more aware that negotiations played a significant role in her job, especially when dealing with stakeholders. The negotiations workshop transformed her perspective on her role as project manager and ways she would manage her projects.
- For future Institutes:
 - Invite other engineers from NJDOT's Division of Capital Management and educate them on smart growth. These engineers do the design work after the planners do the initial plan.
 - Invite those towns that NJDOT project managers are directly working with and have them work together on the projects at the Institute.