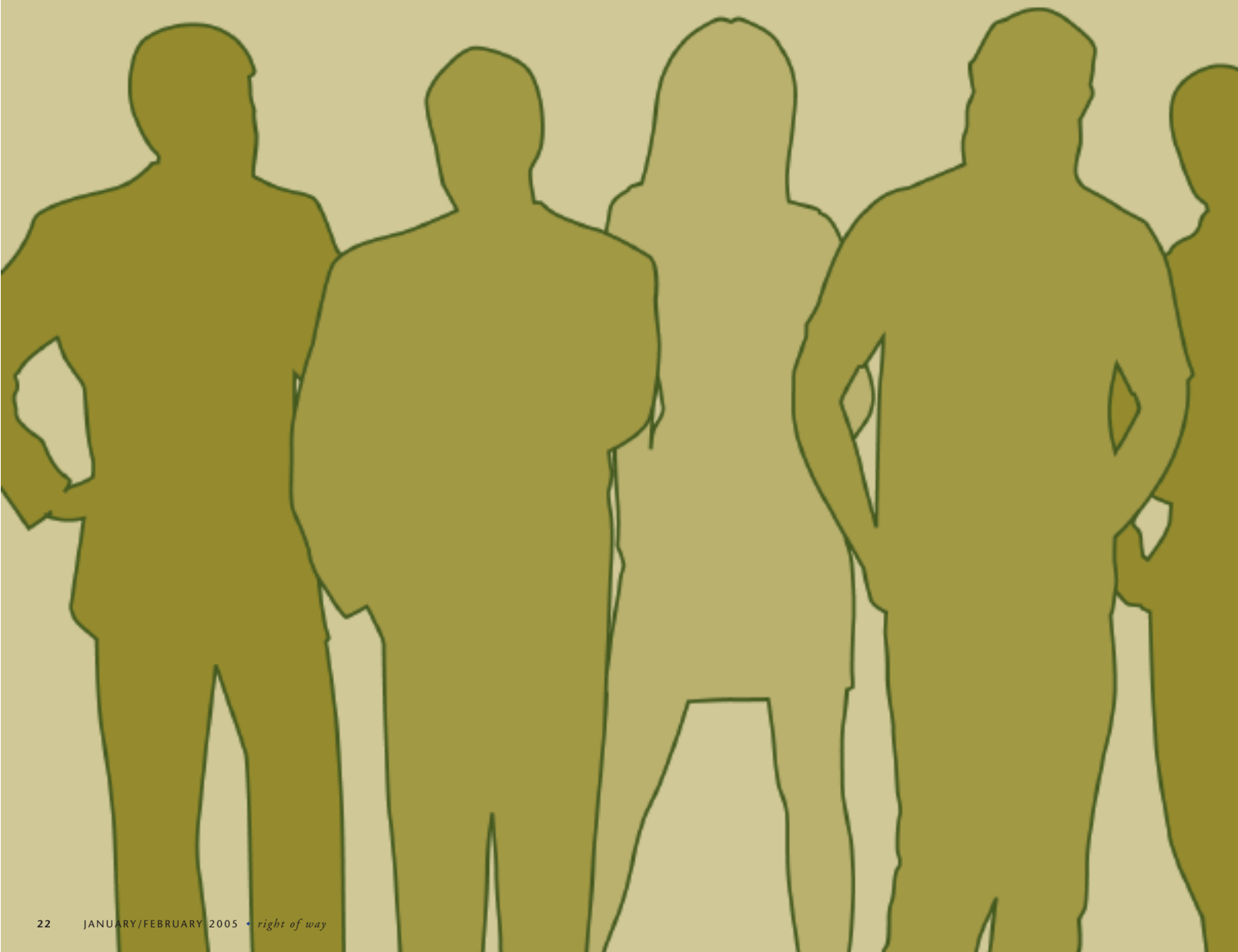
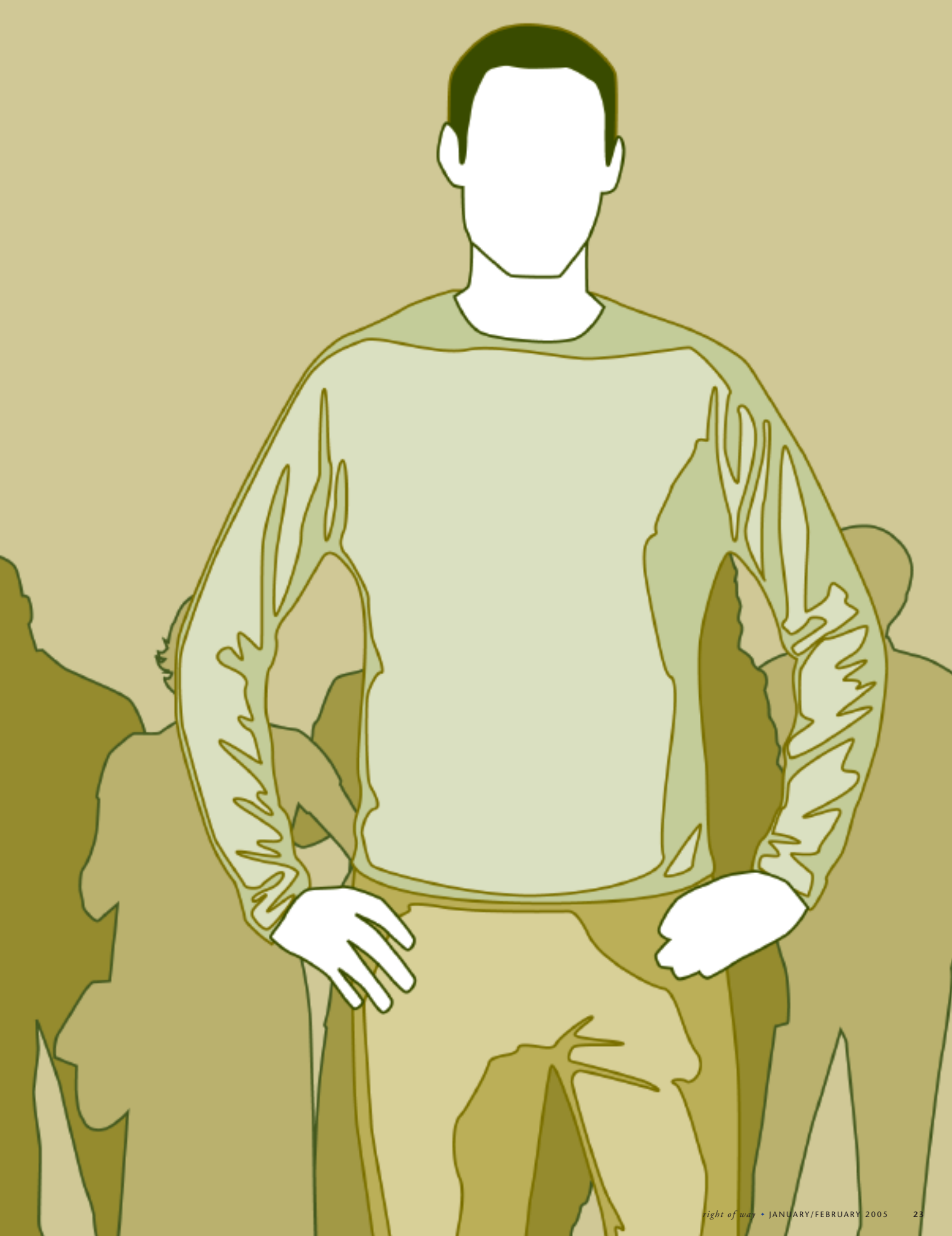


PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU? WHAT'S IN IT FOR THE PUBLIC?

BY CHERYL EVERITT, MBA, IAP2





You've all heard it, you've all dreaded it, and you've all had to do it: public participation. Whether it's standing in front of a group of irate citizens, sitting around the table with bureaucrats each wanting their own special project, or wading your way through the communication records to determine what the real issues are – developing public participation or involvement plans can be daunting.

Public participation is increasingly essential to the success of projects. To garner support, decision makers must know which dimensions of an issue are important to the public. However, change or the perception of change can be threatening to individuals and communities. Citizen reaction to change can cause project delays, resulting in budget overruns and lost opportunities. A strong Public Involvement Team ensures that the concerns of citizens are considered throughout the planning, design and construction processes, and are dealt with in an effective manner so that budgets and schedules are met.

Deliberate strategy means handling the details so that a cohesive, consistent program is developed and handled seamlessly with you. No detail is too small or strategy too large to be considered in framing the public involvement or communication program. Here are a few points that could put things in perspective and help you prepare for a successful undertaking.

First, public participation is more than holding a public meeting – it's communications (newsletters, postcards, Web sites, fact sheets, handouts); public relations (key messages, major stakeholder meetings); media relations (press releases, press kits, media tours); marketing (positioning,

store front offices, sponsorships); and facilitation. If you use these tools when you begin a participatory process, you are less likely to encounter disputes as you move through the project. If the public is involved in the problem identification and in the solution, they may not like the outcome, but they can say they were given the opportunity to participate and the process was fair.

Second, successful public participation activities lead to successful projects. While your state and the federal government have set minimal requirements for public participation and involvement, the idea is that *you* will take it further to accommodate your local community's culture and context, thereby making decisions easier and better; and that money and time will be saved because the project can move forward.

Finally, public participation should facilitate understanding – of the project, of the issues, of the constraints and of the possibilities. Good public participation provides for the incorporation of the public's values into the decisions that affect them and their communities.

GETTING THE PUBLIC INVOLVED

At the outset of a project, you need to determine if you are conducting an informational process or an involvement/participation process. Many projects simply involve keeping the public informed of progress. For example, if you are called upon to do "public involvement" when the design of the project is completed, there are no true opportunities for the

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public to become involved or have an impact. Your job is to keep them informed of your progress so they can cope with the changes you are making in their lives.

In a true public participation project, you may, at the lowest level, consult with the public to obtain feedback on alternatives. At the next level, you may be required to work directly with the public to involve them so that you ensure the issues are understood and considered. This level is the most common in Colorado Department of Transportation projects. Rarely, (and never in my experience), are you called upon to collaborate with the public in each aspect of the decision process, including the development of alternatives and the selection of the preferred solution.

There have been projects where the public has been empowered to make the decision (although never a transportation project).

Therefore, it's very important to meet with the client early on and discuss the project from the public involvement perspective. You need the client's buy-in on what kind of public involvement process you are conducting (inform, consult, involve, collaborate or empower). You may not have all of the answers at this juncture, but it's always easier to begin at the "inform" level and move to the "involve" level than vice versa. At the consult, involve, collaborate and empower levels of involvement, you are, at a minimum, going to do the following: 1) define the issue(s); 2) gather information; 3) establish the decision criteria; 4) develop alternatives; and 5) make the decision. [Author's Note: For further information visit the International Association for Public Participation Web site. They have a chart showing what the goals are at each level and what the increasing level of public impact means to your project. Visit their site at www.iap2.org.]



YOUR RIGHT OF WAY ACQUISITION PROJECT

Sensitivity to and flexibility about right of way acquisitions can further support the efforts of your public involvement team. Get involved early, stay involved and be sure to feed back the information you glean from those contacts you're making as you proceed through the acquisition process. Remember, you are the messenger of change, and not all change is bad.

For example, if you are involved in a process to *inform* the public about a transportation project that has a direct impact to their property, whether it's a partial or a full take, or a constructive take, ask yourself these questions:

Sensitivity: It is essential that you understand their circumstances so that you can appropriately make recommendations, not only to the project team (including the public involvement group), but also on the acquisition itself:

1. Do they know about the project? Are they aware of the need for the project? Can you provide them with the underlying goals of the project (safety, mobility, enhancement to the community)?

2. Do you know about the property owner? Is this a business or a residence? What is his business? How long has he been there? Is this a family-owned entity? What are his needs? Where does he see himself in five-years?

3. Is this a minority? Are there special circumstances that you need to alert the members of your team? Is there a potential Environmental Justice issue? How do their employees get to work? Are the surrounding homeowners also impacted?

Flexibility: There are always ways to make the acquisition process more flexible in the eyes of the public.


1. Is the design in the early concept design or final design stage? If it is early enough, you can request the project team to revisit a design.

2. What is the schedule? In certain circumstances you can request early acquisition due to hardship or to prevent imminent development. You can estimate the schedule to know when the property is truly needed and you can keep property owners and their tenants informed.

3. Does the home or business have some unique or special features that would allow special consideration (historic, cultural or socio-economic that you need to alert the team). Are there special complexities with the move that everyone should be aware of?

Finally, your job is not done until the homeowner or business is successfully relocated and the acquired improvements removed. Sometimes this takes months or even years. Keeping affected individuals informed about the project on an ongoing basis reduces anxiety and promotes inclusion in the project.

Right of way professionals play an important role as members of the public involvement team and *their involvement* should be strongly encouraged as part of your team throughout the life of your project. ❖



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