Project Initiation

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Evaluation name

Land Ports of Entry (LPOE) Community Engagement Impact Evaluation

Evaluation goal

The goal of this evaluation is to assess the impact of community engagement initiatives on (a) the allocation of public funds, and (b) the public's perception of the LPOE project.

Evaluation type

☐ Descriptive study
☐ Formative evaluation
☐ Process/implementation evaluation
☒ Outcome/impact evaluation

Program background

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, commonly known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), which was signed into law by President Biden in 2022, represents a historic commitment to enhance supply chains and upgrade crucial elements of our nation's infrastructure, including ports, airports, railroads, and highways. Within the BIL, there is a provision allocating $3.4 billion to the General Services Administration (GSA) for the enhancement of our nation's land ports of entry along both the northern and southern borders of the United States.

With the support of the BIL LPOE program, the GSA is actively engaged in 26 substantial construction and modernization endeavors spanning eleven states across seven GSA regions. One of the program's six primary objectives[1] is to strengthen community livability and advance community goals around LPOE projects.

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[1] LPOE program objectives: support a secure and well-managed border; facilitate trade and mitigate future supply chain challenges; create good-paying local jobs and grow the economy; improve the human experience; strengthen community livability and advance community goals; and serve as a model for sustainability and innovation.

In the context of the LPOE project, "the allocation of public funds" refers to the financial decisions made to fund different components, features, or activities associated with the project.

Community engagement can play a pivotal role in influencing these allocation decisions. Through effective community engagement efforts led by Regional Points of Contact (RPOCs), decision makers may gain insights into the specific needs, preferences, and priorities of the community. This input can lead to adjustments in the project's budget and resource allocation. For example, community feedback might lead to the inclusion of additional features like green spaces or public amenities to enhance the project's community appeal. It could also result in the reallocation of funds away from aspects of the project that the community finds less favorable or considers unnecessary, leading to a more cost-effective and community-driven project.

The project team intends to develop a guide highlighting how effective community engagement practices can directly influence the allocation of public funds, thus ensuring that the project better aligns with the desires and needs of the community. This alignment, in turn, can significantly boost the overall success and public acceptance of the LPOE project as well as future projects in the region. Consequently, the GSA will also analyze the strategies and approaches that have consistently led to positive outcomes that enhance community perceptions of the project.

Positive outcomes resulting from effective community engagement can encompass a range of benefits, including enhanced community cohesion, a reduction in project delays due to community support, and an improved overall quality of life for residents as the project aligns more closely with their aspirations and needs. This collaborative approach can also lead to a greater sense of transparency in the decision-making process, reinforcing community trust in government agencies and promoting a sense of shared responsibility for the success of the LPOE project.

Future engagement initiatives led by the GSA can potentially utilize the findings from this project as a guiding framework to advance favorable outcomes that align with both GSA-wide and administration priorities.

Evaluation purpose

The primary objectives of the community engagement impact evaluation are twofold: (a) to comprehend the influence of community engagement on the allocation of public funds within LPOE sites/regions, and (b) to examine the impact of community engagement on community perceptions of the LPOE project. The data collection process will be thoughtfully designed to minimize participant burden, and all outcomes will be shared with participants in a format that is both descriptive and actionable.

The core of the evaluation will be internal to PBS and focus on a sample of RPOCs from all sites. At each site, we will administer a 10-minute online survey to RPOCs. These surveys will yield both quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to (a) their approaches in implementing community engagement, and (b) the impact of these engagement efforts on the allocation of public funds and project priorities. Additionally, GSA will request PBS to provide project documents, specifically, their construction plans and any materials related to their engagement efforts. This request is aimed at comparing the project plans before and after engagement efforts, enabling us to establish a stronger causal link between community engagement and changes in the allocation of public funds.

Additionally, after the internal evaluation has concluded, we will select four sites for a follow-up 10-minute survey involving local community stakeholders, spanning archetypes such as individual residents, small businesses, and local officials. These follow-up surveys will provide valuable external perspectives, allowing us to corroborate and enrich our findings from RPOCs and gain insights into how community members perceive the LPOE project and the community engagement process, ensuring a well-rounded evaluation. More specifically, the external data will assist us in establishing a connection between the specific internal practices that foster greater public acceptance of government projects.

Utilizing survey data in these evaluations offers several advantages over conducting interviews. First and foremost, surveys are a highly efficient data collection method, allowing us to gather information from a larger sample size within a relatively short time frame. This scalability ensures that we can collect a broader range of responses and viewpoints, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the situation. For instance, internal surveys would enable us to encompass all LPOE project sites, as opposed to conducting a restricted number of interviews in select sites. Likewise, community surveys would enable us to gather input from a substantial number of community members (with a sample size ranging from N = 50 to 100 per site) within a relatively brief period. Additionally, surveys are conducive to maintaining consistency and objectivity in data collection, as the same set of questions is presented to each respondent, minimizing potential bias or variations in interviewers' approaches. Furthermore, surveys facilitate the standardization of responses, making data analysis more straightforward and enabling quantitative assessment. Lastly, the survey format typically encourages respondents to provide candid and honest feedback as it offers a degree of anonymity, which can be especially valuable when assessing sensitive topics such as community engagement and project perceptions. This efficiency, consistency, objectivity, and data quality make surveys the ideal choice for our evaluation.

This evaluation will require Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) approval.

This evaluation aligns with Executive Order [13985](#), [14091](#), [14052](#) as well as the [PBS Strategic Plan FY 2023-2027](#), and [GSA's Equity Action Plan](#) in an effort to "support key community engagement objectives." Within this framework, PBS is actively striving to harmonize project budgets and scopes with local conditions and insights garnered from community engagement efforts. In practice, this entails collaborating with federal grant agencies to identify community needs pertaining to PBS projects and engaging stakeholders to support GSA's overarching goals, including but not limited to achieving equitable economic outcomes, promoting environmental justice, and facilitating community involvement in decision-making processes.

Evaluation question(s)

The primary guiding questions include:

- How did community engagement influence the allocation of public funds?
    - Did community engagement lead to policy/program changes?
    - Were specific project areas given priority as a consequence of community engagement?
    - Were certain project alternatives consciously avoided due to the influence of community engagement?
- How did different engagement approaches affect the allocation of public funds?
    - How did the methods employed to engage the community affect the allocation of public funds?
    - How did the participation of various stakeholder types in the engagement efforts influence the allocation of public funds?
- What impact did the engagement efforts have on public perceptions of the community engagement initiatives?
    - How did engagement practices influence public perceptions of the LPOE project and government in a broader context?
    - In what ways did the internal outcomes of community engagement efforts shape public perceptions of the LPOE project and government in a broader context?

In addition, the evaluation could also explore the following secondary questions:

- How equitable and efficient were engagement approaches?
    - How were recruitment materials created, and who played a role in their production?
    - Did RPOCs seek to comprehend the distinct cultural, social, and economic contexts of each community?

- o Were RPOCs successful in engaging a representative cross-section of community members?
- o Did RPOCs take measures to engage marginalized community members?
- What are the overall community outcomes?
  - o Were there economic benefits?
  - o Were there environmental benefits?
  - o Were there improvements to public health?

Potential impact and utilization of results

The data collected during the community engagement impact evaluation will serve as a valuable resource for enhancing community engagement resources and training for both current and upcoming GSA programs. This initiative aims to yield lasting advantages, primarily in the form of fostering essential knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) among federal employees involved in direct community engagement. Furthermore, it seeks to establish scalable community engagement protocols and processes that can be easily replicated across various locations. This approach ensures the successful and equitable implementation of community engagement efforts, leading to tangible benefits for community members throughout the United States.

Consistent with the GSA's evaluation policy, we are committed to transparently sharing the evaluation findings with the public following a comprehensive review, such as posting them on our official website.

Proposed evaluation design and methods

This outcome/impact evaluation is aimed at assessing the effectiveness of community engagement initiatives across LPOE sites. This evaluation seeks to understand how these initiatives have influenced (a) the allocation of public funds and (b) the lives of community members. To achieve this, the GSA Evaluation Division (MSG) will adopt a two-fold approach:

(a) We will commence by administering an online survey to RPOCs across various LPOE sites and collect documents from them.

(b) Subsequently, we will conduct a follow-up survey involving members of the community in four selected LPOE sites.

These two approaches will work in tandem to provide valuable insights into the impact of community engagement, benefiting both the government and the local communities. The first approach will directly answer how community engagement influenced the internal allocations of public funds. While the second approach will directly answer how community engagement affected the public's perceptions of the LPOE project.

As part of the evaluation process, MSG will collaborate with key stakeholders to develop surveys for both RPOCs and the community. These surveys will address the guiding evaluation questions, and here is a list of potential questions. Please note that these potential questions include questions that go beyond answering the primary questions of this evaluation, however, these secondary questions have been labeled as "optional".

Data

Both quantitative and qualitative data will be gathered through surveys administered to RPOCs and community members as well as the documents collected. Quantitative analysis will involve generating descriptive statistics and, whenever feasible, exploring correlations in the data. Subsequently, the results will be presented in the form of graphs and tables to provide a concise summary. More specifically, we will examine the correlation between the methodologies employed in community engagement efforts and the resulting impact on project plans. Furthermore, we will explore the correlation between community engagement initiatives and the project's responsiveness in relation to public perceptions of the project.

For qualitative data, we will scrutinize the documents related to the LPOE project sites and open-ended responses. We will utilize a systematic coding approach, defining codes that will be systematically applied to both of the aforementioned sources. A comprehensive coding scheme will be developed, encompassing code families aimed at identifying recurring patterns within the data. Once the coding process is concluded, we will pinpoint themes based on the frequency of occurrence, and illustrative quotes will be incorporated to provide contextual insights. Our primary focus is on determining whether project plans underwent alterations before and after the community engagement efforts were implemented.

Implementation support needed

We may require assistance from PBS staff to carry out the community surveys. Alternatively, GSA could conduct the community surveys independently using its own staff in the four designated locations. Moreover, the surveys could also be delivered via mail and implemented online if no other alternative is available.

Participant Burden

- RPOCs for all sites would be expected to participate in one 10 minute online survey.

- RPOCs at selected sites would be expected to provide us with relevant documents to conduct surveys with community members (e.g., community engagement attendance sheets, lists of local stakeholders and officials who

participated in engagement efforts), and provide us with documents related to the planning of the project and the engagement efforts.

- Community members would be expected to participate in one 10-minute survey.

Timeline and Roles/Responsibilities

A month	**Evaluation setup/pre-work** • MSG reaches out to <u>partners</u> to apprise them of the evaluation process and plan, as well as the potential roles they may play • <u>Partners</u> supply MSG with the necessary materials to facilitate the surveys with RPCOSs and planning documents. • MSG compiles a comprehensive list of all pertinent RPOCs associated with the 26 projects
A month	**Evaluation design/launch** • MSG prepares survey protocols • MSG develops a systematic code to analyze planning documents • <u>Partners</u> review protocols • MSG develops an analysis plan • <u>Partners</u> review analysis plan (optional)
A month	**Data collection** (RPOC Survey) • <u>Partners</u> provide the names and contact information of RPCOs • <u>Partners</u> endorse • MSG sends the survey to RPCOs via email • RPOCs complete survey
A month	**Analysis** • MSG conducts an analysis of the RPOC survey data and planning documents
Two to Three Months	**Data collection** (Community Survey) • MSG identifies four distinct locations based on the RPOC survey • MSG communicates the community survey plans to <u>partners</u> in the selected locations • <u>Partners</u> assist in identifying community members and provide their endorsement. • MSG or PBS recruit community members to participate in the survey • Community members complete survey
2 to 3 weeks	**Analysis** • MSG conducts an analysis of the RPOC survey data

A month to two months	**Report of findings and deliverable** • MSG drafts the deliverable • <u>Partners</u> review the draft and offer feedback • MSG presents findings to <u>partners</u>

Project agreements required, if any

[ ] Data-sharing agreement (DSA)
[X] IRB approval or documentation of exemption
[X] PRA approval
[ ] Other special agreement: _____

Advanced Flags

- Previous evaluation efforts have struggles to engage with RPOCs from the different LPOEs projects as they either cannot be identified or did not respond. Support from PBS and the LPOE team might be essential to the success of the evaluation as this would inform the best approaches to reach RPOCs.
- MSG might be stretched to thin, and deadlines might need to be revised.

Next Steps

- An evaluation plan will be created by October 27th.