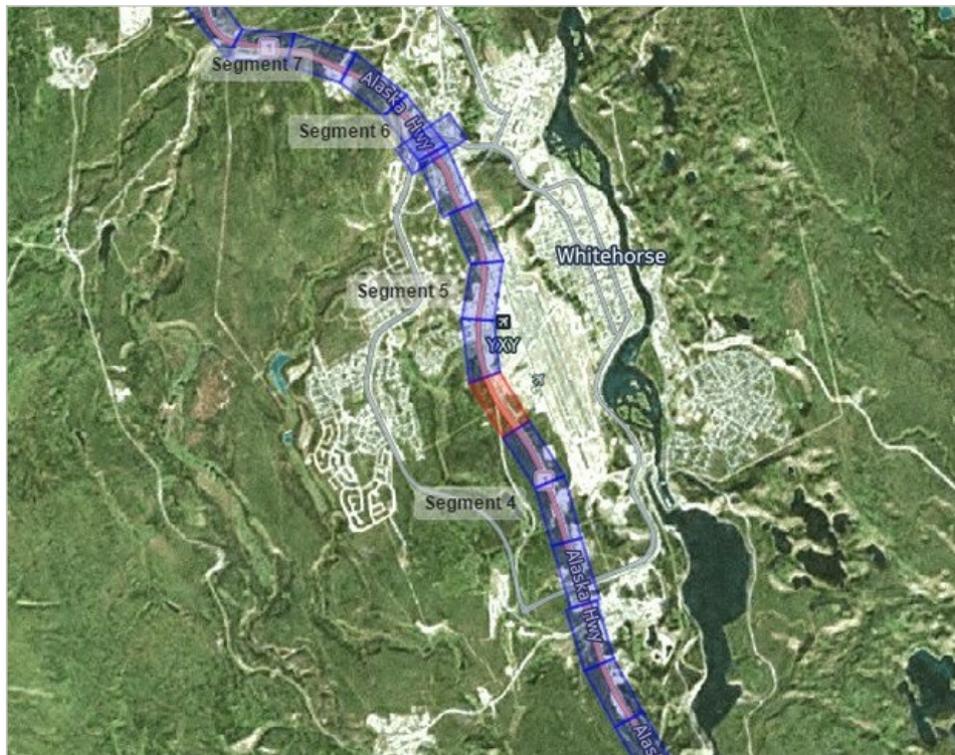


You Know Where They're Doing an Amazing Job Tracking Infrastructure? The Yukon

A sparsely populated Canadian territory is beating out big-city interactives with a public-engagement plan combining the best of high and low tech.

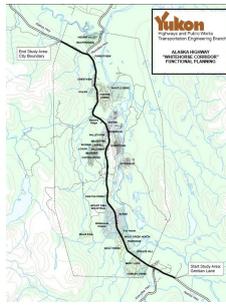
SAM STURGIS | [@sampsturgis](#) | Mar 23, 2015 | [7 Comments](#)



placespeak.com/Yukon Government

Large-scale infrastructure projects create a dilemma. On one hand, [we love them](#). Americans overwhelming [support infrastructure spending](#). On the other hand, infrastructure proposals—monstrous highway projects in particular—are difficult for the public to digest. They tend to be expensive, often take years to complete, and are usually explained in complicated engineering jargon (if they are at all). We want better highways, railways, and ports. But how do we outline these projects to taxpayers in a comprehensible way?

The [Yukon Territory](#), one of Canada's most desolate territories, may have the answer. The territory is aiming to renovate 25 miles of the [Whitehorse Corridor-Alaska Highway](#). The throughway is vital to the region's mobility. It shuttles commuters to and from Whitehorse, the capital and largest city (population 28,000). And it facilitates cross-border trade between Canada and Alaska. It's a sparsely populated, largely forested region. Still, the city of Whitehorse has grown over the past decade and is [projected](#) to nearly double in size. With this in mind, the Yukon government wants to make some ambitious upgrades to its crucial highway.



(Government of Yukon)

The proposal recommends expanding the width of a stretch of the highway to include a passing lane, constructing a parallel pedestrian trail, consolidating entry and exit ramps, and improving intersections. The total cost is [estimated](#) at about \$200 million spent over two decades.

No, this is not big-city infrastructure. The Yukon territory represents the polar opposite of urban density: 34,000 residents sprawled across an area larger than California. But large cities should take a tip from the sophisticated public-engagement campaign for the proposal that Yukon rolled out on Monday; it's an excellent example of what cities pursuing extensive infrastructure projects should do to get their public on board. The campaign is four-pronged, featuring an [interactive map](#) of the highway proposal, a [video](#) series showcasing the renovation, a public [survey](#) to gauge public reaction to the proposal, and a home-delivered [brochure](#).

Local governments often treat the public consultation process as "a box they have to check off," says Colleen Hardwick, CEO of [PlaceSpeak](#), a Vancouver-based public consultancy that developed the public-engagement software for Yukon. (The company is also [working with Vancouver](#) to tally votes for an ongoing, [hotly debated](#) referendum on a tax increase that would fund future infrastructure projects.)

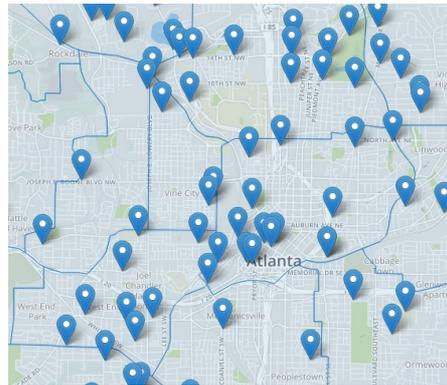
"[Yukon] wanted to be able to drill down into the map," Hardwick says. "These guys really went the extra mile to make sure that what they were telling the public was detailed and engaging."

What if this level of information had been available to every Bostonian in the lead up to the Big Dig?

[Crowdsourcing opinions](#) for public projects is becoming more attractive for local governments looking for buy-in. With U.S. infrastructure routinely characterized as "[crumbling](#)," municipalities are keen to show their residents—often through glitzy websites—that they're out there improving it.

In September 2014, Atlanta launched its own interactive infrastructure map. At [infrastructuremap.org](#), residents can search through \$250 million worth of proposed projects spanning the city. Users can leave comments and recommendations for each proposal. [Virginia's Loudoun County](#) launched a similar tool last year, on which residents can even see which infrastructure projects are

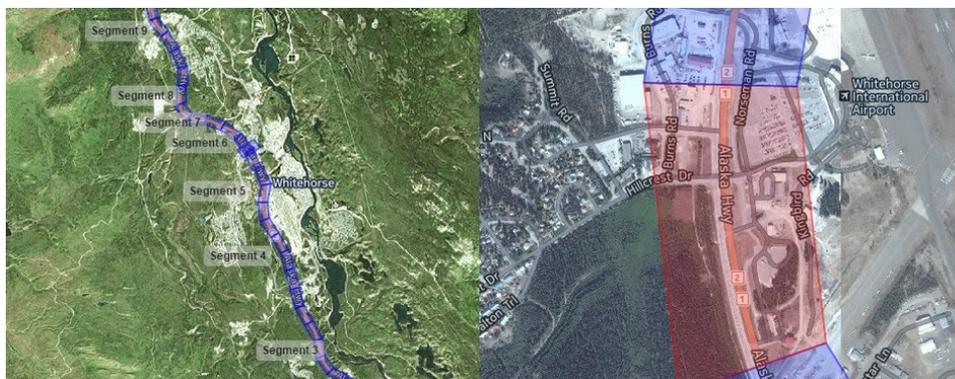
being completed swiftly and which are lingering on and on.



Atlanta's infrastructuremap.org

But there are noticeable functionality flaws in these attempts. And the most glaring issue is a simple one: Not all the information is on the map. [Atlanta's infrastructure map](#) combines proposed projects with funded ones, creating a scatter of blue dots representing legitimate proposals and others that may never see the light of day. A casual visitor to the site would think the city is awash with new infrastructure developments when, in reality, many are just up for discussion.

The Yukon's approach fixes these issues. When residents open up the project [map](#), they're not forced to interpret all 25 miles of proposed renovation and can easily break down the project incrementally. The software allows a user to zoom in on each of the 10 "segments" of the project, which makes a world of difference. An infrastructure project stretching this many miles will impact Yukon residents in various ways. Some Yukoners may be most concerned about the proximity of the expanded highway to their property. Others may want to zoom in to check out improvements being proposed to the intersections they cross each morning on their way to work.



Screenshots from Yukon's interactive map of their proposed highway renovations. Residents can look at the overall area of the project (left) or zoom in on specific neighborhoods (right). (placespeak.com/Yukon Government)

"Inevitably, what happens is that communities are most interested in the bit that affects them," explains Peta Wolmarans of [CH2M Hill](#), the engineering firm contracted by Yukon to design the highway renovation. "So how do we build a tool that allows them to focus in on the bit that affects them quickly in an interactive way?"



An added function of the Yukon project's interactive map is the renderings detailing renovations proposed for the highway. (placespeak.com/Yukon Government)

No matter how cool your interactive map is, it's not guaranteed to be the best format for every interested party. Older residents may be more comfortable with the brochure Yukon mailed to each household. The videos may appeal to residents who don't want to read in much detail.

"The subject matter was quite technical," and "the project itself has a lot of detailed information in it," explains Alicia Debreceni, a spokesperson for the Yukon Government. By presenting the project on several platforms, residents can "customize their experience and view as little, or as much [of it], as they'd like."

Can this robust, digital-first, public-education plan get a small city in Northwest Canada enthusiastic about a highway project? Well, it went live only about 48 hours ago. Still, it's hard not to get excited about the potential of this type of technology to foster inclusive civic discussion.

Public policies involving transportation, "while essential to everyone's quality of life," are inherently "a low priority when people choose to get involved," says Tom Sanchez, a professor of urban affairs and planning at Virginia Tech. An easy-to-use, highly interactive software, like Yukon's, just might have the capability of getting the general public more engaged. By simply bringing along an iPhone, an interactive map or 3D video can suddenly add color to historically mundane public discussions about infrastructure. Hugh Stimson of PlaceSpeak, who helped

design the Yukon software, is hopeful it will make the discussion, "less special-interesty."

What if this level and presentation of information had been available to every Bostonian in the lead up to the [Big Dig](#)? Would such materials have prevented the project from [spiraling out of control](#) and way over budget? Probably not. But Bostonians would have enjoyed a much clearer understanding of the project's intentions and obligations. The public's capacity to keep officials accountable would have been much stronger.

So [browse](#) these cool interactives made available to every resident of Whitehorse, Yukon. You'll quickly learn a lot about their highway and how it might be improved. In fact, by the time you're done, you'll probably know more about this highway in northern Canada than you do about any of the highways in your own city.



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Sam Sturgis is an editorial fellow with *CityLab*.

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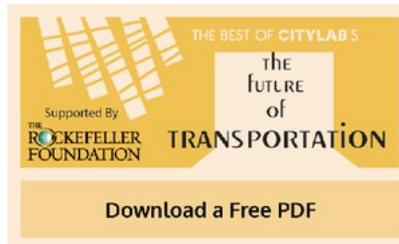
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