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## Online Novice Puts a New 'Face' on Westside Study Outreach

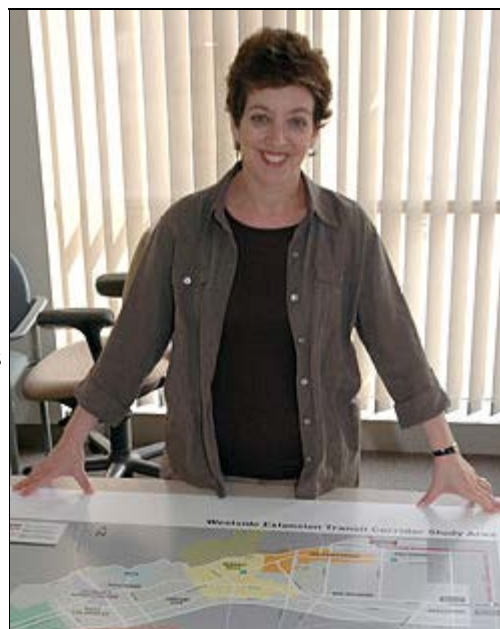
BY Ned Racine, Editor

(July 8, 2008) Jody Feerst Litvak is the first to insist she is not a computer expert, but because she kept an open mind about the virtual world, Metro's Westside Extension Transit Corridor Study team has a new way to reach the transit curious.

That new way is a "Facebook" page. Part of the exploding number of social networking websites, a Facebook page allows visitors to join a virtual organization and interact with other members of that online community.

"All I had ever seen of Facebook was what [my teenagers] would let me glance at over their shoulders as they quickly shut it down," Litvak said, laughing. But she kept an open mind.

Brought along by Matt Barrett, Policy, Research and Library Services Administrator, and Christian Rodarte, an outreach consultant to the Westside area study team, Litvak began to see the value of the digital tool, particularly in reaching college students and 20-something website visitors.



Jody Feerst Litvak is always looking for new ways to reach people curious about the Westside Extension Transit Corridor Study.

Photo by Ned Racine

"It was a way to reach out and involve people who were not necessarily

being reached through all of our other means," Litvak said.

The growing population of the online group surprises and pleases her. Since going public with the group in mid-April, more than 750 Facebook members have joined the group, more than half the number of email addresses the study team had gathered since the study began.

One thing Litvak values from this digital communication is the feedback she receives.

"People will tell you how it's working for them and how it isn't," she explained. "When we first started off, we were so excited about this . . . we were sending messages every third day. I heard back from somebody who said, 'If you keep bugging me and filling my inbox, I'm going to leave the group.' I realized we were a little too excited."

And she notices that the comments she receives are less structured than what she would hear at a public meeting. "Here people can respond when they want to, how they want to; people can respond to others directly, which never happens in a public meeting."

Litvak will make these online comments part of the study record, just as if they were verbal comments received during a public meeting or written comments submitted formally.

Using the Facebook group, she draws her members' attention to new information and events affecting the discussion of transportation on the Westside: links to other websites, meeting notices and media reports.

The Westside study team adds new material continually, because if her visitors do not return, the value of the Facebook page shrinks.

And now, she said, visitors are speaking directly to each other, correcting inaccurate information and bringing new members up to speed. Some of her members have a through knowledge of Los Angeles County transportation issues and some do not.

Would she recommend a social networking website for other projects?

"I think it depends on what [the project] is. I'm more and more becoming a fan of using these various new mediums as ways of communicating with people," she said. "I think it behooves us to watch these [websites] and jump in and comment when we can." Now she hands out both her Facebook address (Metro Westside Extension) with her website address [www.metro.net/westside](http://www.metro.net/westside).

"I am still learning," she said. "I am still a neophyte. I've had a lot of help along the way."

And, yes, her high school and college student are still appalled their mother has a Facebook page.