



Virtual Public Involvement at Texas MPOs

Assessment of Activities during the
COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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Public participation is the process that actively involves the public in decision-making. It *does not* mean giving away control or authority. It *does* mean being transparent and honest about the opportunities for participation and allowing people to have a say in how they want to participate. The outcomes of these activities afford decision makers insight into how the public views issues and challenges and how these concerns impact their daily lives. Public participation plans and programs consist of a multitude of tools and techniques to facilitate input from the public and stakeholders about specific plans, projects, or programs within the region to make well-informed decisions for the general good.

The public includes anyone who resides, works, has an interest in, or does business in a given area potentially affected by decisions, including organized groups. Feedback from people of different backgrounds, cultures, and experiences provides decision makers with a robust and inclusive understanding of the issues. Potential solutions that reflect community interests and values tend to be more readily accepted and can minimize project costs and delays.

Furthermore, consultation with the public is not only a legal requirement—it is also fundamental to the development of plans, programs, and projects. Continuous engagement that is honest, sincere, and transparent builds trust and enhances agency credibility. It also supports infrastructure investment. Agencies that have built strong relationships with the public and stakeholders have been more successful in securing transportation funding.

Over the last decade, significant advances have occurred in digital tools to help the public engage in decision-making. Many departments of transportation and planning agencies routinely post information on websites and allow comments to be emailed. Several have also leveraged social media platforms to communicate information and, in some cases, receive feedback. Additionally, tools such as polling software, visualization tools, mapping programs, budgeting programs, crowdsourcing, and more make participation easier, more meaningful, and more engaging. Even with the advent of these digital tools, public engagement is challenging.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted stay-at-home orders and physical distancing guidelines that limited transportation agencies' ability to conduct in-person public involvement (PI) activities. As a result, many transportation agencies made a rapid shift to adopt, increase, or change their use of virtual public involvement (VPI). This recent experience offers an opportunity to identify successful practices in VPI. In particular, the events that began in 2020 can reveal important lessons on fair and full access to the transportation decision-making process and how equitable participation can lead to the equitable distribution of benefits and burdens.

VPI has the potential to allow deeper and more meaningful engagement while expanding the reach of opportunity like never before. These advancements in meaningful outreach can be achieved by crafting carefully thought-out plans for participation that include specific goals, objectives, metrics, and evaluation based on those metrics.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect the country, and more variants are likely to follow. It behooves the transportation industry to identify best practices and learn from successes and challenges of organizations. This document sets forth the VPI practices at metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) in Texas prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and during the ongoing pandemic, along with the plans for future use.

This document presents summaries of the research conducted to document VPI practices at Texas MPOs and offers commentary on strategies for continuous improvement to ensure that VPI is meeting the needs of all users of the transportation system.

Research Methodology

Researchers devised a methodology that provided a complete picture of VPI practices at Texas MPOs while minimizing the burden on MPO staff to report their activities. First, researchers conducted desktop research. This effort involved searching MPO websites to identify specific VPI activities. Researchers also examined MPOs' public participation plans (PPPs) to determine if and/or when updates related to VPI had been initiated. Finally, researchers reviewed MPO policies and bylaws for any changes that specifically addressed the MPOs' procedures regarding VPI.

As expected, the desktop research identified gaps that prevented a complete understanding of how MPOs are incorporating VPI into plans, programs, and policies. The research team then developed a web-based survey to gather more data and information to augment the desktop research. Researchers were able to use findings from the desktop research as input to develop a unique survey instrument for each MPO that was prepopulated with findings from the desktop research. The unique survey URL was emailed to each MPO. Respondents were asked to confirm or correct the information gathered in the desktop research. The survey also provided an opportunity for respondents to supplement the information obtained via internet searches.

The survey focused on topical areas of:

- Technology.
- Policy.
- Tools and techniques.
- Staffing and funding.
- Evaluation.
- Future plans.

Together, the desktop research and the survey results provided a snapshot of how VPI is happening at Texas MPOs. The findings from each endeavor provided useful data about VPI use at Texas MPOs. However, both of those research methods are quantitative approaches, and researchers were also interested in understanding the thought processes of MPO staff, their elected policy boards, and other stakeholders that may have experienced or participated in VPI activities initiated by MPOs. Additionally, researchers were interested in understanding MPOs' plans for future VPI activities and how those activities will support achieving public participation goals, including those surrounding environmental justice, equity, and Title VI provisions.

To accomplish these research objectives, researchers moved to a qualitative research technique. Two small group discussions were organized and conducted. One group consisted of MPO staff from small and medium MPOs. The other group was comprised of staff members from large MPOs or MPOs that also function as transportation management

associations. The qualitative nature of a small group discussion allowed for a deep dive into the rationale and thought processes behind decisions related to VPI. It provided a richer understanding of the challenges encountered and overcome. It also offered insight into *why* and *how* certain decisions were made. Finally, the small group discussions allowed researchers to clarify any of the survey findings and served as a learning opportunity between the MPOs.

Desktop Research

The findings from the desktop research are summarized in Table 1. As the table shows, information available online varied from one MPO to another. This variation is not surprising considering the staff and resources necessary to implement tools and even update websites. In most cases, especially at the smaller MPOs, these duties are added to the primary responsibilities of transportation planners. This arrangement does not minimize the importance of public involvement in the transportation planning process; rather, it reinforces the need for resilience and creativity necessary to effectively communicate and involve the public in the process. Moreover, Table 1 simply denotes what was found through desktop research and likely is not the complete picture. This assumption was confirmed with the web-based survey and small group discussions. Nonetheless, the desktop research proved a useful starting point and served to minimize the burden on respondents in the survey portion of the study.

Table 1. Matrix of Desktop Research Findings on VPI at Texas MPOs.

MPO	VPI prior to pandemic	VPI in PPP, date published	Types of meetings available virtually	Livestream of meetings	Access to agendas and past meetings	Other VPI opportunities	Online survey and other media	Evaluation of VPI in PPP	How comments are accepted
Abilene	N/F	2018	Transportation Policy Board (TPB)	Link available for live and archived meetings	Available on livestream link	Website contains agendas, public notification request forms, public comment forms	Public transportation surveys as needed	N/F	N/F
Alamo Area	N/F	Virtual meetings may be held in lieu of in-person meetings. The same information will be provided, and advertisement will be the same. Materials will be available for two weeks, generally, with dates included in the public notice.	Planning studies, Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), TPB, Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC)	Link available on home page. Also includes phone number. WebEx, Microsoft Teams.	Available on livestream link and on <i>Online Meetings</i> page	Use low-cost videos for social media, live webinars	Qualitative surveys	Engagement, reach, and followers on social media. Watch time and number of people watching live streams.	Livestream, social media, email
Amarillo	N/F	Updated meeting formats	TPB	Held through Zoom, link available on website under meetings tab. Meeting ID and password available in PDF under meetings tab.	Agendas and videos available through open records request	Use low-cost videos for social media. Comments can be made in writing or via email. Forms used.	Polls	N/F	Livestream
Austin Area (CAMPO)	Virtual open houses available during public comment period(s). Online surveys. Facebook live for streaming public meetings. Webinars available. Wikimap tool for public comments on current conditions.	2019	TPB, TIP	Link available on website homepage and Facebook Live	Videos, agendas, minutes	Events and presentations online, telephone townhalls when needed, webinars, interactive mapping tools	Surveys, virtual open house, interactive mapping	N/F	Email for virtual meetings

MPO	VPI prior to pandemic	VPI in PPP, date published	Types of meetings available virtually	Livestream of meetings	Access to agendas and past meetings	Other VPI opportunities	Online survey and other media	Evaluation of VPI in PPP	How comments are accepted
Beaumont-Port Arthur (SETRPC)	N/F	2020—Online meetings were held when suitable, as well as webinars and telephone townhalls. Online tools used on a case-by-case basis to ensure that the optimum mix of tools is used for each virtual public participation event.	TPB, TPB Executive Committee, TIP meetings, stakeholder meetings, focus groups	Link available on <i>Upcoming Events</i> page	Archived videos, agendas	Webinars and telephone town halls, interactive mapping tools for public comment on specific areas, open house, virtual walking tours	Polls	N/F	Webinars and telephone town hall, interactive mapping tools, open house, virtual walking tours
Bryan-College Station	N/F	N/F	N/F	N/F	Agendas, minutes	N/F	N/F	N/F	Comment forms
Corpus Christi	N/F	Visualization techniques will be created to improve public understanding of plans, policies, and programs.	TPB	Link available	N/F	Telephone townhalls	N/F	N/F	Social media and comment forms
Dallas-Ft. Worth	N/F	2020—Meetings will be recorded and posted online, and whenever possible, a livestream will be provided.	Update to PPP, UPWP, MTP, TIP, Federal Transit Administration funding, congestion management process	Available, when possible	Video archives	Webinars, telephone townhalls, online videos	Surveys	Total number of likes, reach, followers, engagement, subscribers, views, and minutes watched	Email, in person, outreach events, mail, comment form, social media
El Paso	N/F	2021—Ideally the meetings will be held in person; however, under certain circumstances, an in-person meeting may not be feasible, so the MPO will hold virtual public meeting(s).	TPB	Available on Vimeo	Archived videos, agendas, minutes	N/F	Surveys	N/F	Social media
Houston-Galveston	N/F	2021—Virtual public meetings can be held through web conferencing platforms such as Zoom, WebEx, and GoTo Meeting.	Varies	If hybrid or virtual event, link available online. Teleconference phone with passcode also available.	Livestream archives with agendas and minutes	Webinars, telephone townhalls	Surveys	N/F	Letter, fax, email, comment card, comment link

MPO	VPI prior to pandemic	VPI in PPP, date published	Types of meetings available virtually	Livestream of meetings	Access to agendas and past meetings	Other VPI opportunities	Online survey and other media	Evaluation of VPI in PPP	How comments are accepted
Grayson County	N/F	2021—Meeting location is subject to change and can be held virtually, when necessary.	TPB, TAC, public meetings	Zoom meeting ID and passcode available on calendar	Agendas, minutes	N/F	Surveys	N/F	In person, email, mail, website
Killeen-Temple	N/F	2018—Virtual forums and TAC and TPB meetings held when physical meetings not recommended.	TPB	Non-working link	Archived videos from some meetings, agendas, minutes	N/F	Surveys	Interactions such as page views of the KTMPO website and quantifiable social media interactions such as subscribers, numbers of comments, or sharing activity	Comment during live meetings. Subjective observation may be recorded from social media comments.
Laredo	N/F	2017	TPB, special TPB	Available on website	Agendas and minutes for some meetings	N/F	N/F	N/F	Written or oral
Longview	N/F	2018	N/F	N/F	Archived videos, agendas, minutes	N/F	Surveys or questionnaires	N/F	N/F
Lubbock	N/F	2014—Currently being updated	N/F	N/F	Agendas, minutes	N/F	N/F	N/F	N/F
Permian Basin	N/F	2018—Pursuant to §551.127 of the Texas government code and in conjunction with the guidance and provisions provided by the Governor of Texas in the declaration of disaster enacted March 13, 2020, members of the TPB may be participating remotely in compliance with the Texas Open Meetings Act, as temporarily modified by the governor.	TPB, public hearings	Link available online with meeting ID and password	Agendas, minutes	N/F	Surveys	Interactions and engagement, audience content view, audience geography	Livestream and online comment forms

MPO	VPI prior to pandemic	VPI in PPP, date published	Types of meetings available virtually	Livestream of meetings	Access to agendas and past meetings	Other VPI opportunities	Online survey and other media	Evaluation of VPI in PPP	How comments are accepted
Rio Grande Valley	Uses social media to publicize comment periods	Virtually on Microsoft Teams and WebEx since 2020	TPB	Facebook Live, publication on website, social media, and calendars	Archived videos, agenda packets	N/F	Survey for specific projects	Total comments, likes, shares, traffic sources, some demographics	Social media
San Angelo	Used social media for input for people who cannot attend in person	2014	N/F	Zoom link on website	Agendas, minutes	N/F	Surveys	N/F	In person, written, and social media
Texarkana	N/F	2017—Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) will temporarily permit all PI activities previously conducted in person to exclusively use virtual technologies and techniques that fulfill the essential purposes of in-person PI. In-person meetings when applicable. In effect until Stafford Act ends.	Online information, when available, found on website	N/F	Agendas	N/F	Surveys	N/F	In person, mail, fax, email, online comment form
Tyler Area	N/F	N/F	N/F	N/F	Agendas	N/F	N/F	N/F	In person, written, online contact form
Victoria	N/F	2020	N/F	N/F	Agendas, minutes	N/F	N/F	N/F	In person, phone, mail, email
Waco	N/F	Meetings may also be virtual or hybrid (partially in person and partially virtual) to the extent allowed by the Texas Open Meetings Act. Adopted in 2020, current amendment in public review.	TPB, TAC, subcommittees, emergency meetings, partner agency meetings, public informational meetings	Livestream, when recommended. Call-in number and meeting link available three days prior.	Archived recorded meetings, minutes	Live webinars, stakeholder meetings, public hearings, community workshops, open houses	Surveys	Views, follows, comments, engagement reach	In person, phone, mail, email, social media, online comment card
Wichita Falls	N/F	2018	N/F	N/F	Minutes	N/F	N/F	N/F	In person, phone, mail, email, social media

Note: N/F = not found.

Survey Findings

The purpose of the survey was to fill gaps identified during the desktop research and further the understanding of how MPOs in Texas responded to the COVID-19 pandemic to meet PI requirements and plans for future VPI efforts. The survey was successful in accomplishing these objectives. The survey findings showed that less than half of MPOs engaged in VPI activities pre-COVID. Post-COVID, this proportion increased to 100 percent. Livestream events are the most common type of VPI activity in which MPOs currently engage and are also the events that saw the greatest increase in use pre-COVID to post-COVID. These events include both participatory and non-participatory livestream events. Other VPI activities that showed marked increases were hosting of online open houses and posting of prerecorded events.

Almost half of all MPOs have not updated their PPPs, but most of these MPOs recognize the need for and are in the process of doing so. Only a few MPOs reported either not realizing the need to update their PPP or having no intent to update their PPP.

MPOs use a variety of social media platforms, with Facebook and Twitter at the top of the list. Slightly less than half of MPOs stay engaged with their social media followers by posting no less than once per month and no more than once per week. Approximately half of MPOs that use social media also collect social media analytics to help evaluate the effectiveness of their social media presence. Engagements, which include likes, comments, shares, and/or clicks, are the most popular of all analytics.

Despite 21 MPOs being engaged in some sort of livestream VPI activity post-COVID, only slightly more than half of MPOs allow verbal comments received during virtual events to be admitted as part of the public record. Furthermore, only slightly more than one-third of MPOs allow written comments received via livestream event chats to be admitted as part of the public record.

Social media was deemed both successful and unsuccessful, with some MPOs stating it increases public involvement while others counted it as the least successful method for increasing public involvement.

Even though MPOs purchased a wide variety of products, such as software or audio/video equipment, to help support their VPI activities, no MPO received increased funding to help cover these purchases, even though some MPOs considered funding increases. No MPO increased staff to help support increased VPI activity.

Only about one-fourth of MPOs reported noticing an increase in public involvement due to VPI, yet nearly all MPOs plan to continue offering VPI in the future.

Small Group Discussions

The small group discussions were well attended, and nearly all of the Texas MPOs were represented by at least one person. Table 2 lists the participants.

Table 2. MPO Participation in Group Discussions.

Small and Medium MPOs	Large MPOs
Abilene	Alamo Area
Amarillo	Capital Area
Beaumont	Corpus Christi
Bryan-College Station	El Paso
Grayson County	Houston-Galveston Area Council of Governments
San Angelo	Laredo
Texarkana	Lubbock
Tyler	North Central Texas Council of Governments
Waco	Rio Grande Valley
Wichita Falls	Temple-Killeen

The small group discussions were successful in providing a deeper understanding of the VPI practices implemented by small, medium, and large MPOs, in addition to providing clarification of the survey responses submitted in Task 2.

Generally speaking, participants from small and medium MPOs had a low opinion of VPI, largely due to the lack of success they had experienced with these techniques in their area and the level of resources needed to implement VPI effectively. These participants felt like the residents of their planning area did not want to attend public meetings even prior to the pandemic, and VPI was likely not going to change this sentiment. Nearly all participants confirmed that their policy boards do not like VPI, feeling that it is not a good strategy for collecting comments and may be discriminatory against hard-to-reach groups. Therefore, many policy boards have made the decision to meet in person going forward.

Most participants readily admitted that maintaining a relevant social media account is not easy, particularly if it is meant to serve as a mechanism to capture public comment. Many participants reported surrendering their social media accounts to larger partner organizations such as municipal governments that have resources dedicated to social media engagement.

Most participants were unaware of sources of VPI funding and were not sure how funding should be used in the event it was identified. When one participant commented on the need for a full-time public engagement staff member, most MPOs agreed that having such a person would be a major step in making public engagement—both traditional in person and virtual—more successful. Spending limited resources (both staffing and funding) on what is perceived to be an ineffective public engagement strategy results in frustration.

Very little has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of VPI because most participants have little information and lack the knowledge or resources to effectively evaluate VPI. Similarly, no attempts have been made to assess public opinion of VPI.

Discussions with participants from large MPOs confirmed that greater staffing resources, relative to small and medium MPOs, have allowed them to use social media as a more effective tool for VPI. Nevertheless, many MPOs do not recognize social media comments as official public record.

Similar to participants from small and medium MPOs, participants from large MPOs also recognize that the public is busy, and attending public meetings may not be a priority. For this reason, some large MPOs are implementing innovative programs aimed at educating the public on the transportation planning process and simultaneously gathering information on community transportation needs.

While hybrid policy board meetings are commonplace with the large MPOs and make it more convenient for the public to attend, participants noted issues. Achieving a quorum of the policy board has been a significant issue. For this reason, many MPOs require policy board members to attend in person. Additionally, many MPOs either do not allow live comments during livestream events or require a commenter to sign up to make a comment prior to the meeting. One MPO noted that its policy board had requested a time limit on public comments. A significant driver of this limitation has been members of the public using the comment period as a platform to either publicly vent, self-promote, or prank.

Even though larger MPOs have more staff dedicated to VPI, many also depend on consultant staff to help. Larger MPOs reported that VPI is a tool, and not the only tool, with many ensuring that hard-to-reach populations have equal access to public engagement activities.

Looking Ahead

It is fair to say that the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way people think about how they interact with their government at all levels - local, regional and even federal. The public now appears to have high expectations for how decision makers will engage them. This is true for myriad issues, including transportation. The public is well aware of tools that can facilitate their involvement in decision-making, keep them informed about ongoing activities, and ensure all members of the community have access and opportunity to participate. VPI has helped to build these expectations. It is up to agencies using VPI to live up to the expectations. Just like traditional, in-person public involvement, VPI efforts must be evaluated, adjusted, and continuously improved. Meaningful engagement, whether in person or virtual, results in better decision-making and projects that reflect community values.

While the public may be demanding more, there are disparities in Texas MPOs' abilities to meet those demands. Resources, including staffing, funding for tools, and knowledge and experience, will impact MPOs' abilities to effectively reach affected parties that can contribute to transportation decision-making. Conversely, public agencies, including MPOs, must ensure that all voices are being heard, even those not currently engaging. It is incumbent on all entities tasked with engagement to actively and continuously seek out populations that may be missing from the conversation. The assumption should not be made that these people are uninterested. Agencies must endeavor to understand, address, and mitigate the barriers to participation, be they physical, cognitive, or emotional.

It is necessary for all public agencies to consider equity as a cornerstone of their planning practices. Not only is it the law of the land—it is the right thing to do. Transportation is often bound by the hard sciences of various types of engineering. Its vocabulary is often dominated by jargon and acronyms. Public engagement is the area where practice should simply reflect the Golden Rule: treat others as you wish to be treated. Unfortunately, this simple premise has not always been in practice. It is important to acknowledge and recognize that many groups have been marginalized and disenfranchised for decades and even centuries. Moreover, even the terms *marginalized* or *disenfranchised* can be demeaning. The simple fact is that some groups have been underserved and overburdened. Understanding this frame of reference is a first step in centering equity in engagement practices. An equity-centered approach to engagement considers all types of equity—race, ethnicity, geography, ability, age, gender, language, citizenship, education, sexual orientation, and many more. Some of these may not seem relevant to transportation planning, but consideration of each informs an understanding of power and privilege that should influence any engagement design. The ultimate goal should be to allow everyone to participate fully with the appropriate access to meet their individual needs.

Many of the foundational principles of good and meaningful public engagement apply whether that engagement occurs in person, virtually, or in a hybrid environment. Hybrid events can be especially challenging.

The following sections present several considerations in planning, implementing, and evaluating engagement, along with effective practices and approaches. This discussion is by no means comprehensive, and the order does not indicate any particular priority.

Know Your Organization

Does your community know what an MPO is or what it does? The vast majority of the public does not. Explain the MPO's role in transportation planning. Tell the story of the MPO. What are its goals? How does transportation planning work? How are decisions made and by whom? Essentially, explain and illustrate why the work of the MPO is relevant to the public—at an individual level. Regardless of a person's altruism, basic human emotions cause a person to ask, "What's in it for me?" This does not mean a person is self-centered. It means that the MPO must communicate why being involved is important. Demonstrate how MPO decisions affect everyday life in the community. Provide relevant examples.

Know Your Audience

Identifying the audience is fundamental in any engagement effort. Conducting both a situational and audience analysis will provide essential information in determining how best to engage. This step involves more than conducting a cursory scan of socioeconomic demographics in the project vicinity. Also consider the following:

- What languages are spoken?
- What are the primary modes of travel?
- How have groups or sub-groups been involved historically? Are there groups or sub-groups that have historically been left out of the planning process? Why?
- What is the geographical context?
- Are there specific times/days when people are more available?
- Does the audience prefer to communicate through a spokesperson?

This is just a sample of the questions that should be asked when formulating an engagement strategy. This strategy will guide how, when, and where engagement occurs as well as the most appropriate materials to develop, including language and other accommodations. Do not forget that engaging with nontraditional audiences may require a novel approach.

State the Participation Goals Clearly

Be clear to the public about what input is needed and why. Then tell and show them how that input is used. The public often reports a feeling of "My opinion doesn't matter. They've already made a decision." Be open, honest, and transparent about what the public can influence. Demonstrate how the public input was used.

Proceed at the Speed of Trust

Often in transportation planning, a need is identified, a potential solution is formulated, and then the public is asked for input on that solution. This is frequently the point when problems arise. Flipping the approach to build relationships with the community first can lead to more acceptable solutions. Public engagement in transportation is usually a project-driven experience. A process-driven approach may be more effective. Instead of engaging the public sporadically as projects arise or plans are updated, consider committing to routine engagement with communities. Build relationships and understand that doing so takes time, especially if there is past mistrust. Recognize that past injustices, real or perceived, will affect trust-building.

Do Not Let Fear Hold You Back

Part of building trust is being vulnerable. It is okay to tell the public that you do not have all the answers. Likewise, it is okay to try new tools and technologies. Even in small MPOs with limited staff and resources, technology can help. As an example, try creating a short video about why transportation planning is important and why the public should be involved. Internet resources on how to do this with a simple laptop and standard software abound. Enlist local high schoolers to help. In fact, youth is a demographic group that is often overlooked in transportation planning; yet, this is the group most likely to be impacted by long-range plans.

At the same time, be aware of the technological limits and preferences of your audience. Most young people are not on Facebook. Rural areas struggle with internet connectivity. A majority of Hispanic people access the internet from their phone. Be cognizant of these facts when choosing your methods.

Some tools that have proven effective include:

- Mobile applications.
- Project visualizations.
- Videos.
- Crowdsourcing tools.
- Mapping tools.
- All-in-one tools.
- Virtual townhalls, including low-tech telephone options.
- Tools to enhance in-person events.

Provide Multiple Methods and Opportunities

Understanding your audience and knowing their needs allows you to create participation opportunities that coincide with when and how the public wants to engage. A standard of good practice is to engage people where they are. During the pandemic, this was at home, so virtual opportunities made sense. Now that things are opened up more, some people may want to engage in person. As noted previously, the public now has an expectation that virtual

opportunities will continue. People lead busy lives. They may not always be able to attend a 6:00 p.m. public hearing or a 2:00 p.m. advisory committee meeting. Just because they do not show up does not mean they are not interested. Provide multiple ways for them to engage. Create various discreet opportunities. Continually ask them to join email lists. Create short, informative newsletters. Send short surveys. Every touch point helps to build the relationship.

Additionally, look for opportunities to partner with other groups such as nonprofits or spiritual groups that already have an established following. For example, asking for time on an agenda at a homeowners' association meeting is a way to go where people are. Setting up an information table at a high school football game is a way to reach youth and parents.

Providing these opportunities also acknowledges that some people will not be comfortable speaking in a more formal manner, such as at a public meeting or a policy board meeting.

Find Partners

Leverage existing relationships with other governmental or quasi-governmental agencies. Find opportunities to get on the agenda at other meetings. This minimizes the burden on participants by consolidating meetings they are being asked to attend. Do likewise with data collection activities: if another agency is surveying the community about an issue, ask if the MPO can insert a few questions, and offer to do the same in return. Many agencies are often competing against one another for the attention of the public. Working collaboratively can relieve the stress on the public and reduce possible confusion. Create toolkits for partners that include collateral materials such as fact sheets, social media posts, or graphics so that information is readily available and easily shareable.

Partnerships with non-governmental agencies (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) can be especially valuable in communicating with hard-to-reach populations. Often, NGOs and CBOs will have already developed effective mechanisms for communication and established trust with these communities. These organizations can help navigate cultural and language barriers. Establish charters that outline each party's roles and responsibilities.

Build Relationships

After you have found partners, cultivate those relationships. Communicate regularly to maintain the partnership. Maintaining contact outside of specific projects or initiatives communicates that the relationship is valued and respectful. This is also useful to mitigate staff changes. Creating, maintaining, and strengthening those organizational relationships ensures institutional knowledge so that every effort does not begin anew at square one.

Allocate Resources Appropriately

After the initial audience and situational analysis, you will have a better understanding of what resources will be necessary to effectively engage the public. Allow ample time and money to translate materials, provide interpreters, or join others' meeting schedules.

Likewise, producing appropriate project visualization and communication materials for a lay audience takes resources. Include message and material testing for comprehension and clarity as part of your schedule. If the process seems rushed, it likely will not seem sincere. Ensure that each iteration of the process shows the public how and where their input is being used.

If engagement efforts ask people to contribute their time or expertise, plan to compensate them for that.

Consider Equity

The federal government has recently issued many directives that pertain to addressing historical inequities and serve to center equity in transportation decision-making. Recognize, however, that equity should not be pigeon-holed in the public involvement process. Instead, it should permeate all aspects of decision-making.

Take advantage of resources developed by the U.S. Department of Transportation such as the [Every Day Counts](#) program, the Transportation Planning and Capacity Building [Equity](#) planning topic, and the [Equity Action Plan](#).

Recognize implicit bias in the materials created and techniques deployed. For example, consider hybrid engagement events. Are concerted efforts being made to engage the virtual participants, or are those attending in person unintentionally being favored? Take care not to show bias toward the in-person participants. When asking for race and ethnicity in surveys, list the responses in alphabetical order. Include an option for “prefer not to answer” because that answer provides insight as well. Tell people why you are asking for this kind of information, and let them know how you will keep their information private.

Evaluate, Adjust, Evaluate, Adjust

Public engagement is a process, especially at an MPO. Trying new tools and techniques requires patience, practice, and refinement. Just like with in-person engagement, evaluation should be part of every engagement plan. This will help identify what is working as well as what needs adjustment. Tweaks and adjustments can be made during the process, improving efficiency. Do not be afraid to ask people what they need to participate.

Provide Feedback

Telling the public how their input was used and/or reflecting that feedback in plans and programs is a crucial step in the engagement process. This activity confirms to the public that their voice was heard and displays how it was incorporated or why it was not incorporated. This step provides a measure of accountability from the public agency to its public. Providing feedback sends a strong message that input is valued and is taken seriously, which in turn builds trust and motivates people to continue participating.

Conclusion

Virtual public involvement is another tool to help transportation planners, policy leaders, and decision makers understand what the communities they serve want and need in their transportation systems. It is not a replacement for in-person public involvement, and it can complement traditional approaches. Research has shown that VPI can increase:

- Participation.
- Diversity.
- Inclusion.
- Convenience.
- Transparency.
- Access.

The key is understanding the needs and desires of the public. Effective engagement, virtually or in person, leads to better decision-making that is reflective of community values. It can accelerate project delivery and reduce costs. Most importantly, it fosters transparency and builds trusting relationships.

MPOs in Texas and beyond can learn from the experiences of others. Numerous internet resources are available, including FHWA's Everyday Counts 6: [Virtual Public Involvement](#). This program provides tools and resources, including funding, to advance initiatives.