



Virtual Public Engagement Best Practices

Virtual public engagement can be a great way to disseminate information and gather feedback for a program or study. There are several different ways to gather public input virtually. This can include live or recorded presentations (such as webinars or livestreams), online surveys, comment forms, interactive maps and webpages with project information and key documents. Deciding which tools to use for a project really depends on the target audience.

Creating a project website is important, but if no one knows about the website or that information and opportunities for public involvement will be available there, it won't be successful in engaging the public. Taking stock of existing county/municipal websites, e-mail lists and social media accounts in the study area can help address this. It's always good practice to have the county and/or municipalities share information on their accounts to help get the word out. Some municipalities also have local access shows that are streamed on television and online that could provide an outlet for virtual meetings.

Engage local officials to find out where people go to get their information. Perhaps there are community groups, chambers of commerce or other organizations that can help disseminate information through emails to members, websites or social media. In some cases, it may make sense to have a county or town with a Facebook page create a subgroup specifically for the project. The group would allow project team members to share information and collect feedback. Social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, also allow for the creation of polls which can be used as short one-question surveys. It's important to monitor social media posts and groups created to promote a project for any comments. Project team members should respond to any questions about a project posted on social media and incorporate general comments as part of public feedback on a study.

Considering all these resources will help develop an outreach plan. For example, in a community where the mayor has a large Facebook following, it would make sense to use Facebook Live to hold a virtual public meeting. But if a town isn't on social media, or has a minimal following, it might be better to post a presentation and contact information to the study website and use the town's email list and website to ask people to visit the project website and provide feedback.

Virtual outreach efforts should have equitable approaches and be cognizant of potential digital gaps in project areas especially among low income and minority populations. Studies by the Pew Center for Research and Transportation Research Board show that use of smart phones is higher among these populations. Project websites and materials posted online should be mobile-friendly so that people without computer access can easily view them

Below are some general best practices and tips for different types of outreach that can be conducted virtually.

General Tips for Gathering Virtual Public Input

- Consider expanding public comment periods to allow more people to participate as they find out about the opportunity for input. For example, if a comment period is traditionally a month consider making it 6 weeks.
- Provide multiple ways to engage the public so they can participate in the way they are most comfortable. For example, if you are planning to do a webinar, also provide people with a recording they can watch later and a way to submit comments after the virtual meeting.
- Keep virtual public meetings to one hour (or less) in length. If the meeting will consist of Q&A, a 30-minute presentation followed by a 30-minute Q&A session is recommended.
- Presentations posted online may need to be formatted differently than those given in person. If slides are posted, rather than a recording of a presentation, ensure they have adequate information to explain what people are looking at and being asked to provide feedback on.
- Facebook ads can be used to target people living in a community or study area. Ads can also be run in newspapers with information about project websites and a way for people who don't have computer access to request information, such as a number they could call to request that project information be mailed to them.
- Use familiar channels to let people know about the opportunity for public comment, such as websites, social media and e-mail blasts. For example, share the project website on the county/municipal webpage and social media accounts. Share the posts with community groups who can post them to their social media accounts and email information to members.
- If possible, collect or request contact information so you can reach back out, follow up and close the loop on comments received.
- It is important to consider the needs of residents in the study area.
 - Make sure project information is translated for residents who have limited English proficiency.
 - Low-income populations may not have access to virtual outreach or study websites. Study information, including a contact phone number and surveys or other requests for feedback, could be mailed to these households.

Live Virtual Public Presentation Best Practices

- Do a test run ahead of time.
 - Make sure all the presenters log in early so attendees are not waiting on someone to log into the software.
 - Ensure all presenters/speakers have a quiet space they can use during the meeting.
 - Test audio, screen sharing, videos etc.
 - Test the comments to ensure participants will be able to ask questions.
- Eliminate distractions. Make sure you can present/run the meeting without being distracted by something around you.
- Explain that questions will be held until the end but encourage people to submit them via the comment box or chat box.
- Have a moderator to monitor questions as they come in and ensure they get addressed during the Q&A portion.
 - Don't forget to unmute people who call in and want to ask a question.
 - Try to answer as many questions as possible during the live meeting. This demonstrates to members of the public that project sponsors are listening in real time.
- Keep in mind some members of the public may only be able to call in and there may be visually impaired participants so presenters should give a brief explanation of the visuals.

- Present public input as an opportunity to have a voice, make a difference. Be engaged and enthused yourself if you expect others to do the same.
- Recognize that the conversation — comments, dialogue — may not go as you predicted, so be ready to adjust and respond and let people know they’ve been heard. Be objective and validate without value judgement.

Presentation Best Practices (Live or Recorded)

- Keep it brief. You will lose your audience if presentations are too long.
 - Be clear and concise.
 - Do not use complicated or technical terminology. Ensure the general public can understand what you are presenting.
 - Don’t overload people with too much information.
 - Cut out extensive process/background information.
 - Focus on what’s new.
 - Explain what you want feedback on.
- Slides should be simple and visual. Include images and links.
- Tell people how they can provide feedback (ex: online form, email, phone call)

Examples of Virtual Public Meetings

Oregon DOT Virtual Open Houses

<https://openhouse.oregondot.org/>

Oregon DOT built a custom website to house online open houses. The site launched in 2017 to gather STIP comments but has since been used for more than 20 meetings, including transportation plans and highway projects. They use a standard template for all these projects and find that is better than having consultants build custom sites for each one.

They usually do this to supplement in-person outreach but have seen an increase in public involvement with the online component. It has worked well in rural and urban communities. Portland Metro Area Value Pricing Feasibility Analysis had two virtual open houses with more than 13,000 total participants, generating more than 6,000 comments.

- Because NJTPA subregions host some study websites it would be difficult to mirror this.
- The open house website, however, could serve as a model for what information a subregion should put on a study website, which would be used in conjunction with a live virtual meeting using either GoToMeetings or YouTube live.
 - “On demand” stations include embedded video, documents, interactive maps and questionnaires.

Missouri DOT

<https://www.modot.org/online-public-meetings>

MDOT has used virtual meetings in tandem with in person meetings. It’s not clear from the past meetings how the public could participate from the live event. They shifting a planned in person meeting to virtual on 3/19/2020 (They put out a public notice: www.modot.org/node/18159). In lieu of an in person meeting they posted information about the detour routes online and had an online comment form up throughout the day on 3/19 so that people could respond. Here is the webpage for reference: <https://www.modot.org/route-79-virtual-public-meeting>

PennDOT 12 Year Program

PennDOT worked with McCormick Taylor to create a virtual meeting for its 12 Year Program. They used a webinar platform called OnStream that could be embedded on their project page and streamed through Facebook Live. They were one hour long and consisted of a 30-minute presentation followed by a 30-minute Q&A session. They asked attendees to take an exit survey after the event to get feedback on how it went and ways they could improve their virtual events in the future. After the livestream ended the presentations were saved and posted on the website. (The site is no longer up as the project has ended)

Tips from McCormick Taylor:

- Have a dedicated website/page the public can go to.
- Put everything you would have at a meeting online (posters, handouts etc.)
- Post videos and surveys online
- Consider livestreaming presentations and integrating poll questions to keep people engaged
- Use press releases, traditional mail and social media, as well as community partners to get the word out about the virtual meeting/project website.

Broward MPO

This Florida MPO has used Facebook live and e-Town Hall Meetings for public outreach, including for its last LRTP. They had quite a bit of success with it, reaching a few thousand people, given the limitations of Facebook outlined earlier in this document. There is some info and archived content at <http://www.browardmpo.org/index.php/mtp-get-involved>.

FHWA Virtual Public Involvement Resources

Virtual Public Involvement Homepage: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/public_involvement/vpi/

FHWA Webinars on Virtual Public

Involvement: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/public_involvement/vpi/webinars/

Crowdsourcing Fact

Sheet: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/public_involvement/vpi/fact_sheets/crowdsourcing_fs.cfm

Virtual Town Halls Fact

Sheet: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/public_involvement/vpi/fact_sheets/virtual_town_halls_fs.cfm