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PennDOT Connects September 2022 Newsletter

Better Collaboration, Better Communities – Transform Public Engagement Strategies for Local Transportation Projects

How do we involve the public and our local governments responsibly and equitably?

Public engagement for transportation projects has evolved and improved, recognizing that public and stakeholder input is an essential element of project planning and development. Strategies to connect with people, organizations, and governments are necessary for more equitable and transparent public processes. A thorough public engagement process helps to build a structure for implementation, identify problems and issues that need to be considered, and develop the capacity to solve future problems.

Successful transportation projects rely, in part, on effective public engagement. The purpose for involving the public early on is to ensure their perspectives are considered and help shape the project in ways that align with a community's priorities. Public input also is necessary to fairly consider public concerns, address questions, and obtain ideas. This article describes how to effectively approach public involvement.

What public engagement techniques are working well today?

During the past few years, communities have faced different types of challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic that has forever changed the way we interact. Local governments are evolving, and the ways in which we connect and communicate have evolved as well. Several of PennDOT's local districts and state government officials have shared techniques that are working well to engage citizens and local governments. In a recent Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) adoption process through the Lehigh Valley Transportation Study, citizens were engaged through virtual and in-person public meetings, as well as participatory radio broadcasts (in English and Spanish), to promote the TIP and allow for public comment. Traditional TIP public participation techniques also were used to engage the public. The draft TIP document was posted on a website, and citizens submitted comments on their own time.

"We had over 100 comments on our TIP as a result of these efforts, and we're always looking to improve our strategies and connect with all folks (regardless of identities including race, gender, or disability) in the Lehigh Valley." – Hannah Milagio, Program Associate for Community Engagement, Lehigh Valley Planning Commission

Public engagement is typically required to meet regulations and requirements for transportation projects and grants. Decisions should reflect public and stakeholder values and ideas and address current issues. This is responsible governance. By using comprehensive and inclusive public involvement strategies there will be better results, more political buy-in, and easier consensus-building in the decision-making process.

PennDOT uses the following strategies to communicate and coordinate with the public and local governments:

- Media announcements
- PennDOT's website
- The STC (State Transportation Commission) website, which aims to educate, update, and engage citizens in the transportation planning and programming process – “Welcome to Talk PA Transportation”
- PennDOT's social media accounts
- Email updates
- Toolkits for Metropolitan Planning Organizations and Rural Planning Organizations (MPOs and RPOs)
- Surveys

Virtual platforms, webpages, hybrid meetings, and certain types of social media have been used more since 2020, to inform the public and obtain feedback, which allows for a greater response rate.

“Today, webpages and online comment forms have helped improve overall response rates and create a wider spread of information.” – Stephanie Spang, District Planner, PA Dept. of Transportation, Engineering District 11

Steps to successfully and effectively engage citizens

“Local government is changing, and the ways in which we connect with folks needs to change, too. Traditional opportunities, like public meetings and written correspondence, work for some folks, but there needs to be accommodations made for other folks to engage in the process.” – Hannah Milagio, Program Associate for Community Engagement, Lehigh Valley Planning Commission

There are general guidelines that local governments, municipal leaders, and project managers can follow to effectively engage officials and citizens in transportation projects and plans.

1. Identify and be transparent about the reason or goal for engaging the local officials and community citizens.
2. Develop and share a clear purpose for engagement with participants.
3. Select the right public participation tool or process (or apply several techniques) that will meet the identified purpose for the project.

4. Be clear about the goal for engaging the public and officials and be respectful. There are different types and levels of public engagement:

- To inform (exp. handout/fact sheet);
- To consult (exp. opportunity for comment);
- To involve (exp. conduct a workshop or charette);
- To collaborate (exp. participatory committee); and
- To empower (exp. decision-making commissions or committees).

“To build equitable, community-focused transportation infrastructure, we need to center the lived experiences and input of the people who will be most affected by the project.” – Hannah Milagio, Program Associate for Community Engagement, Lehigh Valley Planning Commission
Meaningful and equitable inclusion principles and strategies

When engaging the public and local officials in a transportation project, there are several principles and strategies that can be followed to ensure it is a meaningful, inclusionary, and equitable process.

- Invite participation within an authentic and accountable engagement process.
- Plan early and proactively to account for invisible and unexpected barriers and remain flexible.
- Establish respectful relationships with participants and allow for open and honest communication.
- Engage a representative, diverse, and balanced community sample.
- Work in reciprocal relationship with communities.
- Adapt transportation plans and projects to the context and community.

What types of public involvement strategies work well to engage municipal officials and citizens in local transportation projects based on your experiences? “Virtual public meetings, hybrid meetings, and online surveys.” – Lyndsie DeVito, District Planner, PA Dept. of Transportation, Engineering District 1

What to consider when tailoring projects for inclusion, diversity, and equity

“Public engagement is premised on the belief that everyone has the right to be involved in decisions that will affect their life.”¹ Local governments around the world are developing better strategies to involve and engage communities they serve to inform developing policies, programs, and initiatives. When organizing transportation projects to be inclusionary and equitable, consider the following to ensure it is an integral, ethical, and effective public process:

- Place of residence – urban, suburban, rural;
- Geographic representation;
- Available and affordable means of transportation or internet to connect and participate;
- Education and occupation;
- Political and cultural affiliations and gender inclusivity;
- Language proficiency and literacy; and
- Financial accessibility. (If there are barriers or limitations, try to address them in the process.)

Public engagement initiatives often struggle to develop an effective and inclusionary process, especially since the way citizens and local governments communicate has recently changed. The principles, strategies, and techniques outlined in this PennDOT Connects article will help address the logistical barriers to create a more meaningful and ethical participation process in local transportation projects, TIPs, and L RTPs.

“Important strategies for connecting to communities are continual sharing of information, listening to communities, and trying new ideas to reach people.” – Stephanie Spang, District Planner, PA Dept. of Transportation, Engineering District 11

Public officials serve the community, yet involving the broader public is a worthwhile investment that greatly benefits transportation project planning and development. Decades-old bridges carrying thousands of vehicles every day is an all-too-common story in Pennsylvania. Replacing or repairing bridges takes years of planning, financial resources and work, and is many times something small communities simply don't have the resources to tackle.

Footnotes and Resources:

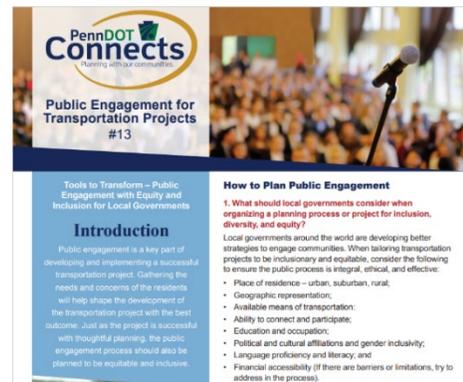
1. As expressed in the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)'s Core Values
2. Beyond Inclusion: Equity in Public Engagement, A Guide for Practitioners, SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue [Beyond Inclusion - Equity in Public Engagement.pdf \(sfu.ca\)](#)

Tech Sheet #13

Public Engagement for Transportation Projects

Looking for tools to increase public engagement for inclusion, diversity, and equity? This tech sheet will provide tips and ideas to include in your public engagement plan.

[Tech Sheet #13](#)



Public Engagement with Equity & Inclusion Drop-In

Successful transportation projects start with effective public engagement. The purpose for involving the public early on is to ensure their perspectives are considered and help shape the project in ways that align with a community's priorities. Are you reaching everyone in the community? Is equity and inclusion part of your public engagement plan? Learn about equity and inclusion and strategies for involving municipal officials and the public in local transportation projects and effective decision-making.



Official Map – Online Training

Does your municipality have an Official Map? This map along with an ordinance may reserve parcels for natural resources and parks, identify corridors for connectivity and access needs, such as trails, roads, or sidewalks, and designate areas for future rights-of-way.

Listen to the “Official Map” PennDOT Connects online training at your convenience to learn how it can be used to advance a number of public purposes, including growth within the transportation network and the natural environment, by ensuring the area needed for a system improvement and important natural resources remains available.



A full list of online training is on the [PennDOT Connects webpage](#) on the [PennDOT website](#).

FREE Transportation and Land Use Planning – Assistance and Training

PennDOT Connects offers **free** assistance and training to municipalities to better integrate local land use development and transportation goals into the state transportation planning process.

Any municipal staff member, government official or planning partner is eligible to request **free** planning assistance or personalized training. Simply fill out the PennDOT Connects Training/Assistance request form by [clicking here](#).



Do You Know Your MPO or RPO?

PennDOT and its Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and Rural Planning Organization (RPO) partners have a long-standing relationship jointly preparing transportation studies, plans, and programs to make the best transportation project investments possible with available resources. This strategic alliance is now of even greater importance for PennDOT Connects implementation. Together, the MPO/RPO planning partners and PennDOT can effectively collaborate and communicate with municipalities — and other community stakeholders (e.g., transit operators, economic development agencies, etc.) — to improve transportation system performance and achieve more livable communities. The collaborative effort of municipalities, MPO/RPO planning partners, and PennDOT is key to ensuring that opportunities to improve transportation and communities are realized.

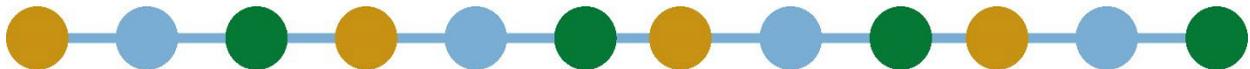
MPO/RPO contacts can be found [here](#).

PennDOT Connects

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation is committed to bettering our transportation system and our communities through collaborative planning. We must find creative solutions to sustain and expand mobility throughout the commonwealth. This means improving our planning process to reflect changing demographics and technological innovation. We are broadening the benefits we deliver and taking a more holistic approach to planning. We are tasking PennDOT staff and our planning partners to consider community needs at the beginning of the planning process to ensure the best allocation of our resources. This approach, PennDOT Connects, will make our planning processes more efficient and cost-effective to the benefit of all Pennsylvanians. The full [PennDOT Connects Policy \(PDF\)](#) includes collaboration requirements and planning considerations, as well as the implementation timeline and more.

PennDOT Connects Newsletter

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