Public Involvement

Involving the general public and transportation partners is an important aspect of all FDOT activities, as expressed in ***Policy No. 000-525-050***. Public involvement is part of every step in the development of transportation improvements. Public involvement is not just about holding meetings or issuing press releases. It is about planning and implementing a comprehensive, integrated program to involve the public in transportation decisions.

This is a brief discussion of public involvement for PMs. FDOT published the Department's ***Public Involvement Handbook*** to provide guidance and methods for developing and implementing effective strategies designed to get the public involved in the transportation decision-making process. The PM must understand the importance of including others in the process. Effective public involvement through all phases of the transportation decision-making process is the key to developing an efficient transportation system where projects move forward smoothly. In addition, it leads to transportation improvements that meet community needs and desires, provides for greater acceptance of projects, and enhances agency credibility. Public involvement builds credible and trusting relationships between agencies and with the community. These relationships, in turn, will minimize conflict and help resolve potential problems that may arise when implementing a project. The public is more likely to support and take ownership of a plan or project when given time and opportunity to review information, share ideas and concerns, and observe changes as a result of their input.

The emphasis of these efforts is slightly different at each phase of a project:

- **Planning -** In the planning stages of a project, the emphasis is on engaging the public and transportation partners in defining a transportation need or problem and then identifying a range of solutions for further consideration in later phases. The PM must work closely with local planning organizations and local agencies in this process. The challenge in planning is to keep others interested in a process that involves a very long-term view.
- **PD&E -** The objective of a Project Development & Environment (PD&E) study is to evaluate the natural, human, and physical environment, present alternatives to the public, and develop a preferred alternative that moves forward into the design phase. PD&E public involvement allows people who are directly affected by or interested in the project to provide their input.
- **Design -** The emphasis of public involvement in design is to inform the public of the project and to solicit timely input into design details. This process usually involves close coordination with local governments.
- **Right of Way -** By their very nature, projects that may require acquisition or relocation always involve dealing with the public. Understanding the needs of property owners, residents and businesses impacted is critical to the success of these projects. The Design PM will work with the Right of Way Office in the course of the project.
- **Construction -** Public involvement issues during construction include maintenance of traffic, business access, noise control, and duration of the work. The Communications Office should be involved in any media or communications about the construction project.

Engaging the Public

Regardless of the project phase, engaging the public generally involves identifying the public, preparing an outreach plan, conducting outreach, follow-up, and documentation.

Identify the Public. Public involvement activities must be accessible to anyone who has an interest in the project, regardless of race, age, income level, or disability. The PM must have an understanding of the different populations who

live, work, and travel in the study area, so that communications methods can be tailored to their needs and preferences. Making sure that all interested members of the public are provided the opportunity to have input into our projects also assures that FDOT complies with federal nondiscrimination regulations, including Title VI and Environmental Justice.

Use a three-pronged approach for identifying the public:

1. **Collect data**. Use Census data for results from the decennial survey and the more frequent American Community Survey. Local counties and governments may also have information related to the population within their jurisdiction. The Sociocultural Data Report (SDR), available in the FDOT Environmental Screening Tool, can be used to help you determine the demographic make-up of your project area. It pulls from U.S. Census data and summarizes the relevant data into one report. Contact your District ETDM coordinator for access to the environmental screening tool.

2. **Conduct a field review**. Visit the study area to verify the demographic data collected and any transportation issues that may be present. During this field review, note who is observed in the study area, the types of community services provided, and if there is evidence of languages other than English being used.

3. **Talk to the community**. Talk to local government staff, community leaders, local businesses, and social service organizations. They work with the community every day and could provide valuable insight. Identify people in the community who can help you understand community values and characteristics.

Prepare a Plan. A comprehensive plan is crucial to the success of any public involvement effort, regardless of the project or phase. For PD&E projects, a Public Involvement Plan (PIP) is required. Guidance on PIPs is provided within the ***PD&E Manual, Part 1, Chapter 11***. For design and construction projects, a Community Awareness Plan (CAP) is prepared. Guidance on CAPs is provided within the ***FDOT Design Manual, Chapter 104***. The PIP and CAP are a road map to the activities that will be done. Results need to be described in the final project documents for PD&E projects or CAP for design projects.

Conduct Outreach. The Department encourages multiple ways for communicating with the public. Public involvement activities almost always include public meetings and hearings. However, building relationships with the community through other forms of outreach is essential to supporting the engagement process. A comprehensive summary of available tools and outreach methods is provided in the Public Involvement Handbook.

It is important to distinguish between public meetings and hearings. **Public meetings** are held to share information and obtain input. **Public hearings** are held to present the recommended alternative or design and allow for public comment. Public hearings are required by law for projects involving new capacity, new corridor, and new interchange access.

The Department requires the hybrid format for public meetings and hearings. In a hybrid format, attendees can participate in two ways: either in person or virtually. Hybrid meetings offer people a choice which encourages more participation. The information presented should be the same regardless of how people participate.

Presentations to local government bodies, such as town councils, county commissions, and MPO boards, provide an opportunity to formally engage with elected officials and to get their opinion on the record. There are no advertisement or notification requirements when presenting at a commission or board meeting or for any meeting that is not sponsored by FDOT.

For public meetings or hearings sponsored by the Department, notifications to elected officials, agency representatives, property owners and tenants, and

interested individuals are required. Notification requirements are provided in the PD&E Manual, Part 1, Chapter 11. Additional guidance on preparing for a meeting or hearing is provided within the Public Involvement Handbook.

Follow-up. After the meeting, it is important to acknowledge each comment received. This confirms to the person that their comment was incorporated into the project. Not all comments require an extensive response. For comments where someone is simply expressing their opinion, a simple acknowledgement and “thank you” is sufficient. However, some participants will ask specific questions within their comment. These may require a specific or customized response.

Documentation. Documentation is important for a variety of reasons. Aside from meeting state and federal requirements, documentation lets the public know they have been heard and creates a record for future phases. It also helps the Department retain records in the event of legal actions. It helps ensure that issues, ideas, and commitments are communicated from one phase to the next. After the meeting or hearing, retain an electronic copy of all notifications, meeting materials, comments, and responses.