901 Maintaining a Community Engagement File

Community engagement documentation involves compiling, synthesizing, and analyzing supporting records and references and making them available for others who may be interested in the community engagement process and results.

A community engagement file is the repository of all materials used to engage the public about a plan or project and the results of that engagement. The file contents provide answers to the questions "who, what, where, when, why, and how" relative to the community engagement process, activities, and results. As a project moves into a new phase, the community engagement file from the earlier phase(s) carries forward important details about affected/interested publics, including community demographics and project-related concerns and preferences.

Purposes

The Department places importance on community engagement documentation for the following reasons:

Public Transparency

By documenting community engagement for transportation plans and projects, FDOT demonstrates that it has included others in plan/project conversations and considered their input in decision making. Transparency builds public trust and relationships.

Plan/Project Decision Making

Community engagement involves two-way communication aimed at incorporating the views, concerns, and issues of the public into decision-making processes. From planning through operations and maintenance, community engagement is on-going in all phases of the project lifecycle. Community engagement documentation ensures that commitments made to address community preferences in one phase are carried into and successfully carried out in future phases.

Process Improvement

Documentation is vital for measuring the performance of a community engagement strategy and its execution. Documentation is the evidence that a community engagement process has or has not achieved its goals.

Legal Processes

Should any aspect of the plan/project be called into question as part of a legal process, documentary evidence of the community engagement process may be requested. The strength or sufficiency of the community engagement documentation could be a factor in establishing the merits of the case.

File Components

Plan for Community Engagement

The Public Involvement Plan for planning and PD&E studies and Community Awareness Plan for design and construction projects should be included in the project file. These plans outline the strategy for community engagement including demographic data used to inform the strategy, planned community engagement activities, and the outreach approach for targeted audiences.

Meeting Notifications

The community engagement file contains the master contact list identifying all persons who were notified about the community engagement activities and how (e.g., letter, newsletter, or email) and when they were notified.

Community Engagement Activities

A description of each community engagement activity conducted for the plan/project and the progression of these activities is a key part of the community engagement file. Community engagement activities include all opportunities for the public to become informed about the plan/project and provide input. Public meetings, presentations to elected officials and other groups, project kiosks at community events, and web-based engagement are examples of community engagement activities.

All materials produced to support the community engagement activities are compiled to become part of the file. Such materials may include:

- Activities schedule with dates, times, and locations
- Public notification formats, distribution list (contacts list), method of distribution (mail, email, advertisement, social media posts, press release, media coverage, etc.), and date of distribution
- Registration materials (registration form, sign-in sheet, etc.)
- Presentation materials (agenda, slides, display boards, video, etc.)
- Activity materials (e.g., maps, charts, fact sheets)
- Public input forms (comment form, survey questionnaire, evaluation form, etc.)

Community Engagement Activity Results

Following each community engagement activity, including any specified comment period, the public input received is compiled, synthesized by topic or theme, and analyzed for substance. For example, public input may indicate the community's level of understanding or attitude about a proposal. With this knowledge, future public engagement activities can be tailored to fill information gaps or focus on a particular community concern. The results of each community engagement activity and supporting documents are included in the community engagement file. This information may include:

- Number of attendees and sign-in sheets
- Ratio of attendees to the number of invitees
- Relationship of attendees to the plan/project (resident, business operator, agency stakeholders)
- Completed public input forms (comment cards, surveys, etc.)
- Other documented public input (e.g., drawing, sticky-note, or dot exercises; transcripts; and meeting minutes)
- Photos of attendees during the community engagement activity
- Post-activity media coverage
- Telephone/website comment logs
- Requests for information
- Responses to public comments

Summary Document

At the conclusion of the community engagement process for a project phase, the details about the community engagement process and findings are presented in a summary document. The summary document should include an accurate assessment of community issues and concerns and the Department's responses. As the phase of a project becomes more defined, these summary documents will provide an ongoing status of public input and Department decisions.

For PD&E projects, the summary document can serve as a standalone appendix to the environmental document or become part of the Comments and Coordination report (refer to FDOT PD&E Manual). For other phases, the summary document could be a memorandum to the project file with references to supporting documentation. It is important to remember that the summary document should provide sufficient detail to tell the story of how the public was engaged and how public input was considered in the decision-making process.