# 801 Responding to Public Comments

A primary objective of any community engagement activity is to inform the public and request their comments. Public comments help build an understanding of community issues that should be considered in designing transportation solutions that fit community needs.

The volume and nature of public comments received for a plan or project can vary greatly depending on the level of public interest. With greater interest, one could anticipate more public comments, including inquiries requiring a detailed response. In such cases, a protocol for organizing and managing public comments is recommended.



## Process Steps

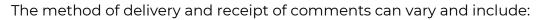### Step 1: Collecting Public Comments

The timing for collecting public comments is often in conjunction with plan/project milestones, typically at the beginning (kickoff), midpoint (alternatives), and endpoint (recommendations). However, public comments can be collected at any time during the decision-making process.

If comments are desired by a certain date, be sure to specify a closing date on related project communications by which all comments must be received. Include an address for mailing or emailing completed surveys and comment forms.

Frequently used tools for collecting public comments include:

*Collecting Public Comments*

| Common methods | Surveys or questionnaires |
|---|---|
| | Comment cards/forms |
| | Real-time polling |
| | Idea walls or maps |
| | Games and puzzles |

The method of delivery and receipt of comments can vary and include:

*Ways Public Comments are Received*

| Common methods | Public meeting/hearing |
| --- | --- |
| | Project website |
| | Email |
| | Physical mail |
| | Telephone |
| | Text |
| | Fax |
| | Social media accounts (FDOT and partners) |
| | Smartphone applications |

## Step 2: Cataloguing Public Comments

Log Individual public comments to organize and manage the information for use in responding to comments and documenting community engagement results.

*Cataloguing Public Comments*

| Key information | *Date received:* Indicator of related plan/project stage and benchmark for timely response |
| --- | --- |
| | *Comment type:* Essence of the comment to trigger an appropriate response |
| | *Contact information:* Necessary for responding to the comment |
| | *Tracking number (optional):* For example, the tracking number 031025 shows the comment year (03), month (10), and order received (25) |

## Step 3: Analyzing Public Comments

This step coincides with community engagement touch points and involves sorting and analyzing comments to identify trends and appropriate follow up. The table below shows a classification system for sorting public comments. For each category, assess the character and frequency of issues raised in the comments. Then, summarize the analysis findings in a report to support plan/project decision making.

*Categorizing Public Comments into Types*

| Public comment categories | *General comments:* Relate directly to the project but do not require a detailed response |
| --- | --- |
| | *Procedural comments:* Related to the community engagement process |
| | *Substantive comments:* Relate directly to project development and require further analysis |
| | *Other comments:* Have no relationship to the plan/project but relate to another effort/action either within or beyond the Department's purview or influence. |

*Using the Analysis Findings*

If you find that most comments pertain to a particular issue, such as aesthetics or safety, consider featuring the issue topic in the next public meeting program or newsletter. If comments are lengthy, it could be showing a heightened level of interest in the plan/project. In contrast, brief comments or incomplete comment form sections might indicate that people do not have the information they need to provide substantive input.

## Step 4: Acknowledging Public Comments

Responding to public comments confirms that each comment has been received and considered. This practice also builds trust and credibility within the community and encourages continued involvement in Department plans and projects.

Regardless of type, all public comments should be acknowledged within 10 working days of receipt of the comment, even if only to thank the commentor for providing a comment or communicating that research for an appropriate response is underway. The public is usually willing to wait for a question to be answered if they know it has been received and is being considered.

The table to the right offers suggestions for acknowledging comments based on the type of comment received and the comment's timeliness.

## Step 5: Distribution & Tracking Public Comments

Occasionally, comments are received that are not relevant to the plan/project, such as those that pertain to another plan/project or unrelated issues. Distribute these comments to the appropriate FDOT or non-FDOT personnel for processing.

## Step 6: Incorporating Public Comments

All public comments directly related to the current plan/project should be considered in the decision-making process. Careful analysis of public comments can lead to innovative solutions that address community needs without compromising the Department's goals for the plan/project.

## Step 7: Follow Up Responses

Responses to all public comments that require detailed information or feedback should include a complete answer and be distributed as soon as possible. A clear and easy-to-understand explanation of any research or analysis that forms the basis for the answer should also be included.

Additional information explaining how the individual can continue to be involved in the decision-making process is always appropriate.

*Acknowledging Public Comments*

| Responses by public comment type | *General comments:* Acknowledge interest in the comment. |
| --- | --- |
| | *Procedural comments:* Acknowledge interest in the comment and provide information about the action that has or will be taken. |
| | *Substantive comments:* Acknowledge interest in the comment and, depending on the relevant phase, provide additional information as described below: |
| | • *Current project phase:* Include a brief description of the action being taken to address the comment and when to expect resolution. Determine if the comment request can be included in the project concept.<br>• *Previous project phase:* Include an overview of the project history and prior decision making information on how to become involved in current or future project decisions.<br>• *Future project phase:* Include a brief overview of the future project schedule that indicates when the decision will be made and convey that the comment will be passed on to the appropriate personnel. Document the comment (see Step 2) |
| | *Other comments:* Acknowledge interest in the plan/project, how the comment has or will be handled, and the appropriate FDOT or non-FDOT personnel to which the comment was forwarded and why. |