

Request for Research Funding for FY 2020-2021

Requesting Office	MPO Advisory Council	Priority 1	1 of 1
Proposed Title	An Assessment of MPO Social Media Practices in Florida		
Justification	As public planning agencies, metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) and other public agencies, such as State Departments of Transportation (DOTs), are required by federal and state law to provide opportunities for the public to participate in planning and decision-making processes. These agencies experience many challenges when attempting to reach the broader public and facilitate meaningful public engagement. In an attempt to address these challenges, some agencies are supplementing their public engagement activities using social media platforms. In 2019, Pew Research Center reported that internet use increased from 76% in 2010 to 90% in 2019 and social media use increased from 43% in 2010 to 72% in 2019. This high rate of adoption and its general accessibility makes social media a suitable tool to fill gaps in public engagement. Despite its many benefits, social media also presents unique challenges for public agencies. Some of these challenges stem from difficulties: • regulating and monitoring content, • enabling timely content while acquiring necessary permission for posts and responses to comments, and • measuring participation and engagement. Carefully considered social media policies and strategies can mitigate these challenges and ensure that public agencies effectively use these platforms to supplement, or even replace, traditional methods for engaging the public in transportation decision-making processes. Recent research on public involvement practices in Florida revealed that several Florida MPOs use social media to inform and involve the public and stakeholders in their decision-making processes. As social media becomes increasingly popular and its benefits and limitations become more evident, a point of reference is needed to employ social media as an effective communication tool. This project proposes to: • benchmark the existing state of practice through a review of existing literature and federal and state guidance on social media use, • survey Florida MPOs and a select number of national MPOs with social media policies, • review existing social media policies from these agencies and identify how the agency designates social media staff, how its social media use is regulated, and how successful public engagement is measured, • systematically analyze the social media pages of a select number of MPOs to assess how social media is used to engage the public (bidirectional vs unidirectional communication), including an assessment of tone and public perception, • evaluate the distribution of agency funds for public engagement and/or social media management, and • develop a set of suggestions for effective social media use by MPOs taking into account the intended use (bidirectional v. unidirectional communication, etc.), cost, and perceived benefit. The deliverables for this project will include a literature review, a technical memorandum documenting current practices, and a final report compiling the study findings and a set of suggestions. The final report will also include case studies of several MPOs evaluated for this study with effective social media policies. The case studies are intended to produce specific examples of effective social media policies, summarize the assessment of these agencies' social media pages, and generate a set of observations. Findings from these case studies will contribute to the final suggestions.		
Impact	This research will impact policies related to public engagement, particularly those associated with social media. As society becomes increasingly dependent on technology, agencies will need to find innovative ways to reach and engage the broader public using available technologies. By providing practical guidance for public agencies, this research will help these agencies reap the numerous benefits of social media, while also helping them navigate potential challenges they may encounter in its use. The products of this research will also assist those agencies in developing or updating their public participation plans and social media policies to more effectively engage the public using social media in a manner that fits the intended purpose and target audience.		
Affected Offices	This research may impact all offices that implement or participate in public engagement including MPOs, FDOT Districts, and other transportation agencies.		
Existing Work	“2018 Assessment of the Practice of Public Involvement in Florida”, Final Report for FDOT Research Center Project BDV25-977-46, October 2019. (https://fdotwww.blob.core.windows.net/sitefinity/docs/default-source/research/reports/fdot-bdv25-977-46-rpt.pdf). “Assessing the Practice of Public Involvement in Florida”, Final Report for FDOT Research Center Project BD544-15, August 2006. (http://www.dot.state.fl.us/research-center/Completed_Proj/Summary_EMO/FDOT_BD544_15_rpt.pdf).		

	“Performance Measures to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Public Involvement Activities in Florida,” Final Report for FDOT Research Center Project BD544-21, Work Order #21, June 2008. (https://www.cutr.usf.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/PIPM-Final-Report-6-26.pdf) “Use of Communication Technologies to Enhance Public Involvement in Transportation Projects”, Final Report for FDOT Research Center Project BDV29-977-32, June 2018. (https://fdotwww.blob.core.windows.net/sitefinity/docs/default-source/content/research/completed_proj/summary_emo/fdot-bdv29-977-32-rpt.pdf?sfvrsn=851db5d9_0). “The Case of Public Involvement in Transportation Planning using Social Media”, Majumdar, S., 2017, (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2213624X1630075X). “Microparticipation with social media for community engagement in transportation planning”, Evans-Cowley, J., and Griffin, G., 2012, (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3141/2307-10). “Practices for online public involvement”, Salerno, M., Sanchez, T., Tomasello, S., & Metz, T., 2019, (https://www.nap.edu/download/25500#). Additional works will be identified during the literature review.		
Keywords Used In Existing Work Search (Cannot leave blank)	Social media, public involvement, public outreach, public engagement, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), regional transportation planning		
Related Contracts (Give contract numbers)	BDV25-977-46 BD544-15 BD544-21		
Funding Request	180,000	Anticipated Duration	24 months
Project Manager	Carl Mikyska	Contracting Method	Direct contract with a university
Urgency	1	The benefits of social media as a broad-reaching communication tool has led some public agencies, including MPOs, to adopt this technology as a component of their public engagement. While its effectiveness is evident, social media is also highly disruptive and difficult to regulate. It is necessary for public agencies to create policies that ensure effective social media use, while also protecting the interest of the agency and the general public. As social media continues to become a preponderant communication tool, it is important for agencies to be proactive in fortifying their presence on these platforms to increase opportunities for effective public engagement.	
Implementability	1	Final data and products will be useful to MPOs, FDOT Districts, and other agencies that engage the public in their decision-making processes.	
Project Benefits (Succinct, complete explanation)			
Project Benefits (Select all that apply and explain)	Quantifiable Benefits (units, dollars, etc...if applicable)	Methodology or Data Sources Used to Determine Quantifiable Benefits. If not applicable, please give justification of project benefits	
☐ Materials Enhancement			
☐ Materials Savings			
☐ Time Savings			
☐ Lives Saved/Injuries Prevented			
☐ Other (Explain)	Improved policies and strategies	Policies and strategies identified through this research will provide a basis for understanding how social media is used and regulated by MPOs in Florida and across the U.S. Notable practices and suggestions will be provided for agencies to consider when developing or updating policies and strategies for social media use.	
	More effective use of funds	The effective use of social media can fortify public engagement, diversifying engagement efforts, increasing public feedback, and potentially assisting agencies in building public trust. These benefits have the potential to ensure more effective use of funds allocated for public engagement activities.	