Inclusive Public Engagement During COVID-19

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Background

Since social distancing guidelines took effect as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, many transportation agencies have been exploring online meetings as an alternative to the in-person public meetings they had been planning. A key question for these agencies is the problem of the digital divide: as they move to online meetings, how will they include those without internet access?

This question is not exactly new. As online and virtual public involvement methods have gained traction in recent years—and as agencies have come to realize the limitations of relying so heavily on traditional public meetings in the first place—practitioners have sought new ways to engage hard-to-reach audiences, including those who are not online, are not comfortable with digital engagement tools, or are unaware of public involvement opportunities for transportation projects.

Prior to COVID-19, to address the digital divide, agencies typically continued to offer in-person meetings side-by-side with online meetings or other virtual engagement platforms. They worked with intermediaries such as libraries to display project materials and provide public internet access. Agencies often offered map mark-up exercises and other tactile activities at workshops to complement online interactive mapping and engagement opportunities. Moreover, to engage low-income and minority residents and other under-represented groups, many practitioners have followed the principle of “going to where people are” instead of expecting them to come to a meeting. This can mean intercept outreach in public places; pop-up tabling events; door-to-door canvassing; hiring community ambassadors; and partnering with community organizations, schools or religious institutions, among other methods.

But many of these alternatives are no longer possible, or extremely limited, in a time of social distancing.

This paper identifies three general strategies for addressing the challenge of reaching and connecting with hard-to-reach audiences:

— Making online interaction as inclusive as possible
— Providing alternative or enhanced methods that are contact-free
— Using in-person methods with distancing to minimize contact

Regardless of the approach or methods used, it is vital that practitioners show sensitivity to the situations vulnerable people face during this time. Low-income and minority residents may be unable or unwilling to participate in a transportation project or planning process during a pandemic. According to the Economic Policy Institute, minority residents are more likely than others to be dealing with illness, unemployment, or the failure of a small business.

Those who still have jobs are more likely to be part of the front-line workforce, with the stress that often accompanies these roles today. Agencies that proceed with project public involvement during this period should recognize that these crisis conditions present a far more significant barrier to meaningful engagement than a lack of internet access. Facilitators should be prepared to acknowledge these challenges and where possible, plan for follow-up outreach to vulnerable communities once crisis conditions lessen.

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Strategies for Inclusive Engagement

MAKE ONLINE INTERACTION INCLUSIVE

Despite the presence of a digital divide, virtual methods can often be more inclusive than traditional public meetings. People can participate anonymously from the convenience of their homes. They can remain home with children or other family members for whom they are caring, and instead of spending an entire evening sitting in a meeting, they can spend a few minutes viewing project materials and providing feedback online. A large majority of the American public, including most minority residents, have internet access in some form, often using mobile phones as their primary access. Still, as agencies plan for virtual meetings, it is important to devise a process that is accessible and welcoming to those without reliable internet access and those who are less comfortable with technology-based tools.

Pew Research Center, Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet,” June 12, 2019
The following are some of the steps agencies can take to make virtual interaction more inclusive:

— For online meetings, provide audio access for standard telephone users via a call-in number—a basic step that is accommodated by most online meeting platforms.

— Publicize online meetings and other opportunities for involvement via offline channels such as mailers, flyers, doorhangers and news media announcements (in multiple languages as needed). For example, the North Carolina Department of Transportation is mailing out newsletters with project updates and information on how to call into upcoming virtual meetings. In addition, social media ads can be geotargeted to reach users in communities that tend to be under-represented.

— Provide options for those with limited English proficiency, such as simulcasts, captioning of presentation materials, back-to-back meetings in different languages, or interpretation services on request.

— Offer online meetings at more than one time to provide flexibility for participants.

— Choose user-friendly tools with one-click access or minimal download requirements; tools also need to work well on mobile phones.

— Provide a staffed telephone number (or a frequently monitored voicemail line) for questions and comments prior to, during and after a virtual meeting.

— Greet participants in a welcoming manner, acknowledge the difficulty of participating during the pandemic, and explicitly welcome those who are participating by phone.

— Provide clear verbal instructions at the beginning of a virtual meeting (e.g. how to find and use a chat box or the raise hand option) and again as any poll or other opportunity for interaction is introduced. Provide a practice poll with a simple question for those unfamiliar with online polls.

— Provide verbal descriptions of the maps or graphics being shown to help those with audio-only access follow along.

— Enable people to participate at any time with an online open house. Create a website with "information stations" and opportunities to leave comments or ask questions 24/7.

— For a formal public comment period, post any documents and hearing materials on a website for access throughout the public comment period (this is already the norm for many agencies). Note that as of this writing, the United States Department of Transportation has not yet issued formal guidance on whether virtual hearings can substitute for an in-person public hearing on a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

— Record and post virtual meetings and hearings online so people can hear the presentations and questions and comments that others have made.

— Lengthen the public comment period for key decisions to provide flexibility during the pandemic.

provide alternatives to online engagement

The second general strategy for inclusive engagement during COVID-19 is to supplement online engagement with alternative methods for informing people and seeking feedback. Some of these options involve methods that were popular in the 1970s and 1980s, such as direct mail, utility bill inserts, telephone banking, and public access television. For example:

— Use the United States Postal Service to reach residents of the study area or of specific communities targeted for inclusive outreach. Mailings can include postcards, newsletters, brochures or postage paid mail-back surveys. Include in the mailer any meeting announcements and information on how to contact staff by phone and email or leave comments on a voicemail line. In today’s environment, these materials need to be primarily graphic based to interest most readers. Lengthy text-based newsletters will likely be discarded.

— A more comprehensive type of mailer sometimes used in the past is a “workbook” with project information including maps, descriptions of alternatives, and response forms to fill out. Again, these will need to be visually engaging products to generate interest.

— Use doorhangers to provide project announcements and options for responding.

— Offer to send out hard-copy versions of project materials, such as the executive summary of a draft long-range plan or draft EIS. These offers can be included in mailed meeting notices.

— Offer alternatives to online surveys, such as hard-copy and telephone options.

— Offer poll questions via text messaging and social media for those who may be unable or unwilling to use an online engagement platform (note that mass texts are subject to Federal Communications Commission regulations).

— Create short videos that explain the project and ways to participate (in multiple languages, if appropriate). Use social media ads, posts and mailers to provide links to the videos.

— Use a vendor-supported telephone town hall instead of (or in addition to) a web-based virtual meeting platform. Telephone town halls accommodate participants without broadband access, and they can include simulcasts in other languages.
— Partner with an ethnic radio station for a community call-in hour, or work with a minority newspaper to provide a feature story on the project.

— Partner with local government to develop public access television programming.

— Provide displays such as posters, flyers, bus placards, or portable exhibits in places that remain open, such as grocery stores and transit stations.

— Consider purchasing point-of-sale video ads at gas pumps or grocery stores.

— Work with community leaders, elected officials, advocacy organizations or social service organizations to gather feedback on behalf of their constituents. Make one-on-one phone calls to people who can represent the underlying population or arrange small-scale virtual meetings with several community leaders to discuss project issues, gather feedback and seek advice on how best to communicate with their constituents.

**IN-PERSON METHODS WITH DISTANCING**

A third approach to address the digital divide is using in-person methods in new ways to reduce the risks of personal interaction. This is uncharted territory, with little experience to go on, but something to consider. Ideas include:

— Hold a timed-entry open house with scheduled appointments or a limited number of walk-up participants at a time. Enforce social distancing and have hand sanitizer and extra masks available.

— For a conventional public meeting, break participants into small groups in different rooms, each with a separate staff person; a common presentation and Q&A could be shared using a video feed.

— Conduct a meeting in a public parking lot, with participants remaining in their cars. For example, Yavapai County, Arizona provided a drive-in option for a meeting that was also broadcast on both television and radio and livestreamed on Facebook and YouTube. Projecting content on a wall and using outdoor speakers for amplification might be another option for a "drive-in" meeting, with socially distanced seating provided for walk-up participants.

— Provide hard copy materials for perusal in a building that remains open, such as a town hall, with a hand-sanitizer station.

— Once schools reopen, use “backpack mail” to reach families with project information and hard-copy surveys that parents can complete and return.

**Additional Considerations**

In planning for inclusive engagement, agencies should consider basic public involvement principles that remain true even in a crisis. These include defining goals, using a mix of tools, building community relationships, telling people how their input will be used, and being flexible as a process evolves.

First, consider where you are in your project and the agency’s objectives for engagement. If the goal is simply to provide reasonable accommodation for people without internet access, that should not be difficult. But if the goal is to gather critical feedback from communities that could be affected by a project, or to reach a specific population whose views have been missing from the conversation, a more proactive, strategic approach will be needed.

Second, use a variety of methods to reach and engage people. When in doubt, ask people how they’d like to be involved or receive future information about a project or plan. Be sure to tell people how their input will affect decision-making and follow up with participants to let them know of decisions as projects proceed. Take steps to ensure privacy for participants’ personal information, such as telephone numbers and email addresses. If the information will be retained for follow-up contact, explain how it will be used and protected.

Ideally, agencies should seek to build relationships with community organizations and individuals rather than coming in with an “ask” and leaving again. Consider hiring local residents to do some of the outreach, for example.
During the pandemic, agencies might also consider ways of broadening the conversation to incorporate concerns beyond a transportation project. For example, during a local planning effort, jobs, housing or food access might be on people’s minds rather than traffic issues. If there is a way to connect these issues to the plan under discussion rather than dismissing these concerns, this could be productive. Similarly, planning efforts could be modified to consider ways of helping communities to recover after the pandemic ends.

Many agencies are likely to continue using online engagement after the pandemic for the benefits it offers. People will continue to prioritize their health and make everyday decisions based on what they perceive to be safest for them and may tend to avoid large public meetings for the long-term. The pandemic provides an opportunity to test new tools, refine inclusive outreach practices, and prepare for the post-COVID-19 period.