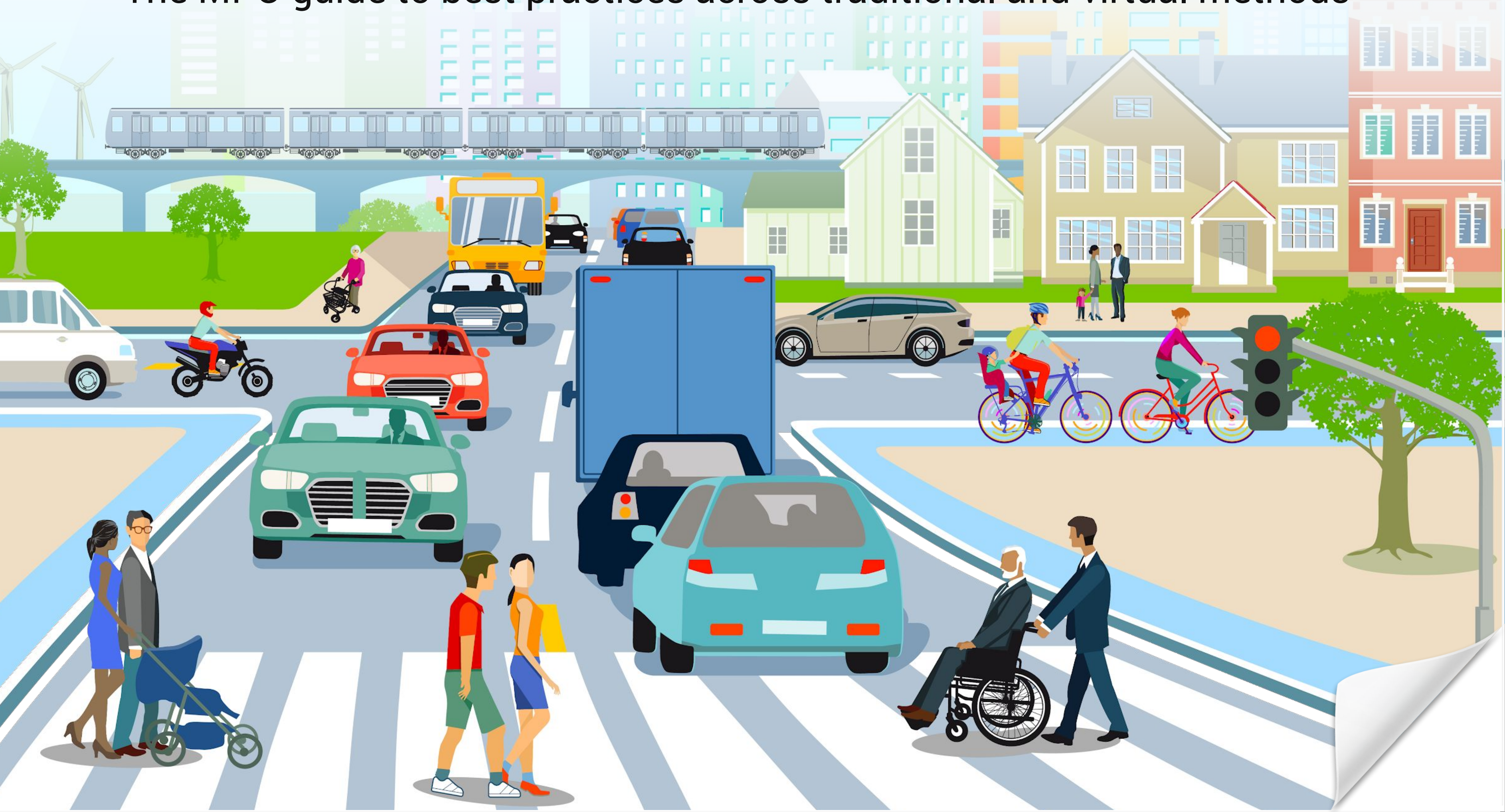
Integrated Public Involvement

The MPO guide to best practices across traditional and virtual methods



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Executive Overview

The increasingly important role of the MPO

By federal mandate, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) must ensure regional cooperation between local governments and transportation authorities. Given the current growth rates of American cities and metro areas, the role of MPOs has never been more important than it is today.

This growth makes for an exciting opportunity to contribute to improving the quality of day-to-day life. This also means greater pressure on gathering the most meaningful resident feedback to align decision-making with community needs.

The rise of regulation, and complexity

As the role of MPO's has increased over the past three decades, so has the body of policies governing how they conduct public involvement. Today's planning organization faces a web of federally mandated policies from a variety of governing bodies. A brief synopsis of commonly cited policies is provided in Appendix B.

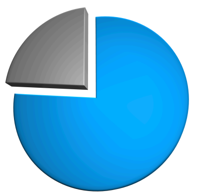
This growing set of policies, mandates, and guidance can be overwhelming, even before one considers the expectations placed on us by professional organizations, credentialing entities, and each MPO's own policy documents.

The rise of technology, and complexity

Along with increasing policy, new technologies and channels of communication have emerged. Each wave of tools has promised time savings, effectiveness, and efficiency - yet each has mostly added additional work and new data silos.

The key observation is that our technology toolbox today is full of *individual tools* that are not built to interact with one another. This is a fundamental flaw. The tools we are using today cause us to view an interconnected process in siloed ways.

These silos create added steps and coordination, and can actually corrode the process and increase the difficulty of compiling the data, analyzing it, and drawing the right conclusions. This may be why an overwhelming majority of MPO professionals agree that more public participation also results in more work:



69% of MPO professionals surveyed agreed with the statement:

"There is a direct correlation between increased participation and increased workload."

Does success today require a new “Jack of all trades”?

This rapid proliferation of regulatory frameworks, technology, and communications channels has resulted in a process that demands MPO professionals possess an almost-impossible combination of skills:

- Multilingual Translator
- Graphic Designer
- Social Media Strategist
- Email Marketer
- Web Accessibility Expert
- Data Scientist
- Comment & Discussion Moderator
- GIS Data Analyst
- Policy Wonk
- Excel Spreadsheet Guru

It’s no wonder we heard many comments along the lines of “we need more people”. MPO staff members are spending more time than ever trying to master individual tools that demand skills outside of their core competencies. This causes even well-staffed teams to be spread thin, detracting from the ultimate goal of better planning and data-driven decision making.

This universal challenge points to a core best practice we'll revisit throughout this guide:

Begin with the end in mind

So how can planners stay focused on what matters and get smart about partners and technology? Start by setting clear intentions. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has defined a simple five-category spectrum for clarifying the level of participation the public will have in a process. Applying this framework is a time-tested way to gain clarity of intent - and teams benefit the most when it's front-of-mind at the beginning of their process.

With a clear understanding of the public's role, the next step is developing a strategy and process that achieves the desired involvement outcomes. While public involvement strategies are unique to goals and needs, there should be a simple way to create a roadmap that leads to public involvement success.

The 5 building blocks of MPO public involvement success

Analyzing hundreds of projects, survey responses, and interviews with MPO professionals, a handful of key themes have emerged. These themes can be summarized as the five building blocks of successful public involvement:

1. Reach
2. Engage
3. Capture
4. Report
5. Comply

We explore each step in depth in this guide. You'll find that each unique step overlaps and influences all other steps along the way. By having a process and system that is truly interconnected, the whole process becomes much more streamlined from end to end.

Bringing it all together

Ultimately public involvement is a relational, multi-step process that is best managed with software designed for the entire process - from reaching people to implementing a plan. This executive guide explores how organizations are selectively applying partners and technology to achieve success while renewing their focus on the core competencies vital to planning better places for all.

The 5 Building Blocks

While every organization is unique, successful processes share a similar set of fundamental steps.

Reach

Getting the word out to the people most impacted by our plans & projects.

Engage

Lowering barriers to participation and tailoring our listening efforts.

Capture

Bringing all inputs and information together in one place for analysis.

Report

Closing the feedback loop with what we heard and how that informs next steps.

Comply

Fully documenting our process, data, and outcomes for partner organizations.

When it comes to public involvement, MPOs have unique obligations for gathering, understanding, and reporting public input. Considering this, let's dive deeper into the five steps of public involvement and see how each step creates an opportunity to use a truly integrated approach to increase public involvement success.

Reach

The first opportunity comes from effectively getting the word out to those who matter most - whether that entails building awareness in potentially impacted communities or to be certain you are reaching equal representation across key demographics. This includes those challenging aspects of gaining equitable participation from traditionally underserved groups, such as low-income persons, Limited English Proficiency and/or Environmental Justice communities.

Engage

Once you've reached your target audiences, how do you ensure that they will actually engage? The key is lowering barriers to participation. This means meeting people where they are, be it online or offline, with a wide range of techniques where and when residents are willing and able to engage. The most impactful and successful approaches often come from well-thought through combinations of both virtual and traditional techniques to create that desired outcome.

Capture

Collecting public input is not solely about *quantity*. It needs to be about *quality*, too. Successfully capturing data requires gathering a representative sample of residents, cataloging their contact information, and segmenting these residents based on specific demographics, interests, or geography. Having an organized approach to public participation is supported by having a well-defined public participation database, one that can serve the MPO with a better understanding of resident priorities, while creating the opportunity for two-way communications.

Report

Once the data is captured, organized, and aggregated, your findings need to be clearly reported back to the public. This is often referred to as closing the gap or completing the feedback loop. Following up with participants to share updates and outcomes, be it at the end of the public involvement effort or in phases, has been proven to increase public trust. This reporting is made the most meaningful by including the right kinds of visuals that tell a clear and concise story.

Comply

While sharing findings with residents is the right thing to do, government regulations require a bit more. Sharing public involvement efforts with regulators and auditors at the state and federal level is often mandated. These results need to be complete, easy to understand and follow, and should show the depth of your reach into key demographics as well as the geography of coverage. Likewise, there's a wealth of meaningful data that can be gleaned from participant comments, the actual survey approach and materials, findings from both in-person meetings and online input, and email correspondence. All of this should be readily available, documented and easy to share.

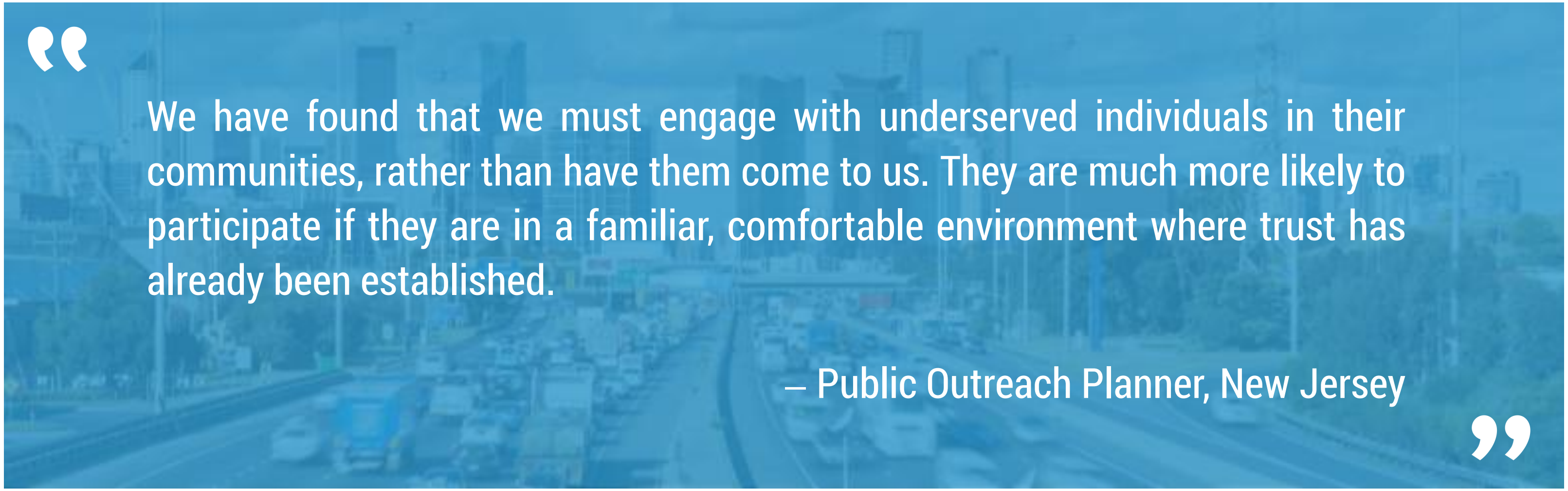
Reaching residents without having to be everywhere at once

Reaching potentially impacted and traditionally underserved communities is of vital importance to MPOs. Below are some key findings from the nationwide survey:

- 97% of participants said reaching potentially impacted communities was “Important” or “Very Important”
- 91% of participants said gathering a representative sample by demographic was “Important” or “Very Important”
- 91% of participants said reaching low-income persons was “Important” or “Very Important”
- 89% of participants said reaching Limited English Proficiency (LEP) persons was “Important” or “Very Important”

Many MPO professionals agree that the solution is not “if you build it, they will come.” Simply hosting meetings, creating a survey or website and expecting citizens to respond is a non-starter.

Rather, MPOs are finding much better success by building relationships with community centers, houses of worship and nonprofits while also attending public events like farmer’s markets or festivals.



> We have found that we must engage with underserved individuals in their communities, rather than have them come to us. They are much more likely to participate if they are in a familiar, comfortable environment where trust has already been established.
>
> – Public Outreach Planner, New Jersey

While a “boots on the ground” approach does build relationships, it’s difficult to scale, especially given time constraints. These in-person efforts can easily take on a life of their own without having a way to know if the time or effort is being spent wisely. For instance, are we spending too much time reaching out to one demographic or geography, and not enough somewhere else?

Conversely, it can feel like we are trying to be everywhere all at once, and no amount of effort is ever enough. This doesn’t even include a digital presence with social media outreach, maintaining a website, engagement message boards, an online survey, email communication, et. al. How might we go about better assuring that time and effort is being spent efficiently?

Early targeting by demographic or geography through social media, targeted media placements, and geofencing can help gather initial input to better understand how time and effort should be allocated in followup efforts.

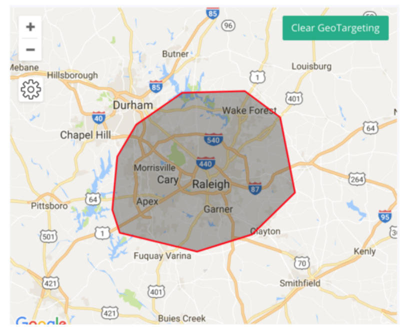
1. Getting started with targeted outreach: social media advertising

Using the same technology as major brands and advertisers to reach target markets, MPOs can also use demographic information and location to target specific groups online. When targeting a perceived Limited English Proficiency (LEP) population it is important that these messages speak in their native language. For example, it is best practice to disseminate messages in both English and Spanish, and many other languages, for that matter.

2. Extending your reach with partners & targeted media placements

When disseminating information to the public, leveraging local news media can help increase awareness about topics that residents care about the most. Including a link to a project page or survey in media and press releases allows news sources to also create an opportunity for public involvement, but this can actually be taken a step further with online strategy.

MPOs can reach residents by embedding a survey question directly into news stories that match certain keywords, such as any article related to traffic. Approaches like this allow residents reading the article to instantly provide public input when they're most likely to be interested.

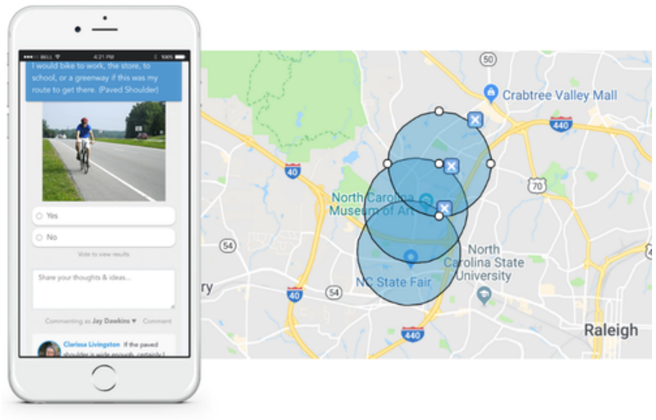


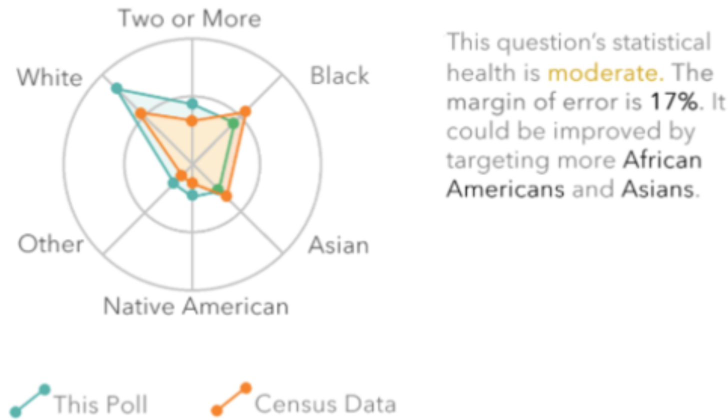
3. Building long-term capacity: geofencing from a public participation database

"Geofencing" technology, the ability to segment down to a street address level, can also be beneficial for targeting geographically. The best way to do this is with geographic information system (GIS) and mapping technology in combination with a public participation database. How this ideally works is by simply drawing a shape on a map, anyone in that targeted area can become part of an email or text message outreach list.

Once these tactics are used, it creates greater precision on who is being reached and where. Initial feedback can then be analyzed to understand where more in-person outreach could be most effective in filling in the gaps.

One powerful way to do this is by comparing initial outreach success with census data:





This is just one of the many instances where combining virtual engagement with traditional engagement can not only save time and effort, but also create desired public involvement outcomes.

Reaching Residents: Questions to consider

1. What groups or geographies are over-represented in our current outreach channels?
2. Do we use social media like a bullhorn, or with precision and intention?
3. What community partners can help us close the gap, and how do we make it easy for them to help?

Engaging under-represented and impacted communities

Reaching citizens with an opportunity to provide public input is the first step of an integrated process, but as MPO professionals know, this outreach effort does not necessarily equate to engagement.

Two themes to consider when designing successful engagement efforts:

Lower the barriers to participation

Reaching the right people is hard enough. Removing obstacles to participation ensures more of these people share their input.

Leverage multiple formats, equitably

Providing equal opportunities to have a voice across multiple venues and formats increases the likelihood of capturing broad, meaningful input.

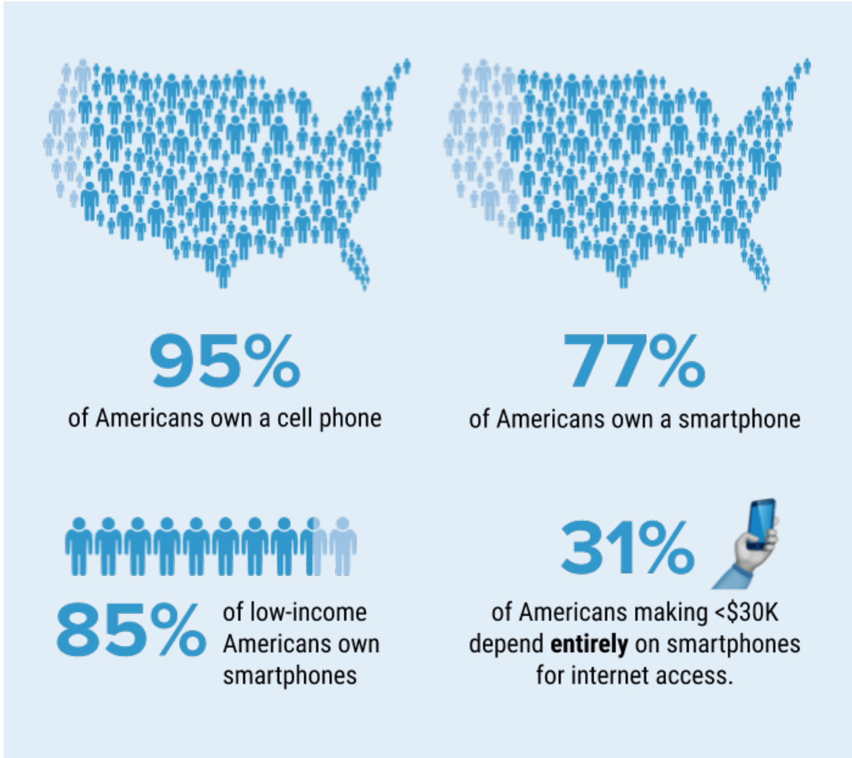
These two principles ultimately provide more people a voice in the plans we create and are foundational to a key goal of our efforts: gathering meaningful feedback.

Lowering the barriers to participation

The more MPOs holistically about their public involvement outreach, the more opportunity there is to get more equitable input from all citizens. By making participation easier and combining methods of outreach, you can start to find answers to the question, “How do we actually get people to engage?”

Providing easy ways to participate on the go is a clear best practice, but many legacy tools and websites persist today, favoring participants with large screens and ample bandwidth. Here empathy is a key consideration, and leads to a practice we believe is summed up in “mobile first” engagement design. With a mobile-first mentality, tools like text surveys and lightweight, mobile-friendly engagement formats take precedence over robust-but-heavy formats.

Consider the point of view of a single mother who works two jobs and relies on public transportation. At her bus stop she notices a sign with a text-in number for a mobile-friendly survey. She may not be able to attend a public meeting or sit down at a home computer, but now she has just as much access as someone who can.



In fact, being mobile-minded is one of the best ways to combine virtual and traditional methods to increase engagement from underrepresented groups. According to Pew Research, reliance on smartphones for online access “is especially common among younger adults, non-whites and lower-income Americans”.

By using a text-in number, we take the traditional 'boots on the ground' approach which often does not yield outcomes in proportion to the time and money spent on them, and scale it up by meeting residents where they are and lowering the barrier to participation.

When possible, this can be taken one step further. Removing barriers to participation, at its fullest extent, becomes a core paradigm of engagement: Meet people where they are.

Lowering Barriers to Participation: Questions to consider

1. Do we require participants to sign in or register before they can participate?
2. Will participants have to learn a new or unfamiliar interface in order to engage?
3. Are our engagement opportunities designed primarily for mobile devices?

Leverage multiple formats, equitably

There are no shortage of engagement methods, both virtual and traditional:

Virtual	Traditional
Social Media	Public Meetings
Email	Paper Surveys
Text Messaging	Phone Surveys
Targeted Media Placements	Canvassing
Online Town Halls	Onsite Visits
Engagement Websites	Attending Public Events
Online Surveys	Newspaper Ads

Virtual and traditional efforts play an equally important role in reaching and engaging the public, and applying them thoughtfully is a great way to reach a broader set of stakeholders and the public.

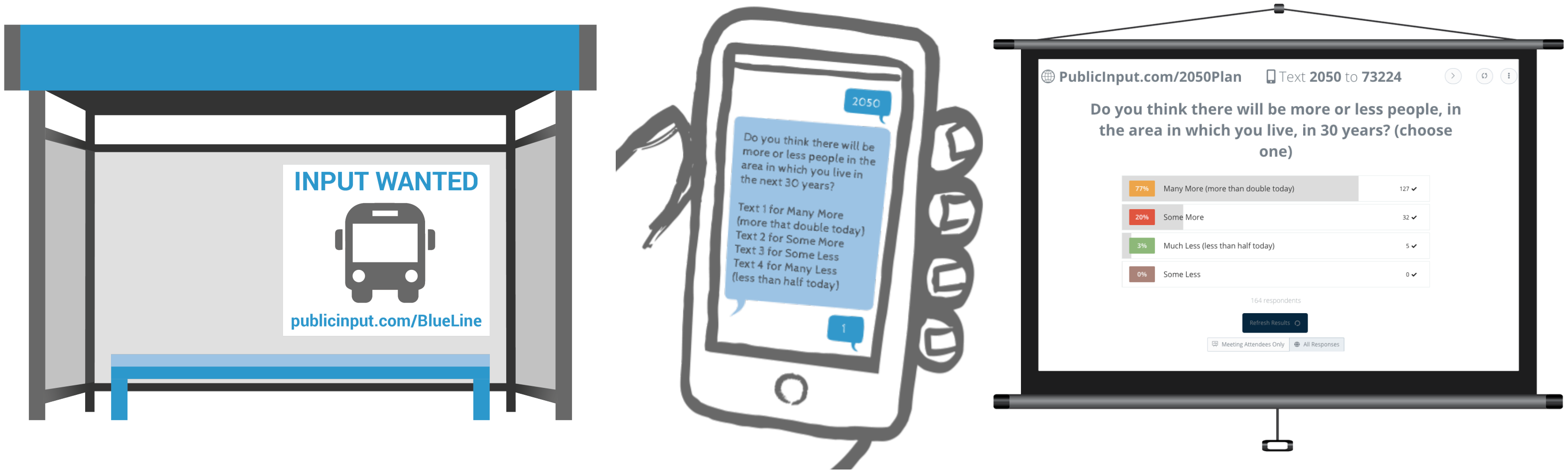
Many planners shared with us the joy of accessing people by going to where they are - be it a public event, assisted living facility, or riding on the bus. Going beyond the public meeting status-quo unlocks access to viewpoints and voices outside of the self-selectors.

Yet here again we saw the pitfalls of using siloed tools for each tactic. Although each effort broadens the type of person engaged in a process, it adds another layer of effort, and more siloed response data. These many layers make reporting more difficult and provide disproportional access and influence - just by virtue of the method by which they engage.

So how can we use an array of involvement methods to our advantage, without increasing our workload or providing some participants disproportionate access and influence?

> “Meet them where they are, where they gather. Add ourselves to the agendas of existing community gatherings.”
>
> –Communications Principal, IL

The solution is to apply a combination of both virtual and traditional methods built around a common set of questions, using formats that complement one another. Let’s explore an example of this on the following page.



Creating equality of input across online, SMS, and in-meeting.

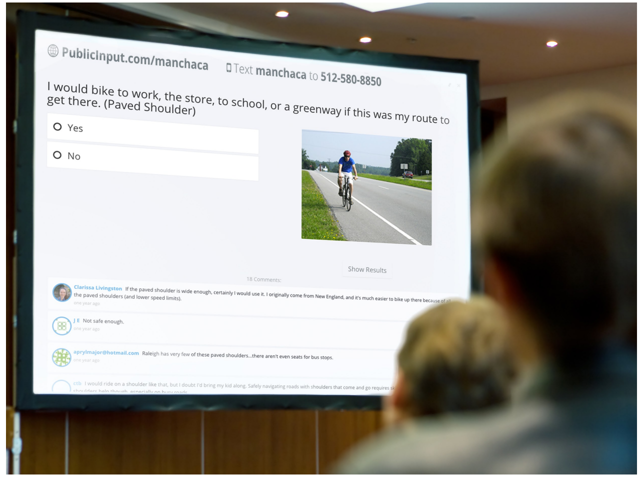
Creating equity across multiple input formats

Let's revisit the example of the single mother who can't participate at the meeting, but can engage on her mobile device. As part of the usual process, would her voice be more or less influential than a vocal meeting attendee?

This paradox is one that is best countered by designing with equity in mind. Consider the above example, with comparable input opportunities online, via SMS, and in-meeting. Each provides comparable questions and experiences, and key efforts are taken to achieve the following:

- Use the same primary questions on web, SMS, and in-meeting
- Use in-meeting capture tools (live voting, tablets, paper) that mirror online and SMS formats
- Online and SMS comments get pulled into the same database that is used to analyze meeting comments

The result is that each participant’s input is captured and included in the same framework for analysis. Each voice has equal footing when it comes time to assess key themes, questions, and perspectives.



Making meetings more productive and connected to virtual efforts

Public meetings have long been a key way of engaging the public, but they’re also infamous for providing a platform for the loudest, most polarized voices. Thankfully, mitigating toxic meeting culture is possible through more intentional meeting design and thoughtful applications of technology.

What are some of the effective approaches to make sure everyone gets equal footing?

A key step is mitigating the effect of the loudest voices. MPO professionals often observe “frequent flyers” expressing a strong, polarizing opinion. The natural response from less-vocal participants is to disengage. To address this challenge, the format of participation should be shifted away from “town hall” to one of concurrent participation, where each participant responds individually to similar content and questions.

Let’s revisit the practice of selectively leveraging partners and technology. If you have the resources to work with engagement practitioners, we recommend consultants or facilitators with experience in the IAP2 framework, as well as familiarity with new technologies and public involvement formats. We explore how these technologies can be applied to public meetings on the following page.

When it comes to technology, the following approaches are a good starting point for more productive meetings:

1. Provide venues for sharing anonymized input

Speaking up can be intimidating. Giving quieter voices a way to share their input without having to be vocal opens the floor to a more diverse set of voices. Ahead of the meeting, this approach can also be used to crowdsource priorities and build consensus on the most pressing issues. This can inform the agenda of the meeting itself - and help project teams avoid surprises.

2. Quantify viewpoints with live in-meeting participation

Replacing outdated clickers with a mobile-friendly text-in number or meeting short URL allows for this. It also opens the door for more interactive experiences like mapping and commenting. Adhering to best practice, results should be shown in real-time and all comments aggregated and monitored.

3. Provide an online live stream of the meeting with opportunities for input and questions

We see more interest in live streaming, especially with the rise of mobile video platforms like Youtube and Facebook Live. To mitigate the ‘walled garden’ nature of these platforms, we recommend embedding these streams into your virtual engagement site alongside a way for participants to comment or ask questions. This approach provides equitable access for all residents to participate, even if they are not on social media.

“Fast, good, and cheap” - you no longer have to pick two when it comes to translation

A small but important development to note is the shift away from translation that is purely automated or purely human. Experienced practitioners frequently point to the importance of human translation when conducting multi-lingual outreach. Yet human translation can be costly if each additional language requires a duplicate site or survey to be created and fully translated.

A development we’re excited about is called “last mile translation”, where Google Translate completes the bulk of the translation work, then a contract translator or bi-lingual volunteer reviews the translation and selectively corrects the translated content. This approach not only provides high-fidelity translation, it drastically reduces the cost of delivering equitable multi-lingual engagement opportunities.

This leads to another best practice - avoid creating separate surveys and websites for each additional language. Instead use an engagement tool that can deliver virtual engagement in multiple languages - and importantly - collect all responses into one central data set for analysis. We explore this concept further in a following chapter, *Capturing and organizing data.*

Equity Across Formats: Questions to consider

1. Can residents without a smartphone or computer participate equally in this process?
2. Will participants who can’t attend a meeting have less influence than those who can?
3. Are we asking comparable questions online and in-person?
4. Does each additional supported language require us to re-build a web page or survey from scratch?

How do you get more meaningful engagement?

Getting more meaningful feedback starts by setting a clear intention of the public's role in the process. Revisiting the IAP2 spectrum of public participation can be helpful, and when crafting content for your online engagement experience, keep in mind three critical factors:

1. Most participants will engage with your content on a mobile device. Design for mobile first.
2. Attention spans are limited. Provide quick, easy ways to start participating in order to buy time to go deeper.
3. Relationships are built over time. Engage with this in mind and capture contacts so you can follow-up.

Mobile First

Most engagement tools built for the public sector are designed to shine on a desktop because that is where decision makers encounter them. However, we should not let the fact that we encountered something on desktop cloud the fact that residents are going to want to engage on mobile. Flipping that approach on its head requires intentional thinking and applications designed for narrow, touch-enabled devices.

From a best practices standpoint, this doesn't mean giving up interactive experiences like mapping, it simply means partnering with a technology provider who brings a participant-centric approach to engagement tools.

Lead with "light" questions to increase interest

Many well-meaning planners try to pack in as much background information and plan documents at the beginning of their virtual engagement tool. While the intent is to create more informed engagement, this approach tends to alienate people who may be on the fence about engaging in the first place.

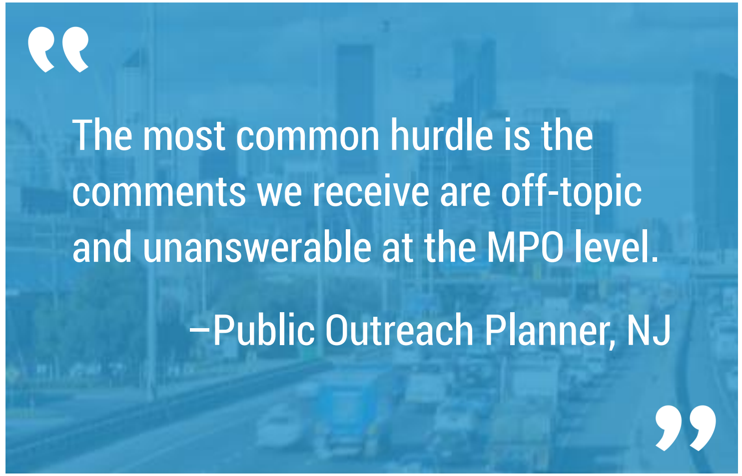
We recommend providing only the most important context up front, and leading with 'easy' questions to get participants started. Participants who respond to at least one question are much more likely to spend more time engaging, learning, and answering follow-on questions. With this in mind, starting light is a counter-intuitive best practice to actually achieve informed participation.

> "[We need] agency time and attention to put toward being thoughtful in how to involve people who also have limited time and attention."
>
> –Planning Manager, Colorado

Engage with relevance and relationships in mind

If you're in a committed long-term relationship at home, chances are it didn't start with something that resembles the public involvement status-quo. Meaningful relationships are built on a foundation of trust and respect, and with that in mind, here are a few key practices:

1. Be clear about how participants will influence the planning process (IAP2 Spectrum)
2. When in doubt, go narrow with question scope and constrain mapping tools to project boundaries. Asking for general input is tempting, but it's more likely to yield off-topic responses and frustrate participants unfamiliar with MPO's.
3. Ask for contact information, and store it in a way that allows you to tailor follow-up communications to the interests and concerns of participants.



A focused approach respects the time of participants by connecting input with the areas it can be most helpful, and respects staff time by reducing the amount of off-topic feedback we have to respond to. It also means that later, when it comes time to follow up with participants, we're more likely to have updates relevant to the input they provided.

Creating Meaningful Engagement: Questions to consider

1. Are our questions broad, or specific to the things that input can actually shape?
2. Are we asking participants to step through information before providing quick ways to start engaging?
3. Does our website or engagement tool feel cramped or hard to use on mobile phone screens?
4. Are we gathering context and contact information with an intent to reconnect?

Capturing and organizing data

(Without having to be a data expert)

It’s not uncommon for MPOs to feel understaffed, and that could largely be due to the fact that current tools are not working holistically, together. Each outreach effort creates a new set of data, and each lives in its own system, folder, spreadsheet - or worse - file cabinet.

Technology has thus far mostly added work and complexity, rather than simplifying the task of public involvement. Effectively countering this trend means stepping back and considering a more integrated approach: leveraging technology that automatically captures virtual and traditional efforts instantly and easily in the same place. This concept is increasingly being referred to as a **Public Participation Database.**

This approach establishes a system to consistently capture and store contacts, input, and context. In this scenario no matter how a participant engages, their input is captured and organized in a consistent manner to enable segmenting, follow-up, and reporting. This approach reduces workload while surmounting the common challenge of not being able to understand who you are reaching, where they are, and what they've said.

Many Public Participation Plans call for a central hub of citizen contact information and/or participation history. Yet most organizations are limping along with some combination of spreadsheets and a blast email platform. Survey results found that 88% of MPO Communicators and 77% of MPO Executives ranked building a public participation database as either "Important" or "Very Important".

> "Documenting how a comment was used/considered in the planning process can be very time consuming, especially with larger planning efforts that could have over 1000 public comments generated.
>
> –Multi-Modal Specialist, FL"

How should a public participation database be organized and maintained?

The ideal public participation database should create public involvement records down to the individual: storing contact information and individual input data. The public participation database should also be connected to all the communication channels by which we reach residents. When both occur, the public participation database becomes a go-to hub for getting started or following up on any public involvement effort.

There is not yet a standard for what defines a public participation database, but given the potential upside to all involved in the transportation planning process, we believe there will be increased adoption of data standards at the state and federal level. Here's why:

1. **MPO public involvement efforts are interconnected with the overall project development lifecycle.**
   When DOT's begin prioritizing projects and moving to environmental review and further public outreach, this lack of data standardization means additional spreadsheet work, duplication of effort, and the potential for people to fall through the cracks.
2. **Benchmarking and sharing best practices gets easier when we share common data standards.**
   One thing that became clear while putting together this guide is that there is much work to be done in the sharing best practices. Benchmarking, clear metrics of success, and information sharing become easier when these standards exist.
3. **As more organizations lean on consultants for public involvement, data standardization ensures continuity.**
   Planning and engagement consultants are playing an increasing role in public involvement, but when each involvement effort produces a unique dataset, MPO teams rarely have the time or resources to reconcile these into a cohesive whole.

Public participation databases and segmenting

While a participation database initially provides quick wins by reducing workload, its true impact is realized by supporting participant segmentation. By capturing and organizing important context data, MPOs can quickly recognize audiences by demographics, interests, geography, and group affiliation.

What does participant context look like? It can be grouped into two primary buckets:

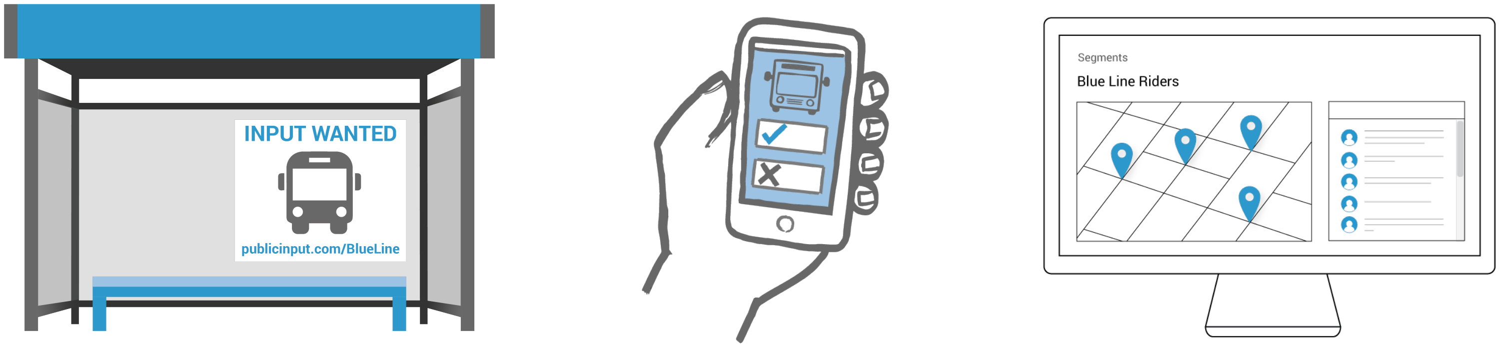
1. Participant-provided context
2. Inferred context

Participant-provided context is straightforward. Whether it’s a zip code, pin on a map, address, or demographic question response, much of what we need to know about a person is still captured by asking for it. This voluntary offering of information is best honored when we connect it to their device, profile, or contact information so we remember it and don’t have to ask for it when we re-engage.

Inferred context, on the other hand, is the domain of data management and public involvement software. Let’s illustrate the concept with an example in use by innovative agencies today. Custom links (website URL’s) and custom text message keywords are generated for each specific outreach effort, and can provide highly valuable insights by:

- Tracking performance of specific postcards, mailings, signs, or participation at an event you attend
- Automatically assigning a visitor to a specific segment
- Automatically translating the page or survey into a specific language

Let’s revisit the bus stop example. Using this custom link approach, visitors who go to the PublicInput.com/BlueLine link or text “BlueLine” into the text-in number are automatically added to a participant segment called “Blue Line Rider”:



Automatically adding participants to a segment based on URL or text message keyword

This allows us to analyze “Blue Line Rider” responses as a group, tailor our follow-up communications, or invite them to participate in future public involvement efforts that relate to the blue line.

Using this “capture and segment” approach automatically builds your public participation database with every public involvement effort. Not only does it prevent people from falling through the cracks, it enables MPOs to quantify what’s working and build relationships at scale. Next we explore how this leads to *Reporting in a way that builds trust*.

Capturing and Organizing Data: Questions to consider

1. Are we able to better understand the concerns and priorities of residents through segmenting?
2. Does our public participation database enable automated follow up with residents?
3. How do we track participation growth and trends over time?

Reporting in a way that builds trust

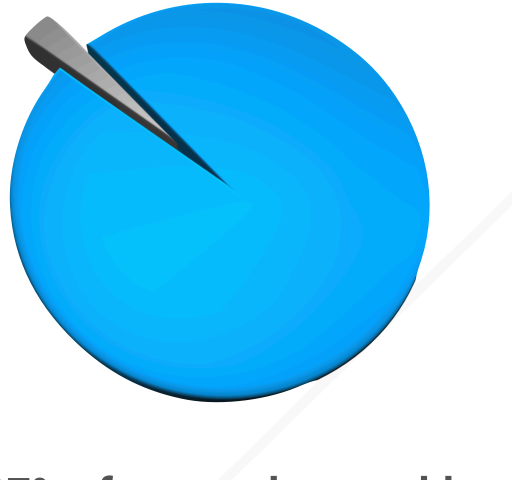
Given the inter-dependent nature of public involvement, analysis should be an integral and continuous part of the process. Teams with real-time insights into what they've heard and who they've reached can identify gaps and reformulate strategy as needed.

No matter the quantity of input received, sheer numbers alone are not enough to call outreach a success: great reporting is about understanding the priorities and concerns of citizens in a way that supports data-driven decisions and informed recommendations.

Our conversations about the current state of reporting pointed to challenges:

- Qualitative analysis is a necessity, but successful outreach can lead to a dreadful amount of manual comment coding.
- Visual reporting is a recognized best practice, but seems to happen rarely because of the associated time, skill, or expense.
- Segmenting to show results by specific population (i.e. EJ, Title VI, LEP) isn't consistently possible, and even when data is available, the time and spreadsheet prowess required create a real hurdle.

Let's unpack these to show how organizations are finding a better way.



97% of respondents said following up with participants to share updates and outcome was "Important" or "Very Important"

Qualitative analysis: tap machine learning to streamline "pre-analysis", not the analysis itself

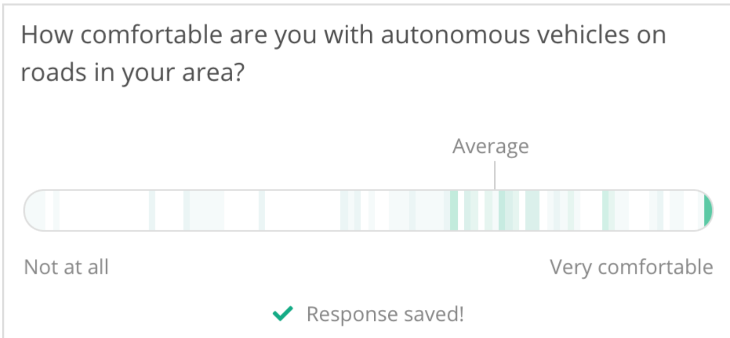
Today there is much hype about how machine learning will change the nature of work. When it comes to AI and machine learning, the places we've seen it produce the most value is "pre-analysis" tasks rather than comment analysis itself.

What do we mean by that? Rather than starting from a blank slate, running comments through a machine learning tool can generate a set of initial themes and key words, and group comments by these themes. From there, human eyes can review the grouped comments to assign actual themes and tags.

Visual reporting: provide real-time data visualization to increase engagement

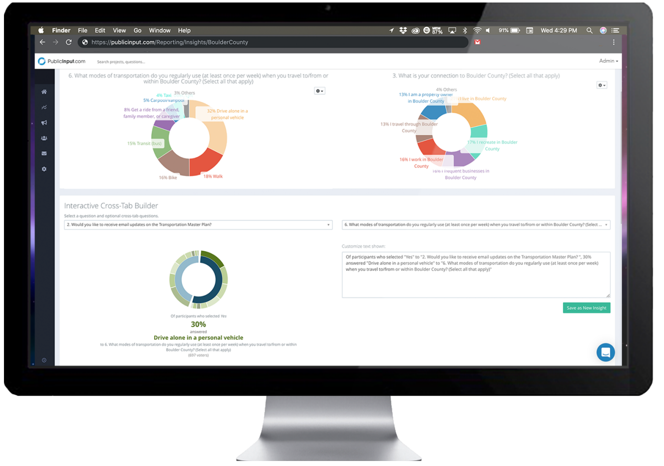
When it comes to data visualization, the days of static Excel charts are becoming a distant memory in favor of tools like real-time dashboards, interactive maps, and data visualization libraries. A key practice we've seen implemented with success is providing instant, real-time results as participants engage.

Not only does this begin closing the feedback loop, it incentivizes continued participation to see how one's viewpoint compares to others in the community. In some cases, real-time reporting may be less desirable, and on occasion we recommend turning this off if a topic is particularly contentious or subject to pressures from advocacy organizations. This is rare, but having a flexible toolkit designed for public involvement means you're well-equipped for any scenario.



Segment results by geography and population

In the past, answering questions like “What is the top priority of low-income citizens?” or “Which issue has the most disparate public sentiment?” has necessitated serious spreadsheet skills. This is another place where a public participation database can provide immense value, and if you implement the data capture and storage principals we outline in the *Capturing and Organizing Data* chapter, this is where your efforts pay off.



Generating segmented reports and data visualizations in minutes means giving your planning team the insights, nuances, and context it needs to truly make data-driven decisions.

The connection between trust and closing the feedback loop

Reporting results back to citizens and other stakeholders is a crucial moment in any Public Participation Plan. Here, there is a great opportunity to show that you have listened to the public and create transparency on what to expect next, or to collect additional input. Only after “closing the feedback loop” can we say that we have completed a successful cycle of public involvement.

In a series of recent studies, the World Bank pointed out that agencies and NGO’s were only successful at building public trust when there was a clear act to ‘close the feedback loop’, essentially letting residents know how their input was used.

At a foundational level, this seems simple enough. But in practice the odds are stacked against this happening for a few reasons. At the moment when closing the loop is most important, teams are focused on finalizing planning documents, coordinating with partner organizations, and getting started on the next effort.

Add to that the contacts that have interacted with us are probably stored in a number of different places, disconnected from important context like demographics, location, group affiliation and interest. It’s easy to see why this important step doesn’t happen consistently.

Given this, it’s important to recognize two things:

1. Communication tools should make follow up less time-intensive.
2. Communication tools should directly integrate with your public involvement database.

By integrating your communication tools with your participation database, you can follow up with the right message, to the right people, on the right channel. And this can be done in minutes - without having to export data, track down spreadsheets, or sift through staff emails.

> “Convincing people across numerous demographics/place-types of the value/importance of participation and getting them to relate personally to long-range planning many years in the future.”
>
> –Communications Director, NJ

By lowering our own internal barriers to communicating, we enable staff to make this critical best practice a regular part of their public involvement workflow.

Residents want to hear from you

Why does it seem like the public is so disinterested in public involvement? Part of this may be gaps in reaching and engaging residents that we've previously mentioned, but also a lack of two-way communication and re-engagement to build relationships. Looking at data from over 6 million sent emails, agencies closing the loop with residents mid-project or immediately following a project saw open and click rates far above industry-average benchmarks. In fact, when compared with Mailchimp, the leading e-commerce email tool, our partner agencies achieved a 55.5% open rate, more than double the average open rate for government agencies overall (26.5%).

Here's a few example communications to illustrate:

Example "Close the loop" email	Unique Open %	Unique Click %
Virginia Beach, VA		
Update from Virginia Beach on Stairway Mural Art	62%	14.4%
Austin, TX		
Update on MLS Engagement from City of Austin	70%	7.5%
Gainesville-Hall MPO, Georgia		
Public Survey - Jackson County Transportation Plan	36%	14.5%
Pensacola, FL		
Survey Results from the Port of Pensacola Community Issues and Priorities Effort	55%	5.4%

Numbers like these remind us that people are demonstrating their interest in a topic by investing their personal time to participate, and by closing the loop, we affirm that interest and build a foundation for future re-engagement and trust.

Building trust is the culmination of efforts like these, and seeing public involvement not as a box to be checked, but as an integrated process foundational to our success as an organization.

Reporting to Build Trust: Questions to consider

1. Can we tailor our communications by interest, geography, or stakeholder group?
2. Can our team close the feedback loop without having to sift through multiple data sets?
3. Can we easily segment our participation results by demography, geography, or other participant attribute?
4. Do we have tools to streamline qualitative analysis, or do we ask staff to “grind through it”?

Complying with state and federal mandates

While most organizations can be satisfied with a process that builds public trust, MPO professionals must go one step further - complying with a myriad of federal laws and guidelines along with their own Public Participation Plan (PPP or PIP).

Teams we spoke with had varying levels of familiarity with these laws and policies, which is understandable. While the core policy documents only number a couple hundred pages, most link out to sub-policies and guidance that extend for dozens if not hundreds of pages.

The most commonly-referenced federal laws and guidelines include:

- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)
- SAFETEA-LU: Safe, Accountable, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users
- FTA/FHWA Guidance and Proposed Rule Making (NPRM) on Public Participation
- Title VI & Executive Order 12898 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations)
- Executive Order 13166 (Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency)
- ADA Section 504 and WCAG 2.0 Requirements

While this list is not exhaustive, it conveys the point. Mastering and implementing all of these requires either a near-superhuman recall ability and an insatiable appetite for reading policy documents - or practicing the core insight we introduced in the first chapter - selectively leveraging technology and partners to focus on core competencies.

NOTE: SAFETEA-LU was superseded by MAP-21 and The FAST Act (2015). All three are included in Appendix B.

In this case, technology can play a critical role in satisfying these requirements and ensuring audit-ready documentation.

Three compliance best practices:

1. Applying targeted outreach to close participation gaps - especially among Environmental Justice, LEP, and lower income populations. (See *Reaching residents without having to be everywhere at once*)
2. Establishing a clear, central "source of truth" from which to store and report all public involvement data.
3. Leveraging online engagement solutions that build-in accessibility best practices.

The single source of truth

This approach has only recently become possible with the rise of application programming interfaces (API's) and comprehensive public involvement software. Whether your team manually stands up its own database or works with a vendor to implement a public participation database, having a central source of truth can simplify compliance.

A "single source of truth" simplifies documentation and report generation

A single source of truth also makes it possible to quickly compile survey results from multiple sources, quantify and map reach to underserved communities, and provide comprehensive records of all comments and staff communications.

The ideal public participation database should provide the following basic functions to an MPO team:

- Generate reports of input received across virtual and traditional channels
- Report participation by specific geographic areas
- Report participation by specific demographic or stakeholder groups

We're already seeing some DOT's and consultants move to automated report generation to document all participation and staff responses for specific time periods. As we discussed in the chapter on data capture, we believe these are the early signals of a shift toward data formatting and reporting standards.

This shift could mean improved inter-agency coordination and institutional memory. Organizations embracing centralized data management will reap the time savings and collaborative benefits of these changes, while organizations adhering to the status quo will likely endure them as another strain on staff time.

Accessibility by default

As more organizations shift service delivery and communication to the digital realm, the importance of accessibility standards continues to rise. Some planners we spoke with noted that aside from the usual "persons needing special assistance should contact..." notice in public communications, much work is left to be done to realize truly accessible engagement.

This is understandable - as technologies and communication channels have become more complex, so too have the standards that apply to ensuring their accessibility. WCAG 2.0 standards are inherently technical, and even experienced webmasters can face a serious learning curve in understanding and applying its guidelines. This is where off-loading compliance to a specialist or solution provider can simplify the process.

Ultimately, providing virtual engagement opportunities that enables people with disabilities to participate equally depends on deeper understanding and empathy for their needs and hurdles. If possible, we recommend observing someone participating in your online engagement via a screen reader - it's an experience you won't soon forget.

Simplified public involvement compliance means being able to identify and reach the right people, engage them with confidence, and comprehensively document the process to show that the goals of the Public Participation Plan were completed. This can be difficult with siloed tools that don't support a dynamic process. An integrated approach using the right tools makes MPO life simpler and smoother by keeping everything in one place.

Complying with state and federal mandates: Questions to consider

1. Do we store participation data in a manner that supports instant, comprehensive reporting?
2. Can we export reports on engagement metrics for specific geographic and demographic groups?
3. Do we consult with web accessibility specialists, or leverage tools that provide this by default?

Leveraging partners and technology to get back to core competencies

Today, transportation planning organizations play an increasingly critical role in shaping a more connected, safe, healthy, and sustainable world. This mandate is ultimately one about serving the needs of people, and success will depend on placing people back at the center of our process.

Achieving people-centric planning is no small feat. In the face of finite resources and abundant complexity, it's more important than ever for teams to re-focus energies towards core competencies, and tap partners and technology for all else.

As planning organizations, this opens the door to fully realizing the goals of not only our Public Participation Plans, but also the higher aspirations of our profession in creating better places for everyone.

About PublicInput.com

PublicInput.com was founded in 2014 by a group of transportation engineers and planners. After seeing first-hand the challenges created by the current state of public involvement, they set out to build a software toolkit that could reach more voices and help organizations put people back at the center of their process.

We believe that when public involvement is conducted in a thoughtful, integrated way it is less costly, less painful, and more representative of community needs. Our core competency is building the technology platform that enables organizations to adopt this integrated approach and emerging best practices.

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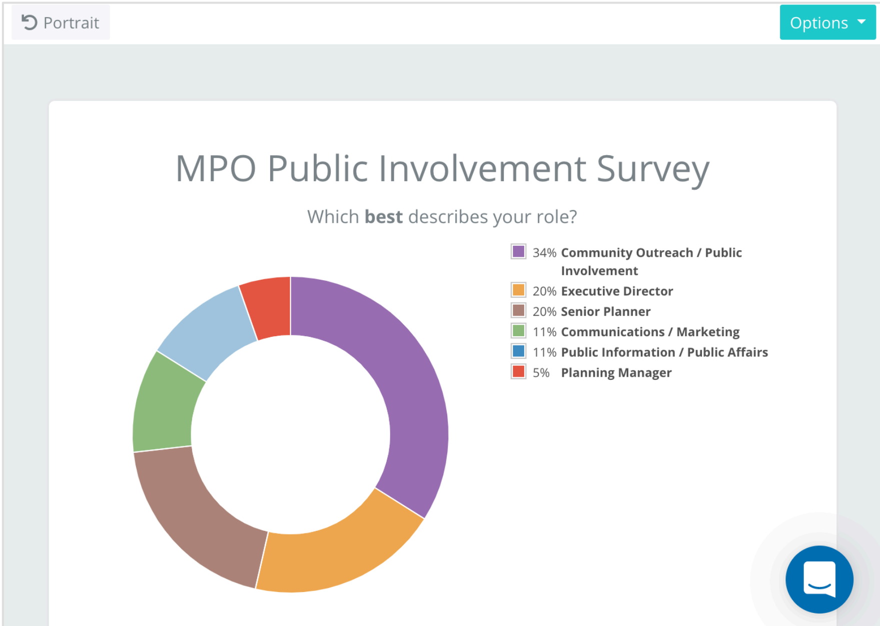
Schedule an intro call

Appendix A: Complete survey findings on what MPO professionals find as their greatest challenges

An interactive summary of MPO survey results is available PublicInput.com/MPO-results



MPO Public Involvement Survey Results

Appendix B: A simplified summary of common public involvement mandates

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

National policy regarding the environment, requiring that agencies prepare a "detailed statement" of the environmental impacts of any "major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment".

There are three tiers of potential reporting, from larger projects to smaller: Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), Environmental Assessment (EA), and Categorical Exclusion (CX). The smaller the project is categorically shown to be, the less reporting requirements. Documenting public participation is typically a part of all three categories.

Effective NEPA report should:

- Tell the project story through clear, concise writing
- Be understandable by lay people, but still legally strong
- Should use effective organization and formatting, following patterns familiar to reviewers
- Effectively use visual elements to concisely convey info

Specific requirements include:

- The results of any meetings that have been held, and any comments received during preliminary coordination. (TRB Blueprint doc p33)

- Summaries to convey when and where a particular meeting was held, who attended, and what was discussed (TRB Blueprint Doc p 34)
- Explain any responsible opposing views that were not considered as part of the draft document (TRB Blueprint Doc p33)
- Comments grouped according to a common theme and are summarized. The report also organizes the comments according to when they were raised. (TRB Blueprint Doc p 34)

SAFETEA-LU: Safe, Accountable, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users

SAFETEA-LU was passed in 2005, reinforcing the requirement for enhanced public involvement previously established in The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991 and TEA-21 in 1998. SAFETEA-LU specifically focuses on ensuring environmental justice and the involvement of minority and low-income citizens in the planning process.

SAFETEA-LU focuses on eight key components:

- Safety
- Equity
- Innovative Finance
- Congestion Relief
- Mobility & Productivity
- Efficiency

- Environmental Stewardship
- Environmental Streamlining

SAFETEA-LU lays out the requirement for a Long Range Transportation Plan and Transportation Improvement Plan. In addition, the act states that Transportation Management Areas (TMAs)—urbanized areas larger than 200,000 population —require a Congestion Management System (CMS), which planning requires DOT certification.

Requirements of SAFETEA-LU have since been carried on through MAP-21 and the FAST Act.

Both MAP-21 and the FAST Act establish "a cooperative, continuous, and comprehensive framework for making transportation investment decisions in metropolitan areas". Both also state that, "public involvement remains a hallmark of the metropolitan planning process."

Moving Ahead For Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21)

The MAP-21 was in effect from 2013-2014, and placed a new heavy interest on **performance based planning** for transportation planning, LRTPs, and TIPs.

- Required to establish and use a performance-based approach to transportation decision making and development of transportation plans.
- Establish performance targets that address the MAP-21 surface transportation performance measures. These targets are:
    - Safety
    - Bridge and pavement condition

    - Air quality
    - Freight movement
    - Performance of the National Highway System
    - Performance measures are to be used to track their progress toward meeting those targets.
- Performance targets selected by an MPO will be coordinated with public transportation providers, to the maximum extent practicable.
- Required to integrate into the metropolitan transportation planning process other performance-based transportation plans or processes.
- The MPOs will establish performance targets not later than 180 days after the date that the relevant State or public transportation provider establishes performance targets.

Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act (FAST Act)

In 2015 MAP-21 was replaced by The FAST Act, which provides long range funding for state and local transportation projects—$305 billion over fiscal years 2016 through 2020 for:

- Highway and motor vehicle safety
- Public transportation
- Motor carrier safety
- Hazardous materials safety

- Rail
- Research, technology, and statistics programs

$350M and $359M are budgeted for MPOs specifically in 2019 and 2020 respectively, as funded by contract authority from the Highway Account of the Highway Trust Fund.

The FAST Act continues all requirements as previously stated in MAP-21, while adding the requirement that "public ports and certain private providers of transportation, including intercity bus operators and employer-based commuting programs to the list of interested parties that an MPO must provide with reasonable opportunity to comment on the transportation plan."

FTA/FHWA Guidance and Proposed Rule Making (NPRM) on Public Participation

This ruling integrates existing NEPA requirements into MAP-21 and the FAST Act, putting an emphasis on environmental impact and environmental protection. It outlines ways organizations should provide early, continuous involvement opportunities and delineates key stakeholder organizations. Of note, many instances of "will" or "shall" were changed to "must" in regards to public involvement and the planning process.

Title VI

Title VI compliance must be reported to the FTA for activities directly receiving FTA funds. According to Title VI, MPOs must be able to "self-certify":

- Analyzed regional demographic data
- Provided member agencies regional data

- Engaged minority communities
- Monitored sub-recipient activity

Other general Title VI requirements include:

- A Participation Plan with proactive strategies, procedures, and desired outcomes
- Requirement to Provide Meaningful Access to LEP Persons (benefits, services, information, other important activities)
- A four factor analysis LEP Assessment (see below)
- A Language Assistance Plan for LEP outreach
  - Include the results of the Four Factor Analysis, including a description of the LEP population(s) served
  - Describe how the recipient provides language assistance services by language
  - Describe how the recipient provides notice to LEP persons about the availability of language assistance
- "Safe Harbor" provision states that vital written material / vital documents for all LEP language groups (5% of the population or 1,000 persons, whichever is less)

Four Factor Analysis LEP Assessment:

1. The number or proportion of LEP persons eligible to be served or likely to be encountered by the program or recipient.
2. The frequency with which LEP persons come into contact with the program.
3. The nature and importance of the program, activity, or service provided by the program to people's lives
4. The resources available to the recipient for LEP outreach, as well as the costs associated with that outreach

Title VI suggests the following Participation Plan strategies:

- Meetings at convenient times and accessible locations
- Utilizing different meeting sizes and formats
- Alternative advertising platforms
- Varying community interaction

Executive Order 12898 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations)

This E.O. passed in 1994 focuses "federal attention on the environmental and human health effects of federal actions on minority and low-income populations with the goal of achieving environmental protection for all communities." Given "the disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their actions on minority and low-income populations," the E.O. "directs each agency to develop a strategy for implementing environmental justice." This includes providing "minority and low-income communities access to public information and public participation."

Executive Order 13166 (Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency)

This E.O. from 2000 requires "Federal agencies to examine the services they provide, identify any need for services to those with limited English proficiency (LEP), and develop and implement a system to provide those services so LEP persons can have meaningful access to them." Furthermore it creates the expectation that "agency plans will provide for such meaningful access consistent with...the fundamental mission of the agency."

ADA Section 504 & WCAG 2.0 Requirements

Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act forbids “discrimination against those who have disabilities”. While not explicitly stated, this may apply to any program or activity (e.g. public involvement opportunity) within the planning area, and call for reasonable accommodation to disabled individuals who wish to participate in meetings, public participation activities, or other events or programs of the MPO.

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) refers to website accessibility, most recently updated in June of 2018. The WCAG specifically cites the use of visuals as an essential best practice. The applications of these guidelines do get fairly technical, so tapping tools that are already compliant, or engaging an accessibility specialist is ideal.

Integrated Public Involvement

The MPO professional's guide to public involvement best practices across traditional and virtual formats.

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