



Virtual Public Involvement Practices in NEPA

Oregon – Multnomah County Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge

This case study discusses virtual public involvement (VPI) strategies implemented by Multnomah County to help meet National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) public hearing requirements for the Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge Project. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) typically requires that agencies hold in-person public hearings, in accordance with 23 U.S. Code (U.S.C.) § 128. The Multnomah County offered an in-person public hearing by appointment, which no one attended, and an Online Open House to share project information and collect comments on the project. Multnomah County integrated VPI into its outreach activities throughout development of the Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge Project.

Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge Project Background



The Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge Project proposes to replace a 96-year-old bridge in downtown Portland, Oregon, with a new bridge designed to withstand earthquakes (see Figure 1). The 19-mile-long Burnside Street, which includes the Burnside Bridge, was designated a regional lifeline route in 1996; the street and bridge allow emergency services to respond after a major earthquake or other disaster. Replacing the bridge will support emergency response and recovery.



Figure 1. Map of the project area for the Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge. Source: Multnomah County.

- 2018 • Feasibility Study completed
- 2019 • Pre-environmental review public engagement on bridge alternatives and evaluation criteria (Round 1)
- 2020 • Pre-environmental review public engagement on recommended preferred bridge alternative (Round 2)
• April 14: Notice of Intent (NOI) issued
• Public engagement on NOI
• October: Preferred alternative approved
- 2021 • January - February: Public engagement for the bridge type selection phase (Round 3)
• February 5: Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) published
• February - March: Public comment period for the Draft EIS (Round 4)
• November - December: Public engagement on cost-saving measures and changes to Preferred Alternative
- 2022 • April: Supplemental Draft EIS published with 45-day public comment period
- 2023 • December: Final EIS
- 2024 • January: Record of Decision



Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge Pre-EIS VPI Approach

Multnomah County, the project sponsor, held four rounds of public engagement during the planning and project development process (pre-Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)) for the Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge Project. To reach stakeholders, both before and during the NEPA process, Multnomah County utilized multiple outreach strategies. County staff offered project briefings as one-on-one conversations with individuals directly impacted by the project, or as group discussions with community organizations and agencies. Opportunities to request a project briefing were offered through emails, phone calls, project newsletters, and the project website. Multnomah County also established several Online Open Houses linked from the main project website, which included renderings of draft bridge alternatives, project materials, [informational videos](#), and surveys to collect public input on the NOI for the project, bridge alternatives, and bridge design. The Online Open Houses served as a way for the project team to share information and collect feedback from interested stakeholders at different stages. One of the videos showed [a simulation](#) of the current Burnside Bridge (see Figure 2) crumbling due to an earthquake to show the importance of the replacement project. Since 2017, this video has been viewed more than 98,000 times, showing significant interest in the project.

To market the Online Open Houses, Multnomah County posted advertisements to social media. The project team noted that paid advertisements on a particular social media site reached the most people, with 6,970 impressions. Outreach during the pre-NOI project phase also included holding community tabling events, contacting businesses through phone canvassing, and mailing flyers to share information with stakeholders in the project area. Multnomah County also created a [website](#) using an interactive web mapping platform, to The project team also continued to offer briefings to



Figure 2. Photo of the current Burnside Bridge. It was completed in 1926. Source: Multnomah County.

share information about the project in six languages, as well as visuals depicting different bridge types (see Figure 3 for an example).

Multnomah County held a virtual public meeting via a web conferencing platform and a livestream platform on February 3, 2021, before publication of the Draft EIS. Thirty-two participants attended the web conference meeting, and 10 participants viewed the livestream.



Figure 3. Example of the preferred alternative, a replacement long span bridge. Source: Multnomah County.



Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge Draft EIS VPI Approach

To inform the public of the 45-day public comment period for the Draft EIS, Multnomah County relied on primarily virtual outreach strategies. For example, project staff sent out e-newsletters to over 3,000 recipients and advertised via social media.

various individuals, organizations, and community



groups to share information on the Draft EIS and solicit comments. The briefings transitioned from in-person to virtual due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

In addition to the virtual briefings, Multnomah County offered an in-person public hearing on March 3, 2021. To manage capacity in advance, the project team set up a reservation system offering 10-minute appointments to attend the hearing. No appointments were requested, and no stakeholders attended the hearing.

Instead of a virtual public hearing, Multnomah County relied on the Draft EIS Online Open House website to share information about the Draft EIS and collect stakeholder comments for the project record. The Online Open House for the Draft EIS included a project overview, information on the project purpose and need, the Draft EIS, and a document library containing technical reports. From February 1 to March 21, 2021, 698 users initiated 1,178 sessions on the Draft EIS Online Open House, with each visit averaging five minutes. About 15 percent of visitors to this website accessed it on a mobile phone. The website included a comment form and information on how to submit comments via mail, email, or voicemail.

Multnomah County received 364 comments on the Draft EIS, 314 of which were submitted directly to the project team by City of Portland staff. The public submitted a total of 50 comments: 19 were submitted using Online Open House comment forms, 29 were submitted by email, and two comments were submitted through voicemails.

Multnomah County found that public engagement in the project appeared to be significantly higher prior to the Draft EIS, as indicated by the number of public comments submitted and the number of Online Open House Visits (see Figure 4).

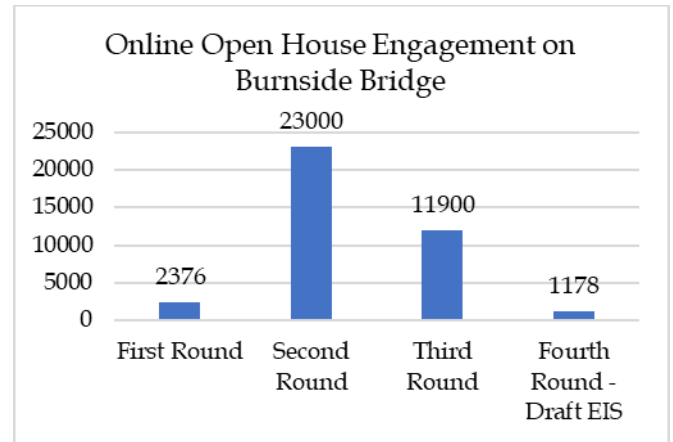


Figure 4. Bar chart comparing the number of online Open House visits and during four rounds of public involvement for the Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge project, including the Draft EIS.



Reaching Underserved Populations

Multnomah County focused on outreach to underserved

populations throughout public engagement for the Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge Project. Portions of the project are located in historic Chinatown and Japantown, where individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP) reside. Individuals experiencing homelessness reside under the Burnside Bridge; there are also day laborer sites located near the bridge. The project also impacts multiple nonprofit community organizations located at the west end of the Burnside Bridge that aid those experiencing homelessness and addiction. Members from these nonprofit organizations have participated in the project’s public involvement process primarily through briefings and the project’s Social Services and Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Working Group.

To reach these communities and other underserved populations that would likely be impacted by the project, Multnomah County relied on a third-party community liaison service. The program employs “liaisons,” extroverted individuals who understand government processes and have extensive social networks in specific communities, to serve as a trusted information source for their communities.

During development of the Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge Draft EIS, Multnomah County worked with these community liaisons to share project information with Black, Native American, Vietnamese, Chinese, Latinx, Japanese, Middle Eastern, Russian, and Ukrainian communities and invite their comments.

During key milestones and public input periods, community liaisons primarily relied on VPI strategies such as telephone calls and emails to individuals and community-based organizations, as well as publications on social media to share information about the Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge Project and invite comments from specific communities.

Multnomah County staff also made sure that project materials were widely accessible on the Online Open Houses. Staff translated online project resources into six different languages and designed these materials on the project website to be easily read using mobile phones.



Benefits of VPI

Multnomah County incorporated VPI techniques to inform the public and other stakeholders of the Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge Project and collect feedback and comments during the project development process. The project team received most feedback through completed online surveys, online comment forms, and through submitted emails, indicating that virtual engagement was preferred by stakeholders. The team also made online project materials available 24/7 during the comment period, and translated these materials into six languages identified within the project study area to ensure that LEP stakeholders could be informed about the project. Multnomah's VPI efforts allowed stakeholders to provide feedback at a time that was convenient for them.



Challenges

Multnomah County found that it was difficult to provide a wide range of public engagement options while ensuring that the project team was not overextended. Multnomah County also recognized that not all forms of public involvement opportunities would work for all stakeholders and tried to balance their offerings to best meet a range of stakeholders' expected needs. The project team found that maintaining high levels of public engagement over multiple years of a project can be challenging, as public interest changes over time. Multnomah County has found that, in comparison to virtual forums, in-person open houses may not always elicit the same quantity or quality of information from the public.



Lessons Learned

Incorporate VPI strategies for public engagement at the outset of a project, rather than introducing VPI strategies retroactively once the project is underway. Multnomah County incorporated VPI techniques into its public engagement strategy at the beginning of the Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge project. Multnomah County continually learned and improved on its experiences by iterating on versions of the project's Online Open House and adapting its virtual advertising methods as it learned which VPI strategies were most effective.

Project websites and Online Open Houses are effective online tools for engaging the public and should be designed to be simple, easy-to-use, and mobile-friendly. Multnomah County's project website used buttons to collapse and expand text, which can help a user quickly scan through the site and target topics of interest. Multnomah County ensured that its project websites and Online Open Houses contained information with various levels of detail to appeal to a wide range of audience interests and were mobile-friendly.



Consider using a variety of VPI tools, such as digital storytelling tools and one-on-one virtual briefings, to appeal to different audience engagement preferences and interests. During the bridge type selection phase of the project, Multnomah County used a digital storytelling tool to create an additional website that featured a range of bridge types. When scrolling through this website, a user could view different graphics, maps, and visuals, including a 360-degree video depicting different bridge types. This website received the most visitation of any Multnomah County project website (over 6,000 visitors).

Multnomah County also held virtual and in-person briefings, either one-on-one with individuals or with agencies and organizations, to provide additional engagement opportunities. The project team found that one-on-one briefings were an effective strategy to gather feedback from more individuals than might have been reached through group discussions alone; the project team heard from some stakeholders that they might have been unable to participate in the group discussions or preferred the more tailored format of the one-on-one discussions.



Next Steps

Multnomah County published a Supplemental Draft EIS (SDEIS) in April 2022 to detail findings and recommendations for reducing the project's cost. The county held additional stakeholder outreach in advance of the publication of the SDEIS from summer to winter 2021, including over 45 briefings, discussions with community groups (over 490 participants), social media and e-newsletter publications, and an [Online Open House website](#) where Multnomah County collected comments on the proposed cost saving measures from November 12 to December 14, 2021. The project team anticipates publishing the Final EIS in December 2023 and the Record of Decision in January 2024, after which the project design phase will begin. Construction is scheduled to begin as early as 2025 and last through 2030, should construction funding for the project be secured.

Moving forward, Multnomah County intends to work with the FHWA Oregon Division Office to continue to incorporate VPI strategies into project planning and development. Multnomah County plans to continue to use Online Open House websites to complement in-person meetings due to the ability of this platform to broaden accessibility and engagement opportunities.

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For more information on virtual public involvement (VPI) refer to the following website: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/public_involvement/vpi/

For more information on the NEPA hearing requirements refer to the following website: https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/NEPA/trans_decisionmaking.aspx

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Contact Information

Thomas Parker
Environmental Manager
FHWA Oregon Division
thomas.w.parker@dot.gov

Sarah Hurwitz
Public Information Officer
Multnomah County
sarah.hurwitz@multco.us

Megan Neill, PE
Project Manager
Multnomah County
megan.neill@multco.us

