



Incorporating Virtual Public Involvement Strategies

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has published new resources as part of its efforts to document and promote virtual public involvement (VPI) across the United States. Public involvement is essential to ensuring that projects meet the needs of the communities that they impact and are intended to serve. VPI – which includes all online, mobile phone, and application-based outreach – has changed the look, feel, and reach of public involvement in recent years, with a growing range of tools including project websites, online materials, virtual meetings, podcasts, press releases, emails, social media, online mapping, and comment forums.

While some tools, including project websites and online materials, have been utilized for many projects, new social media platforms and mobile applications allow for continued experimentation. The new technical assistance materials described below provide best practices and lessons learned for all States working to implement VPI.

Public Involvement Legislation and Regulations

- [Regulations require that some hearings and meetings be held in person:](#)
 - 23 USC 128 and 139
 - 23 CFR 771.111 – (H)
 - 23 CFR 450.210(a)
 - 23 CFR 450.316(a) (MPO)
- [Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act \(FAST Act\)](#)
- [Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act \(MAP-21\)](#)
- [March 11, 2021, Announcement: Temporary Virtual Public Involvement During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

VPI and the Health Emergency

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) halted in-person public involvement efforts in March of 2020, which in turn created a shift to virtual platforms. Many States that had previously utilized some VPI expanded their use, while many States without VPI experience explored and incorporated new VPI practices to continue community engagement in a safe, distanced manner. FHWA worked closely with States to incorporate these strategies into their State Public Involvement Plans (PIP). With an increased reliance on virtual strategies, States have seen shifts in meeting attendance and overall content engagement. On March 11, 2021, FHWA issued [temporary guidance](#) stating that virtual public hearings would temporarily satisfy the public involvement requirements for in-person public hearings as part of project development and environmental review process under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) during the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, the March 11, 2021, guidance is no longer applicable. Current FHWA policy is that project sponsors should use a combination of in-person and VPI for public hearings and meetings during the environmental review process. Thus, the in-person component of the hearing can be supplemented and enhanced by other methods of public involvement, such as VPI strategies. Each State should include in their public involvement/public hearing program procedures to address the use of both in-person and VPI techniques, to be approved under 23 CFR 771.111(h).

Impacts of VPI

VPI has significantly impacted the reach and precision of outreach efforts. Utilizing text messages, targeted advertisements, and social media has allowed a larger audience to access information about highway projects. Additionally, VPI provides increased opportunities for stakeholders to provide comments or attend meetings, including those who would have been unable due to work, family, or other obligations. Virtual strategies allow practitioners to come to the people, rather than expecting the people to come to them. Some States have noted that increased VPI during COVID-19 has elevated the level of customer service that residents will expect moving forward, as noted in the resources below.

Increased participation in public involvement efforts due to virtual options provides a bright outlook for public participation in the future. Complementary virtual outreach, meeting streaming, and comment opportunities along with in-person options will allow the maximum amount of feedback from stakeholders of all demographics, locations, and backgrounds. Some States have used VPI to enhance their Environmental Justice (EJ) outreach efforts through targeted outreach to EJ neighborhoods and by running ads or other content on EJ-focused media outlets such as streaming stations. FHWA continues to coordinate with States to develop virtual strategies and ensure new practices are compliant with Federal legislation, regulations, and guidance.

New Resource: VPI Conversations Video Series

The FHWA is providing assistance to transportation agencies that are working to make VPI a bigger part of how they engage the public through its [VPI initiative](#), as part of FHWA's [Every Day Counts](#) program that focuses on increasing adoption of proven innovations.

A new feature of FHWA's VPI initiative includes a series of video conversations with agencies implementing VPI called [VPI Conversations](#). These five- to ten-minute short videos feature State Departments of Transportation and Metropolitan Planning Organizations sharing their stories about how adding VPI to their public involvement toolboxes has led to increased participation, thoughtful feedback from the public, and engagement with individuals that were unlikely to attend an in-person public meeting.

The videos provide insights on the variety of VPI tools used by large and small agencies across the country such as project visualizations, online meetings, and mapping tools. These tools are rapidly evolving, and agency staff offer insights on the tools used to support their planning, project development, and environmental review processes. The videos also discuss how agencies can use VPI to address several challenges, such as effectively engaging traditionally underserved populations, individuals with disabilities, and rural and low-broadband communities. The videos also show how agencies are institutionalizing VPI through policies, guidance, and training resources.

The [FHWA VPI website](#) includes several additional tools to assist States in VPI. The website includes a "Do-it-yourself" video series along with several webinars and peer exchanges featuring agencies that have implemented VPI. [To sign up for email updates about the VPI initiative, click here.](#)

New Resource: Best Practices for Virtual Public Hearings in NEPA Case Studies

The FHWA has released a series of resources showcasing the use of VPI in various project-specific applications across the country. These resources highlight project and planning specifics in addition to best practices and lessons learned; the descriptions below summarize all of the projects that are showcased. [All case studies can be found here.](#)

I-526 Lowcountry Corridor WEST Project: Charleston, South Carolina

The South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) has used VPI for over five years. When COVID-19 pandemic restrictions began, virtual engagement became SCDOT's primary means of outreach and public involvement. SCDOT conducted a hybrid public hearing for the I-526 Lowcountry Corridor WEST project in December 2020 consisting of a live, virtual public hearing "comment session" and individual, in-person appointments. SCDOT used a variety of innovative virtual options to allow the public to obtain information and submit comments, including a 360-degree virtual hearing room, project hotline,



Figure 1. The I-526 Lowcountry Corridor WEST virtual reality public hearing room. Source: SCDOT.

dedicated email address, and live chat feature. Furthermore, SCDOT employed a variety of physical and virtual marketing strategies—including geotargeted digital ads, flyers at bus stops, and on-bus wrap around advertisements—to ensure the public was aware of the virtual resources for learning about and commenting on the project, especially underserved populations in the project area. SCDOT meaningfully involved EJ and Limited English Proficiency populations through strategically targeted messaging and engagement with community leaders. A hybrid approach to the public hearing allowed SCDOT to provide an in-person option while also permitting more attendees to join than could safely be accommodated in person. [The full case study can be accessed at this link.](#)

Black Hawk Bridge Project: Iowa

The Iowa Department of Transportation (Iowa DOT) has used its proprietary Public Involvement Management Application (PIMA) since 2013 and has added new functionalities to the tool over time. For the Black Hawk Bridge Project, Iowa DOT staff used PIMA to register meeting participants, collect electronically submitted comments, share prerecorded PowerPoint presentations, and, for the first time, livestream a virtual public meeting and hearing on June 15, 2021. Iowa DOT also hosted an “at your own pace” virtual public hearing via PIMA between June 15 and June 30, 2021, which allowed stakeholders to view the same content presented at the virtual public hearing at a time of their choosing. Leading up to the virtual public hearing and comment period, Iowa DOT leveraged virtual and non-virtual forms of outreach to share project information. The primary source of virtual outreach was the project website, which included a link to PIMA. Iowa DOT also used paid, geotargeted Facebook advertisements, email announcements, newspaper advertisements, and direct mailings. Iowa DOT found that its use of VPI strategies resulted in more public comments than expected if the agency had only used traditional outreach methods, and that the comments were more specific than those collected for previous projects. [The full case study can be accessed at this link.](#)

Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge: Portland, Oregon

Multnomah County integrated VPI into its outreach activities for the Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge Project during three rounds of public engagement between 2019 and 2020, prior to initiating the NEPA environmental review process. After publishing the draft environmental impact statement on February 5, 2021, Multnomah County offered an in-person public hearing by appointment on March 3, 2021, and an Online Open House in February and March 2021, to share project information and collect comments. To reach stakeholders, both before and during the NEPA process, Multnomah County utilized multiple outreach strategies, including Online Open House websites, one-on-one briefings, and social media advertisements. The project team focused on outreach to underserved populations throughout public engagement, primarily relying on paid Community Engagement Liaisons that serve as trusted information sources for their communities. The project team translated online project resources into six different languages and ensured materials on the project website could be easily read using mobile phones. By offering materials online 24/7, Multnomah County’s VPI efforts allowed stakeholders to provide feedback in a safe manner, at a time that was convenient for them. [The full case study can be accessed at this link.](#)

South Lawrence Trafficway West Leg: City of Lawrence, Kansas

The Kansas Department of Transportation’s (KDOT) South Lawrence Trafficway (SLT) West Leg team, in collaboration with FHWA Kansas Division and Headquarters staff, included VPI considerations in its PIP in December 2018. After implementation of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in March 2020, the SLT West Leg project team adjusted elements of the PIP to ensure that safe, virtual engagement opportunities could be provided to stakeholders. FHWA approved KDOT’s request to hold a hybrid public hearing with both virtual and in-person participation options, as well as a virtual “Open House.” The virtual component of the public hearing, hosted using Iowa DOT’s PIMA software, took place on May 25, 2021, and the in-person component took place on May 26, 2021. KDOT’s virtual “Open House” was held from April to September 2021, to allow the public to view materials and provide feedback for the entirety of the comment period. KDOT leveraged both traditional and virtual outreach strategies to ensure robust participation, and members of the public could submit comments in a variety of ways, including via the project website, an email address, drop-in centers at community locations, and two online surveys.



Figure 2. Attendees at the live, in-person hearing for SLT on May 21, 2021. Source: KDOT.

KDOT believes that using VPI strategies can broaden opportunities available for the public to engage in transportation project planning and development, as well as allow for outreach efforts that reach more diverse populations and produce an improved quality and quantity of submitted comments. [The full case study can be accessed at this link.](#)

Chesapeake Bay Crossing Study Tier 1: Maryland

The Maryland Transportation Authority (MDTA) is following a tiered NEPA process to identify and assess the impacts of alternatives to provide congestion relief at the existing Bay Bridge, which provides the only way to cross the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. In the Tier 1 study, MDTA conducted initial assessments across a 100-mile study area to select a corridor alternative for the new crossing. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, FHWA approved MDTA to hold public hearings with both virtual and in-person participation options. The public hearings consisted of a virtual information room, which was made available in February 2021, and had 11 viewing stations dedicated to different details about the study and allowed viewers to submit comments. In addition, MDTA held four virtual testimony sessions, hosted with publicinput.com, and two in-person live sessions in April 2021. MDTA's outreach strategy included advertisements in print and digital media, press releases, social media, e-blasts, and mail, as well as targeted outreach to underserved populations and EJ communities through minority and Spanish-language media. Given the 100-mile study area for this project, MDTA considered VPI critical to reaching a large audience. [The full case study can be accessed at this link.](#)

I-375 Improvement Project: Detroit, Michigan

The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) released an environmental assessment for public review and comment on January 5, 2021, with an open comment period through February 19, 2021. In November 2020, MDOT worked with the FHWA Michigan Division Office and the FHWA Office of Project Development and Environmental Review to develop a project-specific public hearing plan for the I-375 Improvement Project. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the plan outlined a hybrid approach to the public hearing; an in-person public hearing and live virtual comment session were documented as part of the project record. The plan also outlined in-person safety protocols, and an advertisement strategy that incorporated traditional and VPI approaches. MDOT worked to ensure that access to the virtual comment session would be as easy as possible for underserved populations in the project area, including by allowing participants to join online via Broadnet (a virtual platform) or by telephone. The project website hosted resources and information for the public to learn about the project and provided a comment form for people to provide input. MDOT also posted a recorded presentation about the project on YouTube. Additionally, MDOT used Twitter and Facebook to advertise the virtual comment session and public hearing, as well as other traditional methods of outreach. MDOT believes using VPI strategies helped the agency reach more of the community than through use of traditional outreach methods alone. MDOT noted that the use of VPI strategies appeared to increase opportunities for communication transparency and two-way dialogue with the public. [The full case study can be accessed at this link.](#)

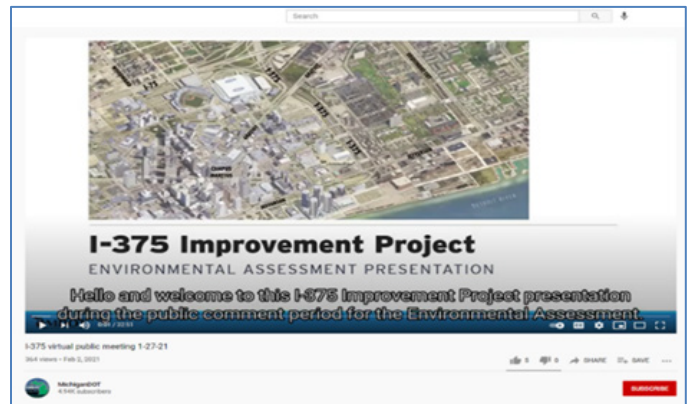


Figure 3. Screenshot of the pre-recorded public hearing presentation video, played at the I-375 Improvement Project virtual outreach event and in-person public hearing. Source: MDOT.

Corridor K Project: North Carolina

The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) released an environmental assessment for a 12-mile portion of Corridor K for public review and comment in August 2020. While FHWA typically requires that agencies hold in-person public hearings, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, FHWA approved NCDOT to hold a virtual public hearing on October 1, 2020, which they held via GoToMeeting. NCDOT also used a website on the publicinput.com platform to share information and collect comments. To reach those members of the public without broadband access, NCDOT provided the option for members of the public to provide feedback via mail, phone, or one-on-one meetings. NCDOT publicized the opportunity to provide feedback on the environmental assessment using both VPI and traditional strategies to reach the population of stakeholders in the project area that did not have access to broadband. This included mailing a newsletter to 1,698 property owners in the study area two weeks before the virtual public hearing that contained a project update, instructions for how to access the virtual public hearing, a link to the project website along with a QR code, contact information for the project team, instructions for how to provide comments online by email or by phone, and instructions for how to request hearing materials without access to the internet. NCDOT believes that its use of VPI strategies allowed it to reach a broader demographic than it would have if they only used traditional outreach methods. [The full case study can be accessed at this link.](#)

I-495 Express Lanes Northern Extension: Virginia

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) has conducted outreach for the I-495 Express Lanes Northern Extension (NEXT) project since 2018 through in-person public information meetings and VPI efforts. In summer 2020, the I-495 NEXT project team began planning for a hybrid public hearing that included both virtual and in-person components. On September 28 and 30, 2020, prior to the hybrid public hearing, the project team held two virtual Q&A sessions over a web-based platform (Webex) to allow opportunities for interactive dialogue among project leadership, technical staff, and the public, while also serving as a dry run for the hybrid public hearing. VDOT held the virtual component of the public hearing on October 5, 2020, via Webex, with a livestream on YouTube, and the in-person component on October 8, 2020. To reach traditionally underserved populations, VDOT published notices in newspapers with primary audiences from EJ populations, mailed postcards to residents in the study area, posted information in public places, and relied on social media and the website. VDOT found that offering a hybrid public hearing and using other VPI strategies as part of the I-495 NEXT project led to multiple benefits for both the agency and the public, including a broader outreach effort and an increase in the quantity of comments. [The full case study can be accessed at this link.](#)

Resources for Practitioners

To learn more about the projects showcased in the [VPI Practices in NEPA Case Studies](#), see the following resources:

- [I-526 Lowcountry Corridor WEST](#), the project website created by South Carolina DOT
- [Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge](#), the project website created by Multnomah County
- [Black Hawk Bridge Project](#), NEPA document by Iowa DOT
- [South Lawrence Trafficway West Leg](#), the project website by Kansas DOT
- [Chesapeake Bay Crossing Study Tier 1](#), the project website by Maryland DOT
- [I-375 Improvement Project](#), the project website by Michigan DOT
- [Corridor K Project](#), the project website by North Carolina DOT
- [I-495 Express Lanes Northern Extension](#), the project website by Virginia DOT

FHWA has developed several public involvement resources for practitioners:

- FHWA's [Public Involvement in NEPA Transportation Decision Making](#) policy resource center provides information on public involvement in NEPA and project development.
- FHWA's [Public Involvement/Public Participation resource center](#) links to resource guides including Public Involvement Techniques For Transportation Decision-Making, the Transportation Planning Process Resource Guide, and several guides on how to effectively engage EJ communities.
- FHWA's [Virtual Public Involvement resource center](#) is dedicated to virtual public involvement. This page showcases content from the [Every Day Counts Initiative](#), Extending Our Reach webinars, and fact sheets.
- FHWA's [Promising Practices for Meaningful Public Involvement in Transportation Decision-Making](#) provides practices to promote a shared understanding of meaningful public involvement at all stages of the transportation decision-making process and project lifecycle.

Contact Information

Bob Washington
Environmental Protection Specialist
Office of Project Development & Environmental Review
202-366-4651
robert.washington@dot.gov

For information on VPI in the Planning Process:

Mack Frost
Transportation Specialist
Office of Planning
804-775-3352
mack.frost@dot.gov

Andrew Edwards
Community Planner
Office of Planning
404-562-3659
andrew.edwards@dot.gov

Look What's New!

- [Register](#) for the Virtual Public Involvement Practices in NEPA Webinar on February 27 and 28.
- [Digital Tools to Enhance In-Person Events](#), including Meetings-in-a-Box, Pop-up Outreach, and Underserved Community focused tools.
- [Crowdsourcing tools](#) are platforms for public input that allow participants to indicate their ideas and preferences.
- [Reports and recordings](#) of the peer exchange workshop to share VPI strategies and practices.
- The new [Planning and Environment Linkages](#) (PEL) Handbook and PEL Flowcharts provide practitioners with guidance that support implementing PEL approaches.