

# CHAPTER IV - PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

## 1.0 Overview

The Georgia Department of Transportation's (GDOT) Public Involvement Guidelines ([Policies & Procedures 4055-1](#)) currently are being revised. Until that revision is complete, the following guidelines should be followed.

### 1.1 When is Public Involvement necessary?

Public involvement, an integral part of the GDOT's Plan Development Process (PDP), encourages and solicits public input while providing an opportunity for the public to become informed about project development. Public involvement activities are also intended to provide the public access to the decision-making process. According to the PDP, "efforts to reach the public and be responsive to their concerns are an important element of project development and will be made on all projects." The goal of public involvement is to foster two-way communication and trust between governing agencies and the public.

Seeking meaningful public involvement is important for sharing the concerns of communities and for determining the final outcome of a project. Public involvement should be tailored to the specific project. The project team should consider the appropriate strategies to reach the communities within the project area. The project team should consult very early (such as during the initial concept team meeting) to determine the appropriate public involvement strategy. This strategy should build on public outreach efforts made during the project's planning phase.

Categorical Exclusions (CE) are the lowest level of environmental documentation and are appropriate for projects that would result in limited environmental impact. These projects tend to be non-controversial and do not require a Public Hearing Open House (PHOH). However, in some instances, small projects may have some adverse effect on the community, or may be controversial, and in that case, a Public Information Open House (PIOH) should be held. For example, if a project changes permanent access to a property (or properties), public outreach to affected property owners will be required even if overall project impacts are minor.

Environmental Assessments (EA) are prepared when the level of environmental impact is unknown. PIOHs may be held at any time during the preparation of the draft document. To meet federal requirements, after the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has approved the Draft EA, a PHOH must be held (or, with FHWA's concurrence, the opportunity for a PHOH must be advertised). In addition to PIOHs and PHOHs, the project team should consider other public outreach initiatives such as those discussed in [Section 3.0](#), below. While many EAs do not have a stand-alone Public Involvement Plan, consideration should be given to developing one for projects that are controversial or result in community impacts.

An Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is the appropriate level of environmental document for projects that have the potential to result in significant environmental impacts. These include projects that are very controversial. At a minimum, a PHOH will be held after the Draft EIS (DEIS) is approved. Other public involvement strategies may be appropriate. Most EIS's will have a stand-alone Public Involvement Plan.

Public involvement needs also must be reconsidered during the reevaluation phase if substantial time has elapsed since the last outreach effort or if project changes warrant additional outreach.

For those projects involving the closing of a roadway and/or bridge during construction and result in an off-site detour, see [Section 2.4](#).

## **1.2 Legislation and Executive Orders**

The following are just some of the major laws governing public involvement.

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR]) require that agencies make a diligent effort to involve the public in preparing and implementing their NEPA procedures. They also require that agencies provide public notice of NEPA-related hearings, public meetings, and the availability of environmental documents so as to inform those persons and agencies that may be interested or affected.

The environmental regulations of the US Department of Transportation (USDOT), the FHWA, and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) can be found in 23 CFR Part 771. In accordance with CEQ requirements, these regulations were adopted to implement NEPA requirements for surface transportation projects. Under 23 CFR Part 771, agencies involved with federally funded transportation activities must make decisions in the overall public interest and inform the public and other governmental entities and involve them in making decisions.

Direct Federal Nationwide Action Plan. Section 136(b) of the 1070 Federal-aid Highway Act (23 USC 109(h)) directed the Secretary of Transportation to promulgate guidelines designed to assure that possible adverse Social, Economic, and Environmental (SEE) effects of federal-aid highway projects are fully considered and that final decisions are made in the best overall public interest.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) encourages the involvement of people with disabilities in the development and improvement of transportation and paratransit plans and services.

The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA); its 1998 successor, Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21); and the current transportation bill, Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), enacted in 2005, emphasize public participation in the transportation planning process.

Executive Order (EO) 12898 – Environmental Justice (EJ) – emphasizes the need for the full and fair participation of minority and low-income communities in public involvement and the decision-making process.

## 2.0 Advertised Public Meetings

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The Project Manager (PM) must request that Public Information Open Houses (PIOH) and Public Hearing Open Houses (PHOH) be scheduled. The [Public Involvement Worksheet](#) should be used to request the meeting.

Open Houses will be advertised twice in the local newspaper having general circulation in the county or counties in which the project is located. Either legal or retail ads may be used. Advertisements for PIOHs will be published three weeks and one week prior to the meeting date. Advertisements for PHOHs will be published 30 to 40 days and 5 to 9 days prior to the meeting date. In doing this, it is important to consider individual newspaper submission deadlines.

The NEPA analyst will prepare the advertisement and furnish it to the District Planning and Programming Engineer (DPPE) who will arrange for publication. The appropriate ad should be used:

- Public Information Open House (PIOH), see [Section 2.1](#) below
- Public Hearing Open House (PHOH) for an approved Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Effects Report (EER), see [Section 2.2](#) below.
- An Opportunity for a PHOH for an Environmental Assessment (EA), see [Section 2.3](#) below
- An Opportunity for a PHOH for an Environmental Effects Report (EER)
- Detour Meeting, see [Section 2.4](#) below
- Information Detour Meeting (30 days prior to the road closure), see [Section 2.4](#) below.

The NEPA analyst will prepare an open house handout. The handout will be provided to each attendee and will include:

- [Welcome letter](#) signed by the GDOT PM office head
- Project description
- Project location map
- [Comment form](#)

If the open house is a PHOH, the handout also will include:

- Purpose and Need
- [Summary of Environmental Impacts](#) (including any PM 2.5 requirements or *de minimis* findings)
- Right-of-way (ROW) statement

A dry run will be held at least 10 days prior to the scheduled open house. The dry run will be coordinated by the NEPA analyst and project displays, the open house handout, and the project fact sheet will be available at the dry run. The [Public Involvement Worksheet](#) should be utilized at the meeting.

Comment forms are provided in the meeting handouts for attendees choosing to submit written comments; court reporters are made available at open houses to record verbal comments. The comment period remains open for 10 days.

All open house materials are posted on GDOT's public involvement [website](#). The public also may submit project comments via the website. The Office of Environmental Service's Public Involvement staff is responsible for posting open house materials on the website. The NEPA analyst will submit the meeting handout and the PM will submit the project layouts for posting at least one week prior to the open house.

### **2.1 Public Information Open House (PIOH)**

The PIOH is an informal meeting with an open house format and generally lasts two to three hours. The purpose is to inform the public of a project that is proposed in their area, gather information from the public and to receive comments from the public about the proposed project. Generally, formal presentations are not made at these meetings. Should the project team determine that a formal presentation should be made, the PM will discuss with the GDOT Director of Engineering. This decision must be made prior to the PIOH advertisement so that the presentation time can be announced. Georgia DOT representatives (including consultants working on the project) must attend these meetings and must be prepared to discuss the project and answer questions. These meetings should be held early in the project development stage.

### **2.2 Public Hearing Open House (PHOH)**

State and federal laws require that public hearings be held after the Draft EA or after the DEIS is signed by FHWA, or after the GDOT Commissioner approves the Environmental Effects Report (EER) (if 100 citizens request), whichever is appropriate. A PHOH is held to exchange information between GDOT and the public prior to making a commitment to the location and design of the project. The approved draft NEPA document or the approved EER must be made available at this meeting. The PHOH is conducted in the same manner as the PIOH and generally last three hours. Generally, formal presentations are not made at these meetings. Should the project team determine that a formal presentation should be made, the PM will discuss with the GDOT Director of Engineering. This decision must be made prior to the PHOH advertisement so that the presentation time can be announced. Representatives of GDOT (including consultants working on the project) must attend these meetings and be prepared to discuss the project and answer questions.

The approved NEPA document must be made available to the public for 15 days prior to the PHOH; however, state law [OCGA 32-3(f)(5)(A)] requires that PHOHs be advertised no less than 30 days in advance.

### 2.3 Opportunity for a Public Hearing Open House

The requirements for holding a PHOH may be satisfied by publishing two notices of an opportunity for a PHOH in a newspaper with general circulation in the vicinity of the proposed project.

For NEPA documents, this may be appropriate if a PIOH has been held in the months prior to the approval of the EA. However, FHWA must concur with the decision to advertise for the opportunity as opposed to holding a PHOH. If there are requests for a PHOH, then GDOT will decide on the appropriate action.

For EERs, the PHOH must be held if 100 citizens request one.

### 2.4 Detour Meetings

For projects involving the closure of a roadway and/or bridge during construction and resulting in an off-site detour, public outreach must occur unless the closure and detour were presented at a previous open house. Detours include even minor changes in access to a property or properties during construction. This public outreach effort must be made prior to the NEPA document approval so that specific public concerns can be identified and addressed. If the detour is proposed following approval of the NEPA document, this effort must occur prior to approval of a NEPA reevaluation.

While a PIOH can be an effective means of obtaining public input on detours, there may be another public outreach tool that is a more effective means of reaching the target audience.

In addition to obtaining public input during the NEPA process, the public must be [notified](#) of the detour 30 days prior to the road closure.

### 2.5 Responding to Open House Comments

Every effort will be made to respond to public comments in a timely manner. All comments received will be responded to within 30 days of the meeting date.

By the close of business of the day following the open house, the NEPA analyst will prepare and circulate a [Synopsis](#). This Synopsis will provide a broad overview of the meeting attendance, the number in favor & opposed to the project, major concerns/comments, and the officials in attendance. It will be circulated to the appropriate Board Member, the Chief Engineer, Director of Engineering, the Office Head of the Project Manager, the State Environmental Administrator, the Office of Environmental Services Public Involvement Coordinator, the State Planning Administrator, the District Engineer, the District Preconstruction Engineer, the DPPE, the Director of Communications, and FHWA.

Following the close of the 10-day comment period and the receipt of the court reporter's transcript, the NEPA analyst will prepare a Summary of Comments that lists each comment received and assigns it to the appropriate office with the expertise to prepare (or approve) a response to the comment.

For responses prepared by GDOT, the Summary of Comments will request that the assigned office prepare a response to the appropriate comments. The NEPA analyst will circulate the Summary of Comments within 14 days of the meeting date. Responses must be received within seven days of the request.

For consultant prepared responses, [the Summary of Comments](#) will include the proposed responses to each of the comments for review and approval by the appropriate GDOT office. The GDOT NEPA analyst will circulate the Summary of Comments within 15 days of the meeting date and request approval within seven days of the request.

The Summary of Comments will be circulated to the Director of Engineering, the Office Head of the Project Manager, the State Environmental Administrator, the State Planning Administrator, the District Engineer, the District Preconstruction Engineer and FHWA.

The NEPA analyst will utilize the responses prepared and approved by the subject matter expert to develop one response letter for all meeting attendees. This letter will be reviewed by the State Environmental Administrator, approved and mailed within 30 days of the meeting date.

Georgia DOT ROW staff will prepare separate response letters which should be coordinated with the project team and mailed in a timely manner.

## 2.6 Summary of Open House Responsibilities

### *Scheduling & Advertising*

<b>Action</b>	<b>Responsible team member</b>	<b>Days* prior to open house</b>
Request	PM	60
Schedule open house	Office of Environmental Services Public Involvement staff	45
Ad strategy Targeted audiences Flyers Radio announcements Multi-lingual Etc.	NEPA analyst	75-90
Identify & arrange for open house location	DPPE	45-60
Advertisement preparation	NEPA analyst	30-45
Ad publication	DPPE	30-40
Invitation to officials	DPPE	30-40
Sign fabrication (announcing open house)	DPPE	30-40
Determine sign locations	DPPE in consultation with	45

	PM	
Sign installation	DPPE	15-20
Hire Court Reporter (transcript due within 7 calendar days)	DPPE	14
Schedule dry run	Office of Environmental Services Public Involvement staff	17
Hold dry run	NEPA Analyst	10

*Open House*

<b>Action</b>	<b>Responsible team member</b>	<b>Days* prior to open house</b>
Handout Welcome letter (signed by PM office head) Project description (provided by PM) Project location map (provided by PM) Comment form	NEPA analyst	10
Handout Purpose & Need Summary of environmental impacts RW statement	NEPA analyst	10
Handout for posting on website	NEPA analyst	7
Project displays	PM	10
Project displays for posting on website	PM	7
Project fact sheet	PM	10
press release announcing open house	GDOT Communications staff	3-4

*Post open house*

<b>Action</b>	<b>Responsible team member</b>	<b>Days* prior to open house</b>
Synopsis (GDOT & Consultant)	NEPA analyst	1
Summary of Comments (GDOT)	NEPA analyst	14
Summary of Comments with proposed responses (Consultant)	NEPA analyst	15
Response to Summary of Comments (GDOT)	Team subject matter experts	21
GDOT Response to Consultant Summary of Comments	Team subject matter experts	22

Response letters (GDOT & Consultant) to State Environmental Administrator	NEPA with input from team	26
Response letters mailed	NEPA analyst	30

\*Calendar days

### 3.0 Additional Tools for Public Involvement

A variety of methods to involve and inform the public could include direct participatory techniques such as brainstorming sessions and task forces or indirect participatory techniques such as mailing lists and use of the mass media. The involvement techniques used should fit the scope of the project and its impacts by providing adequate notification and involvement opportunity.

#### 3.1 Direct Participatory Techniques

The public is normally less likely to be suspicious about an agency and its projects if given the chance to become informed and involved. Many times the public simply wants to feel that they have been heard and to lend their voice to decisions affecting their neighborhood or community. Involving people in face-to-face meetings provides an opportunity for the public to learn and express opinions/concerns about a project.

Bringing together a core participation group is a technique used to help agencies establish a working relationship with a community and participate in decision-making. The following are two examples of core participation groups.

A Citizens' Advisory Committee (CAC) is a representative group of stakeholders that meets regularly to discuss issues of common concern. A CAC has five basic features:

1. Interest groups from throughout the project area or region are represented,
2. Meetings are regularly held,
3. Participant comments are recorded,
4. Consensus on issues is sought but not required, and
5. A CAC is part of the planning process and project development process.

A CAC acts primarily in an advisory role, studying issues and presenting a mosaic of opinions.

A Collaborative Task Force is a group assigned a specific task, with a time limit for reaching a conclusion and resolving a difficult issue, subject to ratification by official decision-makers. Its membership usually involves local people or representatives from interest groups, appointed by elected officials or agency executives. A collaborative task force usually helps solve a specific problem, working strenuously toward consensus and presenting a strong and unified voice.

To encompass the full range of community interests, efforts should be made to include traditionally underserved people in public involvement. Effective public involvement requires a full range of community interests; however, those people with limited transportation knowledge often do not participate. There are several possible ways to involve traditionally underserved people in the decision-making process, including involving community organizations and their



leaders to build communication. Also, community groups and religious organizations can provide access to individuals and can serve as forums for participation.

Effective public involvement may also require understanding an ethnic group's customs and language. Translations and bilingual speakers can be essential for relaying and gathering information. Understanding how different cultures communicate is important. For instance, some cultures feel that it is improper to disagree with authority, while other cultures discuss the issues with the entire community before leaders or elders relay decisions.

In addition to PIOHs and PHOHs discussed above, other face-to-face meetings could include the following:

- Brainstorming can be a highly effective method of moving participants out of conflict and toward consensus. Brainstorming has four basic components:
  1. Generate as many solutions to a problem as possible,
  2. List every idea presented without comment or evaluation,
  3. Group and evaluate ideas to reach consensus, and
  4. Prioritize ideas.

Brainstorming is useful for bringing up new ideas, defining ideas, and reducing conflict.

- A charrette is a meeting used to resolve a problem or issue within a specified time limit. A charrette is often used early in the planning process to provide useful ideas and perspectives from concerned interest groups. In mid-process, a charrette helps resolve sticky issues. Late in the process, it is useful to resolve an impasse between groups. A charrette can help reduce feelings of alienation by offering the public the opportunity to interact with public agencies. Because a charrette focuses on a specific problem to be resolved or an issue to be addressed, it is usually a one-time event.
- A workshop format consists of reorganizing a larger group into small discussion groups (less than 10 people) that address planning or project-related issues, prioritize those issues, and later report the results to the larger group of participants. It maximizes participation by all attendees, while also discouraging dominance by a few individuals. The workshop is particularly useful in the early stages of project development.

### **3.2 Indirect Participatory Techniques and Methods of Communication**

In order to have effective public involvement, communication needs to be a two-way street. This can be accomplished by providing substantive information in a variety of communication techniques. The following are just a few of the techniques available.

- Mailing lists are used to reach an audience about upcoming events, meeting invitations, newsletters, summary reports, and other information. Mailing lists can be an easy and effective way to reach the public, especially if address lists are kept up to date in a database format. A drawback to mailing lists is the time and effort required to set up a list, especially when tax maps are the sole source of identifying property owners. Often

information from tax maps may not be up to date or may possibly be inaccurate. Additional drawbacks to mailing lists are printing and postage costs for large lists.

- Public information materials provide information about a project that is underway or in the planning stage. These materials should be concise and clear when providing information and may consist of advertisements, billboards, web sites, press releases or radio announcements. A drawback to public information materials is that these materials are not normally interactive and can have potentially high production costs.
- Videotapes or continuous PowerPoint loops are recorded visual and oral messages to present information to the public. These can be used in several settings, including meetings and open houses. For instance, it can be set to replay endlessly so that the same message is shown to the public, such as project description, the project development process, and perhaps the project's schedule. Drawbacks to this method of relating information may include production costs, equipment needs, and the simple fact that it is not interactive.
- Major projects often also have a project website and project hotline established.

#### **4.0 Consultant deliverables**

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After receiving comments from GDOT or FHWA on any document, a disposition letter (including the comment and how it was responded to) should be attached to the hard copy of the submittal letter and emailed to the GDOT reviewer for their use in facilitating the review of the document.

For any approved document, consultants will provide a CD (with the requested hard copies of the document) that includes a pdf (or series of pdfs) and a Word copy of the complete approved document.

1. Public Involvement Plan (if appropriate)
2. PIOH/PHOH
  - a. Advertisement
  - b. Handouts
  - c. Synopsis
  - d. Summary
  - e. Response letters
3. Other meetings
  - a. Meeting materials
  - b. Meeting minutes